



KARIN SLAUGHTER

T H E

WILL TRENT

S E R I E S

Karin Slaughter

The Will Trent Series

Triptych

Fractured

Undone

Broken

Fallen

Criminal

Unseen



Dell Books

Triptych, *Fractured*, *Undone*, *Broken*, *Fallen*, *Criminal*, and *Unseen* are works of fiction. Names, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

A Dell eBook Edition

Triptych copyright © 2006 by Karin Slaughter

Fracture copyright © 2008 by Karin Slaughter

Undone copyright © 2009 by Karin Slaughter

Broken copyright © 2010 by Karin Slaughter

Fallen copyright © 2011 by Karin Slaughter

Criminal copyright © 2012 by Karin Slaughter

Unseen copyright © 2013 by Karin Slaughter

Excerpt from *Cop Town* copyright © 2014 by Karin Slaughter Publishing, LLC

Snatched copyright © 2012 by Karin Slaughter

Busted copyright © 2014 by Karin Slaughter Publishing, LLC

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by Dell, an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House LLC, a Penguin Random House Company, New York.

DELL and the HOUSE colophon are registered trademarks of Random House LLC.

The novels contained in this omnibus were each published separately by Dell Books, an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House LLC, a Penguin Random House Company, New York, in 2006, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, and 2013.

This book contains an excerpt from the forthcoming title *Cop Town* by Karin Slaughter. This excerpt has been set for this edition only and may not reflect the final content of the forthcoming edition.

eBook ISBN: 9780804180740

Cover Design: Scott Biel

Cover Image: delectus/E + /Getty Images

www.bantamdell.com

v3.1

Contents

Cover
Title Page
Copyright

Triptych

Fractured

Undone

Broken

Fallen

Criminal

Unseen

Excerpt from *Cop Town*
Snatched
Busted

Karin Slaughter



Triptych

A BANTAM DELL  BOOK

KARIN
SLAUGHTER

TRIPTYCH

A DELL BOOK



TRIPTYCH

A Delacorte Press Book / August 2006

Published by
Bantam Dell
A Division of Random House, Inc.
New York, New York

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved
Copyright © 2006 by Karin Slaughter

Delacorte Press is a registered trademark of Random House, Inc., and the colophon is a trademark of Random House, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Slaughter, Karin, 1971–

Triptych / Karin Slaughter.

p. cm.

1. Serial murderers—Fiction. 2. Atlanta (Ga.)—Fiction. 3. Psychological fiction. I. Title.

PS3569.L275T75 2006

813'.6—dc22 2006044475

www.bantamdell.com

eISBN: 978-0-440-33623-5

v3.0_r1

Contents

Master - Table of Contents

Triptych

Title Page

Copyright

Part I

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Part II

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Part III

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Chapter 32

Chapter 33

Chapter 34

Chapter 35

Chapter 36

Chapter 37

Chapter 38

Chapter 39

Chapter 40

Author's Note
Dedication
Acknowledgments



PART I

JUNE 17, 1985

DECATUR TEEN MURDERED

Parents found fifteen-year-old Mary Alice Finney dead in their Adams Street home yesterday morning. Police have not released any details of the crime other than to say that they are treating this as a homicide and that those who were last seen with Finney are being questioned. Paul Finney, the girl's father and an assistant district attorney for DeKalb County, said in a

statement released last night that he has every confidence that the police will bring his daughter's killer to justice. An honor student at Decatur High School, Mary Alice was active in the cheerleading squad and was recently elected sophomore class president. Sources close to the investigation have confirmed that the girl's body was mutilated.

ha
tho
and
how
way
“
and
turr
tabl
tric
the
thre
the

CHAPTER ONE

FEBRUARY 5, 2006

Detective Michael Ormewood listened to the football game on the radio as he drove down DeKalb Avenue toward Grady Homes. The closer he got to the projects, the more tension he felt, his body almost vibrating from the strain by the time he took a right into what most cops considered a war zone. As the Atlanta Housing Authority slowly devoured itself, subsidized communities like Grady were becoming a thing of the past. The in-town real estate was too valuable, the potential for kickback too high. Right up the road was the city of Decatur, with its trendy restaurants and million-dollar houses. Less than a mile in the other direction was Georgia's gold-encrusted capitol dome. Grady was like a worse-case scenario sitting between them, a living reminder that the city too busy to hate was also too busy to take care of its own.

With the game on, the streets were fairly empty. The drug dealers and pimps were taking the night off to watch that rarest of miracles occur: the Atlanta Falcons playing in the Super Bowl. This being a Sunday night, the prostitutes were still out making a living, trying to give the churchgoers something to confess next week. Some of the girls waved at Michael as he drove past, and he returned the greeting, wondering how many unmarked cars stopped here during the middle of the night, cops telling Dispatch they were taking a ten-minute break, then motioning over one of the girls to help blow off some steam.

Building nine was in the back of the development, the crumbling red brick edifice tagged by the Ratz, one of the new gangs that had moved into the Homes. Four cruisers and another unmarked car were in front of the building, lights rolling, radios squawking. Parked in the residents' spaces were a black BMW and a pimped-out Lincoln Navigator, its ten-thousand-dollar razor rims glittering gold in the streetlights. Michael fought the urge to jerk the steering wheel, take some paint off the seventy-thousand-dollar SUV. It pissed him off to see the expensive cars the bangers drove. In the last month, Michael's kid had shot up about four inches, outgrowing all his jeans, but new clothes would have to wait for Michael's next paycheck. Tim looked like he was waiting for a high tide while Daddy's tax dollars went to help these thugs pay their rent.

Instead of getting out of his car, Michael waited, listening to another few seconds of the game, enjoying a moment's peace before his world turned upside down. He had been on the force for almost fifteen years now, going straight from the army to the police, realizing too late that other than the haircut, there wasn't that much difference between the two. He knew that as soon as he got out of his car it would all start up like a clock that was wound too tight. The sleepless nights, the endless leads that never panned out, the bosses breathing down his neck. The press would probably catch on to it, too. Then he'd have cameras stuck in his face every time he left the squad, people asking him why the case wasn't solved, his son seeing it on the news and asking Daddy why people were so mad at him.

Collier, a young beat cop with biceps so thick with muscle he couldn't put his arms down flat against his sides, tapped on the glass, gesturing for Michael to roll down his window. Collier had made a circling motion with his meaty hand, even though the kid had probably never been in a car with crank windows.

Michael pressed the button on the console, saying, "Yeah?" as the glass slid down.

"Who's winning?"

"Not Atlanta," Michael told him, and Collier nodded as if he had expected the news. Atlanta's previous trip to the Super Bowl was several years back. Denver had thumped them 34-19.

Collier asked, "How's Ken?"

"He's Ken," Michael answered, not offering an elaboration on his partner's health.

"Could use him on this." The patrolman jerked his head toward the building. "It's pretty nasty."

Michael kept his own counsel. The kid was in his early twenties, probably living in his mother's basement, thinking he was a man because he strapped on a gun every day. Michael had met several Colliers in the Iraqi desert when the first Bush had decided to go in. They were all eager pups with that glint in their eye that told you they had joined up for more than three squares and a free education. They were obsessed with duty and honor, all that shit they'd seen on TV and been fed by the recruiters who plucked them out of high school like ripe cherries. They had been promised technical training and home-side base assignments, anything that would get them to sign on the dotted line. Most of them ended up being shipped off on the first transport plane to the desert, where they got shot before they could put their helmets on.

Ted Greer came out of the building, tugging at his tie like he needed air. The lieutenant was pasty for a black man, spending most of his time behind his desk basking in the fluorescent lights as he waited for his retirement to kick in.

He saw Michael still sitting in the car and scowled. "You working tonight or just out for a drive?"

Michael took his time getting out, sliding the key out of the ignition just as the halftime commentary started on the radio. The evening was warm for February, and the air-conditioning units people had stuck in their windows buzzed like bees around a hive.

Greer barked at Collier, "You got something to do?"

Collier had the sense to leave, tucking his chin to his chest like he'd been popped on the nose.

"Fucking mess," Greer told Michael. He took out his handkerchief and wiped the sweat off his forehead. "Some kind of sick perv got ahold of her."

Michael had heard as much when he'd gotten the call that pulled him off his living-room couch. "Where is she?"

"Six flights up," Greer folded the handkerchief into a neat square and tucked it into his pocket. "We traced the nine-one-one call to that phone." He pointed across the street.

Michael stared at the phone booth, a relic of the past. Everybody had cell phones now, especially dealers and bangers.

"Woman's voice," Greer told him. "We'll have the tape sometime tomorrow."

"How long did it take to get somebody out here?"

"Thirty-two minutes," Greer told him, and Michael's only surprise was that it hadn't taken longer. According to a local news team investigation, response times to emergency calls from Grady averaged around forty-five minutes. An ambulance took even longer.

Greer turned back to the building as if it could absolve him. "We're gonna have to call in some help on this one."

Michael bristled at the suggestion. Statistically, Atlanta was one of the most violent cities in America. A dead hooker was hardly an earth-shattering development, especially considering where she was found.

He told Greer, "That's all I need is more assholes telling me how to do my job."

"This asshole thinks it's exactly what you need," the lieutenant countered. Michael knew better than to argue—not because Greer wouldn't tolerate insubordination, but because he'd agree with Michael just to shut him up, then turn around and do whatever the hell he wanted to anyway.

Greer added, "This one's bad."

"They're all bad," Michael reminded him, opening the back door to his car and taking out his suit jacket.

"Girl didn't have a chance," Greer continued. "Beat, cut, fucked six ways to Sunday. We got a real sick fuck on our hands."

Michael put on his jacket, thinking Greer sounded like he was auditioning for HBO. "Ken's out of the hospital. Said come by and see him anytime."

Greer made some noises about being real busy lately before trotting off toward his car, looking back over his shoulder as if he was afraid Michael would follow. Michael waited until his boss was in his car and pulling out of the lot before he headed toward the building.

Collier stood at the doorway, hand resting on the butt of his gun. He probably thought he was keeping watch, but Michael knew that the person who had committed this crime wasn't going to come back for more. He was finished with the woman. There was nothing else he wanted to do.

Collier said, "The boss left fast."

"Thanks for the news flash."

Michael braced himself as he opened the door, letting the damp, dark building slowly draw him in. Whoever had designed the Homes hadn't been thinking about happy kids coming home from school to warm cookies and milk. They had focused on security, keeping open spaces to a minimum and covering all the light fixtures in steel mesh to protect the bulbs. The walls were exposed concrete with narrow windows tucked into tight little corners, the safety wire embedded in the glass looking like uniform cobwebs. Spray paint covered surfaces that had been painted white once upon a time. Gang tags, warnings and various pieces of information covered them now. To the right of the front door, someone had scrawled, *Kim is a ho! Kim is a ho! Kim is a ho!*

Michael was looking up the winding staircase, counting the six flights, when a door creaked open. He turned to find an ancient black woman staring at him, her coal dark eyes peering out around the edge of the steel door.

"Police," he said, holding up his badge. "Don't be afraid."

The door opened wider. She was wearing a floral apron over a stained white T-shirt and jeans. "I ain't afraid'a you, bitch."

Clustered behind her were four old women, all but one of them African-American. Michael knew they weren't here to help. Grady, like any small community, thrived on gossip and these were the mouths that fed the supply line.

Still, he had to ask, "Any of y'all see anything?"

They shook their heads in unison, bobbleheads on the Grady dashboard.

"That's great," Michael said, tucking his badge back into his pocket as he headed toward the stairs. "Thanks for helping keep your community safe."

She snapped, "That's your job, cocksucker."

He stopped, his foot still on the bottom stair as he turned back toward her, looking her straight in the eye. She returned the glare, rheumy eyes shifting back and forth like she was reading the book of his life. The woman was younger than the others, probably in her early seventies, but somehow grayer and smaller than her companions. Spidery lines crinkled the skin around her lips, wrinkles etched from years of sucking on cigarettes. A shock of gray streaked through the hair on the top of her head as well as the ones corkscrewing out of her chin like dreadlocks. She wore the most startling shade of orange lipstick he had ever seen on a woman.

He asked, "What's your name?"

Her chin tilted up in defiance, but she told him, "Nora."

"Somebody made a nine-one-one call from that phone booth outside."

"I hope they wash they hands after."

Michael allowed a smile. "Did you know her?"

"We all knowed her." Her tone indicated there was a lot more to be told but she wasn't the one who was going to tell it to some dumb-ass white cop. Obviously, Nora didn't exactly have a college degree under her belt, but Michael had never set much store by that kind of thing. He could tell from her eyes that the woman was sharp. She had street smarts. You didn't live to be that old in a place like Grady by being stupid.

Michael took his foot off the step, walking back toward the cluster of women. "She working?"

Nora kept her eye on him, still wary. "Most nights."

The white woman behind her provided, "She an honest girl."

Nora asked her tongue. "Such a young little thing." There was a hint of challenge in her voice when she said, "No kind of life for her, but what else could she do?"

Michael nodded like he understood. "Did she have any regulars?"

They all shook their heads again, and Nora provided, "She never brought her work home with her."

Michael waited, wondering if they would add anything else. He counted the seconds off in his head, thinking he'd let it go to twenty. A helicopter flew over the building and car wheels squealed against asphalt a couple of streets over, but no one paid attention. This was the sort of neighborhood where people got nervous if they didn't hear gunshots at least a couple of times a week. There was a natural order to their lives, and violence—or the threat of it—was as much a part of it as fast food and cheap liquor.

"All right," Michael said, having counted the seconds to twenty-five. He took out one of his business cards, handing it to Nora as he told her, "Something to wipe your ass on."

She grunted in disgust, holding the card between her thumb and forefinger. "My ass is bigger than that."

He gave her a suggestive wink, made his voice a growl. "Don't think I hadn't noticed, darlin'."

She barked a laugh as she slammed the door in his face. She had kept the card, though. He had to take that as a positive sign.

Michael walked back to the stairs, taking the first flight two at a time. All of the buildings at Grady had elevators, but even the ones that worked were dangerous. As a first-year patrolman, Michael had been called out to the Homes on a domestic disturbance and gotten caught in one of the creaky contraptions with a busted radio. He had spent about two hours trying not to add to the overwhelming smell of piss and vomit before his sergeant realized he hadn't reported in and sent somebody to look for him. The old-timers had laughed at his stupidity for another half hour before helping get him out.

Welcome to the brotherhood.

As Michael started on the second flight of stairs, he felt a change in the air. The smell hit him first: the usual odor of fried foods mingled with beer and sweat, cut by the sudden but unmistakable stench of violent death.

The building had responded to the fatality in the usual way. Instead of the constant thump of rap beating from multiple speakers, Michael heard only the murmur of voices from behind closed doors. Televisions were turned down low, the halftime show serving as background noise while people talked about the girl on the sixth floor and thanked the Lord it was her this time and not their children, their daughters, themselves.

In this relative quiet, sounds started to echo down the stairwell: the familiar rhythms of a crime scene as evidence was gathered, photos taken. Michael stopped at the bottom of the fourth-floor landing to catch his breath. He had given up smoking two months ago but his lungs hadn't really believed him. He felt like an asthmatic as he made his way up the next flight of stairs. Above him, someone laughed, and he could hear the other cops join in, participating in the usual bullshit bravado that made it possible for them to do the job.

Downstairs, a door slammed open, and Michael leaned over the railing, watching two women wrangle a gurney inside the foyer. They were wearing dark blue rain jackets, bright yellow letters announcing "MORGUE" on their backs.

Michael called, "Up here."

"How far up?" one of them asked.

"Sixth floor."

"Mother fuck," she cursed.

Michael grabbed the handrail and pulled himself up the next few stairs, hearing the two women offer up more expletives as they started the climb, the gurney banging against the metal railings like a broken bell. He was one flight away from the top when he felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. Sweat had glued his shirt to his back, but some sort of sixth sense sent a chill through him.

A flash popped and a camera whirled. Michael stepped carefully around a red stiletto shoe that was flat on the stair, looking as if someone had sat down and slipped it off. The next step up had the perfect outline of a bloody hand gripping the tread. The next stair had another handprint, then another, as someone had crawled up the stairs.

Standing on the landing at the top of the fifth flight was Bill Burgess, a seasoned beat cop who had seen just about every kind of crime Atlanta had to offer. Beside him was a dark pool of coagulating blood, the edges spreading in rivulets that dropped from one step to the next like falling dominoes. Michael read the scene. Someone had stumbled here, struggled to get up, smearing blood as she tried to escape.

Bill was looking down the stairs, away from the blood. His skin was blanched, his lips a thin slash of pink. Michael stopped short, thinking he'd never seen Bill flustered before. This was the man who'd gone out for chicken wings an hour after finding six severed fingers in the Dumpster behind a Chinese restaurant.

The two men did not speak as Michael carefully stepped over the puddle of blood. He kept his hand on the rail, making the turn to the next flight of stairs, thankful for something to hold on to when he saw the scene in front of him.

The woman was partially clothed, her tight red dress cut open like a robe, showing dark cocoa skin and a wisp of black pubic hair that had been shaved into a thin line leading down to her cleft. Her breasts were unnaturally high on her chest, implants holding them up in perfection. One arm was out to her side, the other rested above her head, fingers reaching toward the handrail as if her last thoughts had been to pull herself up. Her right leg was bent at the knee,

splayed open, the left jutting at an angle so that he could see straight up her slit.

Michael took another step, blocking out the activity around him, trying to see the woman as her killer would have seen her. Makeup smeared her face, heavy lipstick and rouge applied in dark lines to bring out her features. Her curly black hair was streaked with orange, teased out in all directions. Her body was nice, or nicer than you'd expect from what the needle marks on her arms indicated she was: a woman with a habit she fed between her legs. The bruises on her thighs could have come from her killer or a john who liked it rough. If it was the latter, then she had probably willingly endured it, knowing she'd be able to get more money for the pain, knowing more money meant more pleasure later on when the needle plunged in and that warm feeling spread through her veins.

Her eyes were wide open, staring blankly at the wall. One of her fake eyelashes had come loose, making a third lash under her left eye. Her nose was broken, her cheek shifted off center where the bones beneath the eye had been shattered. Light reflected against something in her open mouth, and Michael took another step closer, seeing that it was filled to the top with liquid and that the liquid was blood. The light overhead glinted off the red pool like a harvest moon.

Pete Hanson, the medical examiner on call, stood at the top of the stairs talking to Leo Donnelly. Leo was an asshole, always playing the tough cop, joking about everything, laughing too loud and long, but Michael had seen him at the bar one too many times, his hand a constant blur as he slammed back one scotch after another, trying to get the taste of death out of his mouth.

Leo spotted Michael and cracked a smile, like they were old pals getting together for a good time. He was holding a sealed plastic evidence bag in his hand and he kept tossing it a couple of inches in the air and catching it like he was getting ready to play ball.

Leo said, "Hell of a night to be on call."

Michael didn't voice his agreement. "What happened?"

Leo kept tossing the bag, weighing it in his hand. "Doc says she bled to death."

"Maybe," Pete corrected. Michael knew the doctor liked Leo about as much as everyone else on the force, which was to say he couldn't stand the bastard. "I'll know more when I get her on the table."

"Catch," Leo said, tossing the evidence bag down to Michael.

Michael saw it in slow motion, the bag sailing through the air end over end like a lopsided football. He caught it before it hit the ground, his fingers wrapping around something thick and obviously wet.

Leo said, "Something for your cat."

"What the—" Michael stopped. He knew what it was.

"Lookit his face!" Leo's shotgun laugh echoed off the walls.

Michael could only stare at the bag. He felt blood at the back of his throat, tasted that metallic sting of unexpected fear. The voice that came out of his mouth did not sound like his own—it was more like he was under water, maybe drowning. "What happened?"

Leo was still laughing, so Pete answered, "He bit off her tongue."

CHAPTER TWO

FEBRUARY 6, 2006

When he had returned from the Gulf War, Michael had been haunted by his dreams. As soon as he closed his eyes, he saw the bullets coming at him, the bombs blowing off arms and legs, children running down the road, screaming for their mamas. Michael knew where their mothers were. He had stood by helplessly as the women banged the closed windows of the schoolhouse, trying to break their way out as fire from an exploded grenade burned them alive.

Aleesha Monroe was haunting him now. The tongueless woman in the stairway had followed him home, worked some kind of magic in his dreams so that it was Michael chasing her up the stairs, Michael forcing her back onto the landing and splitting her in two. He could feel her long red nails sinking into his skin as she tried to fight him off, choking him. He couldn't breathe. He started clawing at his neck, her hands, trying to get her to stop. He woke up screaming so loud that Gina sat up in bed beside him, clutching the sheet to her chest like she expected to see a maniac in their bedroom.

"Jesus, Michael," she hissed, hand over her heart. "You scared the shit out of me."

He reached for the glass of water by the bed, sloshing some on his chest as he took large gulps to quench the fire in his throat.

"Babe," Gina said, touching the tips of her fingers to his neck. "What happened?"

Michael felt a sting on his neck and put his fingers where hers had been. There was a rent in the skin, and when he got up to look in the mirror over the dresser, he saw a thin trickle of blood dripping from the fresh cut.

She stood beside him. "Did you scratch yourself in your sleep?"

"I don't know." He knew, though. He still hadn't caught his breath from the dream.

Gina wrinkled her nose as she pulled his hand to her mouth. For a second, he thought she was going to kiss it, but she asked instead, "Why do you smell like bleach?"

He'd had to scrub it off him—that smell, that stickiness, that came from being around the dead. Michael didn't tell her this, didn't want to open up that conversation, so instead he squinted at the clock, asking, "What time is it?"

"Shit," she groaned, dropping his hand. "Might as well get dressed. My shift starts in two hours."

Michael picked up the clock to see for himself. Six-thirty. After processing the crime scene, tossing the woman's apartment and going through the paperwork, he had gotten maybe four hours of sleep.

The shower came on, pipes rumbling in the wall as the hot water heater kicked in. Michael went into the bathroom, watching Gina slip off the shirt she'd slept in.

"Tim's already up," she said, taking off her panties. "You need to make sure he's not getting into anything."

Michael leaned against the wall, admiring her flat stomach, the way the muscles in her arms stretched as she took the band out of her hair. "He's fine."

Gina gave him a look, noticing him noticing her. "Check on him."

Michael felt a smile on his lips. Her breasts had kept their fullness after Tim, and his mouth was almost watering at the sight of them. "Call in sick," he told her.

"Right."

"We'll watch a movie, make out on the couch." He paused, then tried, "Remember how we used to just kiss for hours?" Christ, he hadn't had more than a peck on the cheek in months.

"Let's kiss like that, Gina. Nothing else. Just kissing."

"Michael," Gina said, leaning in to check the water temperature. She stepped into the shower. "Stop leering at me like I'm a hooker and go check on your son."

She closed the shower door, and he waited a full minute before leaving, watching her silhouette behind the glass, wondering when things had started to go wrong between them.

He had met Gina before his unit left for the Gulf. No one was expecting to get hurt over there, but Michael and his fellow grunts had played it up, getting all the action they could before being dropped in the desert. Ellen McCallum was a petite, bottle blonde, not too bright—just the kind of girl you wanted to remember when you were stuck in some filthy, sand-encrusted tent a million miles from home, telling the guys about the girl back home who could suck the leather off a couch.

Michael had spent the better part of a week trying to get into Ellen's pants when up walked Gina, her cousin. She'd pretty much ripped Michael a new one for messing around with her favorite baby cousin, but when he'd shipped out a couple of days later, it was Gina he was thinking about. Her curly brown hair, her delicate features, the smooth curve of her ass. He started writing to her, and to his surprise, she wrote back—real mean at first, but then she calmed down a little, almost got sweet on him. He was in Kuwait, supposedly keeping the peace, when some dumb-ass teenager fooling around with a handgun accidentally shot him in the leg. The kid was a lousy shot, but the wound wouldn't heal. When Michael was sent to the base in Germany for surgery, it was Gina he called first.

They got married a week after he was discharged and two weeks later he signed up with the Atlanta Police Department. Gina graduated from nursing school at Georgia Baptist and got a good job at Crawford Long Hospital. Two years later, she went over to Piedmont where they paid her more. Michael got his gold shield and was moved from his patrol beat at Grady to Vice, with a pay bump to match. Soon, their life was rolling along better than Michael had ever expected. They bought a house just north of Atlanta, started putting money away for a rainy day, thinking about having a kid or two and making it a real family. Then Tim came along.

He was a quiet baby, but Michael saw a sparkle in his big blue eyes. The first time he held Tim was like holding his own heart in his hands. It was Barbara, Gina's mom, who saw the problems first. He never cries. He doesn't engage. He stares at the wall for hours. Michael fought it tooth and nail, but the doctor confirmed Barbara's suspicions. Tim had been deprived of oxygen at some point during Gina's pregnancy. His brain would never develop past the level of a six-year-old. They didn't know how or why, but that was just the way it was.

Michael had never liked Barbara, but Tim's diagnosis made him hate her. It was a cliché to despise your mother-in-law, but she had always thought her daughter traded down and now she saw Tim's problem as Michael's failure. She was also some kind of religious nut, quick to find fault in others, not so quick to see it in herself. She wasn't just the glass-is-half-empty type; she thought the glass was half empty and they were all going to hell for it.

"Tim?" Michael called, putting on a T-shirt as he walked through the house. "Where are you, buddy?"

He heard giggling behind the couch, but kept walking toward the kitchen.

"Where'd Tim go?" he asked, noting his son had scattered a full box of Cheerios all over the kitchen table. Tim's blue bowl was filled to the rim with milk, and for just a second Michael could see Aleesha Monroe's red, red mouth, the way it had been filled with her own blood.

"Boo!" Tim screamed, grabbing Michael around the waist.

Michael startled, even though Tim did this practically every morning. His heart was thumping in his chest as he lifted his son up into his arms. The kid was eight now, much too big to be held, but Michael couldn't help himself. He stroked back the cowlick on the top of Tim's head. "You sleep okay, kiddo?"

Tim nodded, pulling away from Michael's hand, pushing at his shoulder so he could get down.

"Let's clean up this mess before Ba-Ba gets here," he suggested, scooping some of the cereal into his hand and tossing it into the box. Barbara came during the week to watch Tim. She took him to school, picked him up, made sure he had his snack and did his homework. Most days, she spent more time with him than either Michael or Gina, but it wasn't like either of them had a choice.

"Ba-Ba won't like this mess," Michael said.

"Nope," Tim agreed. He was sitting at the table, legs pulled up underneath him. The fly to his Spider-Man pajamas sagged open.

"Tuck in your equipment, buddy," Michael admonished, trying to fight the wave of sadness that came over him as Tim fumbled with the buttons.

Michael had been an only child, probably a little more than spoiled. When Tim came along, he didn't know anything about caring for a baby. Changing Tim's diaper had been embarrassing, something to get over with as quickly as possible and with minimal contact. Now, all Michael could think about was the fact that Tim would hit puberty in a few years. His body would start growing, changing him into a man, but his mind would never catch up. He would never know what it was like to make love to a woman, to use what God gave him to bring pleasure to another human being. He would never have children of his own. Tim would never know the joy and heartache of being a father.

"Who made this mess?" Gina asked. She was wrapped in the blue silk robe Michael had given her for Christmas a couple of years ago, her hair swirled up in a towel. "Did you make this mess?" she teased Tim, cupping his chin in her hand as she kissed his lips. "Ba-Ba won't like this," she said. Michael got a secret kick that the kid hadn't been able to call Barbara grandma like she wanted.

Tim started to help clean up, making more of a mess in the process. "Uh-oh," he said, dropping to his knees, picking up one Cheerio at a time, counting them out loud as he handed them to his mother.

Gina asked Michael, "You getting home at a decent hour tonight?"

"I told you I had a case."

"In a bar?" she said, and he turned his back to her, taking a couple of mugs down from the cabinet. He'd been too wound up last night to come straight home. Leo had suggested they get a drink, talk about the case, and Michael had taken him up on the offer, using the excuse to toss back a couple of bourbons and take the edge off what he'd seen.

"Eleven ..." Tim counted. "Twelve ..."

Gina said, "You smell like an ashtray."

"I didn't smoke."

"I didn't say you did." She dropped a handful of Cheerios into the box and held out her hand for more.

"Fourteen," Tim continued.

"I just needed some time." Michael poured coffee into the mugs. "Leo wanted to talk about the case."

"Leo wanted an excuse to get shitfaced."

"Uh-oh," Tim sang.

"Sorry, baby," Gina apologized to their son. She softened her tone. "You skipped a number. What happened to thirteen?"

Tim shrugged. For the moment, he could only count to twenty-eight, but Gina made sure he hit every number along the way.

Gina told Tim, "Go get dressed for Ba-Ba. She'll be here soon."

Tim stood and bounced out of the room, skipping from one foot to the other.

Gina dropped the Cheerios into the box and sat down with a groan. She had pulled a double shift this weekend to pick up some extra money. The day hadn't even started and already she looked exhausted.

"Busy night?" he asked.

She took a sip of coffee, looking at him over the steam rising from the mug. "I need money for the new therapist."

Michael sighed, leaning against the counter. Tim's old speech therapist had taken him as far as she could. The kid needed a specialist, and the good specialists weren't on the state health insurance plan.

"Five hundred dollars," Gina said. "That'll get him through the end of the month."

"Christ." Michael rubbed his fingers into his eyes, feeling a headache coming on. He thought about the BMW and the Lincoln he'd seen at Grady Homes last night. Tim could see fifty specialists for that kind of money.

"Take it out of savings," he said.

She snorted a laugh. "What savings?"

Christmas. They had raided their savings for Christmas.

"I'm gonna ask for another shift at the hospital." She held up her hand to stop his protest. "He's got to have the best."

"He's got to have his mother."

"How about your mother?" she shot back.

Michael's jaw set. "I'm not going to ask her for another dime."

She put down the mug on the table with a thump that spilled coffee onto the back of her hand. There was no way to win this argument—Michael should know, they'd had it practically every week over the last five years. He was already working overtime, trying to bring in extra cash so Tim could have the things he needed. Gina took weekend shifts twice a month, but Michael drew the line at her working holidays. He barely saw her as it was. Sometimes, he thought she planned it that way. They weren't a married couple anymore; they were a partnership, a nonprofit corporation working for the betterment of Tim. Michael couldn't even remember the last time they'd had sex.

"Cynthia called last night," Gina told him. Their spoiled next-door neighbor. "She's got a loose board or something."

"Loose board?" he repeated. "Where's Phil?"

She pressed her palms to the table and stood. "Botswana. Hell, I don't know, Michael. She just asked if you could fix it and I said yes."

"Did you want to consult with me about that first?"

"Do it or don't," she snapped, tossing the rest of her coffee into the sink. "I need to get dressed for work."

He watched her back as she made her way down the hall. Every morning was like this: Tim making a mess, then cleaning it up, then some argument about something stupid breaking out. To top things off, Barbara would be here soon, and Michael was sure his mother-in-law would find something to complain about, whether it was her aching back, her paltry social security check, or the fact that he'd given her a retarded grandson. Lately, she had taken to leaving articles on Gulf War Syndrome taped to the refrigerator, the obvious inference being that Michael had done something horrible over in Iraq that had brought this scourge on her family.

Michael went into the bedroom and dressed quickly, skipping his shower so he wouldn't have to go into the bathroom and deal with Gina again. He saw Barbara's Toyota pulling into the driveway and grabbed his hammer out of his toolbox, sneaking out the back door as she came in the front.

Part of the chain-link fence around the backyard had been taken out by a tree during the last ice storm and there hadn't been any money to fix it. He hopped over the broken section, careful not to catch the cuff of his pants on the twisted metal and fall flat on his face. Again.

He knocked at the back door, glancing through the window as he waited for Cynthia to come. She took her sweet time, padding up the hall in a short, babydoll robe that was opened to reveal the camisole and thong she wore underneath. Everything was white, practically see-through. Michael wondered where Phil was. If Gina ever answered the door for Phil dressed this way, Michael would have fucking killed her.

Cynthia slowly worked the locks, bending at the waist, flashing some breast. Her long blonde hair covered her face. The camisole was so low he could see the tips of her pink nipples.

Michael hefted the hammer in his hand, feeling an electric buzz in his head. He should just turn around right now and let her fix her own board. Shit, Phil had to come home sometime; let him do it.

Cynthia flashed him a smile as she opened the door. "Howdy, neighbor."

"Where's Phil?"

"Indianapolis," she said, cupping her hands around her mouth to hide a yawn. "Selling support hose to the masses so he can keep me in the style to which I've become accustomed."

"Right." He glanced over her shoulder. The kitchen was a pigsty. Crusty plates were stacked in the sink, take-out pizza boxes everywhere, cigarettes flowing out of ashtrays. He saw mold growing on a glass of what looked like orange juice.

He said, "Gina told me you have a loose board."

She smiled like a cat. "It needs tightening."

Michael put down the hammer. "Why did you call her?"

"Neighbors help neighbors," she said, like it was simple. "You told Phil you'd look after me when he was away."

Phil hadn't meant like this.

She pulled him inside the house by his shirt collar. "You look so tense."

"I can't keep doing this."

"What are you doing?" she asked, pulling him closer.

He thought of Gina, the way she never looked at him anymore, how it felt when she pushed him away. "I just can't."

Her hand pressed hard against the front of his pants. "Feels like you can."

Michael held his breath, his eyes following the slope of her small breasts to her firm nipples. He felt his tongue slip out between his lips, could almost feel what it would be like to put his mouth on her.

She unzipped his pants and reached in. "You like this?" she asked, moving her thumb in a circular motion.

"Jesus," he hissed between his teeth. "Yes."

DECATUR CITY OBSERVER

JUNE 19, 1985

WITNESSES SOUGHT IN FINNEY MURDER

Police are asking witnesses to come forward in the Mary Alice Finney case. The girl was found slain in her Decatur home last Sunday. Police Chief Harold Waller revealed in a news conference that Mary Alice went with friends to Lenox Square Mall earlier that evening, then attended a neighborhood party in Decatur. The fifteen-year-old was last seen leaving the party with a stranger. Anyone who either

saw the girl or has information about the stranger is encouraged to call the DeKalb County Police Department. The family has refused all interviews, but in a formal statement, Paul Finney, assistant district attorney for DeKalb County and father of the slain girl, has asked for privacy. Sources close to the investigation say that Sally Finney, the girl's mother, found her daughter when she went to wake her for church.

CHAPTER THREE

Michael felt like shit. Hell, he *was* shit.

The first time with Cynthia had been an accident. Michael knew that was a lame excuse, it wasn't like you could just trip and the next thing you know, you're in somebody's vagina, but he really did think of it along those lines. Phil had called long-distance from California one night, frantic with worry because he couldn't reach Cynthia. The man traveled all the time, selling women's hosiery to the big department stores and probably wetting his whistle along the way. Michael didn't have proof, but he had worked Vice for three years and he knew the type of businessman who availed himself of the local talent whenever he was on the road. The constant phone calls checking on Cynthia were more like guilt calls, Phil's way of keeping tabs on her when he couldn't keep tabs on himself.

Gina had been working nights then, already pulling away from Michael when he reached out to her. Tim's challenges were becoming more evident and her response had been to throw herself into work, doing double shifts because she couldn't stand the thought of coming home and dealing with her damaged son. Michael was sick with grief, exhausted from crying himself to sleep at night and just plain damn lonely.

Cynthia was available, more than willing to take his mind off things. After the first time, he had told himself it wouldn't happen again, and it hadn't, not for a year at least. Michael had work and Tim, and that was all he thought about until one day last spring when Cynthia had mentioned to Gina that her sink was leaking.

"Go fix it for her," Gina had told Michael. "Phil's gone all the time. The poor thing doesn't have anybody to look out for her."

He wasn't in love with Cynthia and Michael wasn't stupid enough to think she had those kinds of feelings for him. At the ripe old age of forty, he had learned that a woman who was eager to go down on you every time she saw you wasn't in love—she was looking for something. Maybe Cynthia liked the thrill of banging Michael in Phil's bed. Maybe she liked the idea of seeing Gina out the kitchen window and knowing she was taking something that belonged to another woman. Michael couldn't let himself consider her motivations. He knew his own well enough. For those fifteen or twenty minutes he spent next door, his mind went blank and he wasn't thinking about paying the specialists or making the mortgage or the phone call from the credit card company asking when they could expect some money. Michael was just thinking about Cynthia's perfect little mouth and his own pleasure.

She would want something someday, though. He wasn't so stupid that he didn't at least know that.

"Yo, Mike," Leo called, rapping his knuckles on Michael's desk. "Get your head out of your ass."

"What's going on?" Michael asked, sitting back in his chair. The station was empty but for the two of them, Greer locked behind his office door with the shades drawn.

Michael indicated the closed door. "He jerking off in there again?"

"Got some Lurch-looking freak from the GBI with him."

"Why?" Michael asked, but he knew why. Last night, Greer had said he was going to call in help on this one, and the next step up the ladder was the Georgia Bureau of Investigation.

"He don't consult with me," Leo said, sitting on the edge of Michael's desk, scattering papers in the process. He did this all the time, no matter how many warnings Michael gave him.

Leo asked, "You get in trouble with the wife last night?"

"No," Michael lied, letting his eyes travel around the squad room. The place was depressing

and dark, the wall of windows looking out at the Home Depot across the street thick with grime that blocked out the morning sun. City Hall East was a twelve-story building, a onetime Sears department store, that sat at the base of a curve in Ponce de Leon Road and took up a whole city block. A railroad track separated the structure from an old Ford factory that had been turned into pricey lofts. The state had bought the abandoned Sears building years ago, turning it into various government offices. There were at least thirty different departments and over five hundred city employees. Michael had worked here for ten years but other than the overcrowded parking garage, he had only seen the three floors the Atlanta Police Department used and the morgue.

"Yo," Leo repeated, banging the desk again.

Michael pushed his chair from the desk and away from Leo. Between the chain-smoking and constant nips Leo took from the bottle he kept in his locker, the guy had breath like a dog's fart.

"You daydreaming about some pussy?"

"Shut up," Michael snapped, thinking he'd hit too close to home. Leo always did—not because he was a good detective, but because he couldn't keep his mouth shut.

"I was thinking about going to see Ken later on." Leo took a tangerine out of his suit pocket and started peeling it. "How's he doing?"

"Okay," Michael told him, though the truth was he hadn't talked to Ken in a week. They had been partners for a while, close as brothers, until Ken had clutched his arm one day and dropped to the ground. He had been talking to Michael about a gorgeous woman he'd met the night before, and for a split second, Michael thought the fall was some kind of joke. Then Ken had started to twitch. His mouth sagged open and he pissed himself right there on the squad room floor. Fifty-three years old and he'd stroked out like an old man. The whole right side of his body was gone now, his arm and leg useless as a wet newspaper. His mouth was permanently twisted so that dribble poured down his chin like he was a baby.

No one from the squad wanted to see him, to hear him try to talk. Ken was a reminder of what was just around the corner for most of them. Too much smoking, too much drinking, two or three failed marriages, all ending with your lonely last days spent catatonic in front of the tube, stuck at some crappy, state-run nursing home.

Greer's door opened, and a lanky man in a three-piece suit came out. He was toting a leather briefcase that looked like a postage stamp in his large hand. Michael could see why Leo had called the guy Lurch. He was tall, maybe six-four or -five, and whippet thin. His dirty blond hair was cut tight to his head, parted on the side. His upper lip looked funny, too, like someone had cut it in half and put it back together crooked. As usual, Leo had gotten the show wrong. Put some knobs on either side of his neck and the guy could be on *The Munsters*.

"Ormewood," Greer said, motioning him over. "This is Special Agent Will Trent from CAT."

Leo showed his usual grace. "What the fuck is CAT?"

"Special Criminal Apprehension Team," Greer clarified.

Michael could almost feel Leo straining not to point out that this actually spelled SCAT. Not much shut up his fellow detective, but Trent was standing close to Leo, looming over him by almost a foot. The state guy's hands were huge, probably big enough to wrap around Leo's head and crush his skull like a coconut.

Leo was an idiot, but he wasn't stupid.

Trent said, "I'm part of a special division of the Georgia Bureau of Investigation set up to aid local law enforcement around the state in apprehending violent criminals. My role here is purely advisory."

He spoke like he was reading from a textbook, carefully enunciating every word. Between that and the three-piece suit, the guy could be a college professor.

"Michael Ormewood." Michael relented, holding out his hand. Trent took it, not too firm but not limp like he was holding a fish. "This is Leo Donnelly," Michael introduced, since Leo was occupied with sticking half the tangerine in his mouth, the juice dripping down the back of his hand.

"Detective." Trent gave Leo a dismissive nod. He glanced at his watch, telling Michael, "The autopsy results won't be ready for another hour. I'd like to compare notes if you have a minute."

Michael looked at Greer, wondering exactly what had shifted on the food chain in the last two minutes. He was getting the feeling he had been relegated to the bottom and he didn't like it.

Greer turned his back to them, waddling toward his office. He tossed over his shoulder, "Keep me in the loop," as he closed his door.

Michael stared at Trent for a beat. The state guy didn't look like a cop. Despite his height, he

didn't fill the room. He stood with a hand in his pocket, his left knee bent, almost casual. His shoulders would be pretty broad if he stood up straight, but he didn't seem inclined to take advantage of his size. He lacked the presence of somebody who was on the job, the "fuck you" attitude that came from arresting every type of scum the earth had to offer.

Michael stared at the man, wondering what would happen if he just told the asshole to fuck off. Between the fight with Gina this morning and his run-in with Cynthia, Michael figured he should give somebody a break today. He waved his hand toward the door. "Conference room's this way."

Trent headed up the hall. Michael followed, staring at the man's shoulders, wondering how he had ended up in the GBI. Usually, the state guys were adrenaline junkies, their bodies so pumped with testosterone that there was the constant sheen of sweat on their foreheads.

Michael asked, "How long you been on the job?"

"Twelve years."

Michael figured Trent was at least ten years younger than him, but that didn't tell him what he wanted to know. "Ex-military?" he asked.

"No," Trent answered, opening the conference room door. The windows were actually clean in this room, and in the sunlight Michael could see a second scar running along the side of Trent's face. The pink lightened to an almost white as it jagged from his ear down his neck, following his jugular and disappearing into his shirt collar.

Somebody had cut him pretty deep.

"Gulf War," Michael said, putting his hand to his chest, thinking that might draw the man out. "You sure you weren't enlisted?"

"Positive," Trent replied, sitting down at the table. He opened his briefcase and pulled out a stack of brightly colored file folders. In profile, Michael could see his nose had been busted at least a couple of times and wondered if the man was a boxer. He was too thin, though, his body lean, his face angular. No matter what his past, there was something about the guy that set Michael on edge.

Trent was paging through the files, putting the folders into some kind of order, when he noticed Michael was still standing. He said, "Detective Ormewood, I'm on your team."

"Is that so?"

"I don't want any glory," Trent said, though in Michael's experience, that was what the "G" in "GBI" stood for. The state boys had a reputation for coming in, doing half the work and taking all of the credit.

Trent continued, "I don't want to steal the spotlight or be on the news when we catch the bad guy. I just want to assist you in your job and then move on."

"What makes you think I need assistance?"

Trent looked up from the files, studying Michael for a few seconds. He opened a fluorescent pink folder flat on the table and slid it toward Michael. "Julie Cooper of Tucker," he said, naming a town about twenty miles outside Atlanta. "Fifteen years old. She was raped and beaten—almost to death—four months ago."

Michael nodded, flipping through the file, not bothering to read the details. He got to the victim's photograph and stopped. Long blonde hair, heavy eyeliner, too much lipstick for a girl that age.

Trent opened another folder, this one neon green. "Anna Linder, fourteen, of Snellville."

Just north of Tucker.

"December third of last year, Linder was abducted while walking to her aunt's house down the street from her home." Trent passed the folder to Michael. "Raped, beaten. Same M.O."

Michael flipped through the file, looking for the photo. Linder's hair was dark, the bruises around her eyes even darker. He picked up the girl's picture, studying it closer. Her mouth had been beaten pretty bad, the lip cut, blood dripping down her chin. She had some kind of glitter on her face that picked up the flash from the camera.

"She was found hiding in a ditch in Stone Mountain Park the next day."

"Okay," Michael said, waiting for the connection.

"Both girls report being attacked by a man wearing a black ski mask." Trent laid out an orange folder, a photograph paper-clipped to the top sheet. "Dawn Simmons of Buford."

Michael did a double take, thinking this girl couldn't be more than ten. "She's younger than the others," he said, disgusted by the thought of some sick fuck touching the child. She wasn't much older than Tim.

"She was assaulted six months ago," Trent told him. "She reports that her attacker wore a black ski mask."

Michael shook his head. Buford was an hour away and the girl was too young. "Coincidence."

"I think so, too," Trent agreed. "Guys like this don't hunt outside their comfort area."

Without realizing it, Michael had taken a seat at the table. He put down the photo of the ten-year-old and slid it back toward Trent, thinking he'd be sick if he looked at it one more minute. Jesus, her poor parents. How the hell did people live through this sort of thing?

Michael asked, "What's that mean? Comfort area?"

Trent went back to his professor voice. "Child sexual predators have a specific age group they go after. A man who's sexually attracted to ten-year-olds might think fifteen, sixteen, is too old. The same goes for a man who's interested in teenagers. He'd probably be just as disgusted as you are by the thought of molesting a girl that young."

Michael felt his stomach clench. Trent was so matter-of-fact about it, as if he was discussing the weather. He had to ask, "You got kids?"

"No," Trent admitted, not returning the question. Maybe he already knew the answer, probably from Greer. Michael wondered what the bastard had said about Tim.

Trent continued, "I've put in a call to the parents in each case to see if we can talk to the girls, perhaps get some new information now that some time has passed since the attacks. From what I've seen, victims of these sorts of crimes remember more as they get some distance from the event." He added, "It might be a waste of time, but then we might hear something that they couldn't recall during the initial interviews."

"Right," Michael agreed, trying not to sound annoyed. He had worked plenty of rapes on his own and didn't need a lesson.

"I think the perpetrator is probably a well-educated man," Trent said. "Probably in his mid- to late-thirties. Unhappy with his job, unhappy with his home situation."

Michael held his tongue. In his opinion, profiling was a load of shit. Except for the well-educated part, Trent could be talking about most of the men in the squad. Throw in banging his next-door neighbor and he'd be describing Michael.

"The files show a clear pattern of escalation," Trent continued. "Cooper, the first girl, was attacked outside a movie theater; quick, efficient. The whole thing took maybe ten minutes and all of it was out of range of the theater's closed-circuit cameras. The second, Anna Linder, was abducted right off the street. He took her somewhere—she's not sure where—in a car. He left her right outside the gates of Stone Mountain Park. Park police found her the next morning."

"Any tire tracks?"

"About twelve hundred," Trent answered. "The park had just started its annual Christmas lights show."

Michael had taken Gina and Tim to see the lights. They went every year.

"DNA?" Michael asked.

"He wore a condom."

"Okay," Michael said. So he wasn't a moron. "What does this have to do with my girl last night?"

Trent narrowed his eyes, like he wondered if Michael had heard a word he said. "Their tongues, Detective." He slid the reports back over. "They all had their tongues bitten off."

CHAPTER FOUR

"The tongue is basically like a piece of tough steak," Pete Hanson said, slipping on his latex gloves. He stopped, looking at Trent. "I take you for a runner, sir. Is that correct?"

Trent didn't seem surprised by the question. Being on the job for twelve years, Michael figured the man had been around his share of eccentric coroners.

He answered, "Yes, sir."

"Long distance?"

"Yes."

"Marathons?"

"Yes."

"Thought so." Pete nodded to himself, like he had scored a point, though Michael had noticed that Will Trent hadn't volunteered any information about himself.

Pete went back to the corpse lying on the table in the center of the room. Aleesha Monroe's body was draped in a white sheet, her head exposed. The third eyelash was gone, the makeup removed. Thick sutures lined her forehead where her scalp and face had been peeled back to examine her skull and remove her brain.

"You ever bitten your tongue?" Pete asked.

Trent didn't answer, so Michael said, "Sure."

"Heals pretty quickly. The tongue is an amazing organ—unless it's severed, that is. At any rate," he continued, "biting through the tongue is not a difficult endeavor." He rolled back the sheet, showing the top of the Y-incision but stopping just shy of baring Monroe's breasts.

"Here," Pete said. Michael could see deep black bruises over the woman's left shoulder. "The distribution of the livor mortis tells us she died where you found her. On her back, on the stairs. My guess," Pete said, "is that she was beaten, then raped, and in the course of the rape he bit off her tongue."

Michael thought about that, pictured her on the stairs, her body lax at first as she endured the rape, then tensing, convulsing in fear as she realized what was going to happen.

Trent finally spoke. "Can you get DNA off the tongue?"

"I imagine I'll get a significant amount of DNA off her tongue, given her profession." Pete shrugged his shoulders. "And I'm sure the swabs from her vagina will reveal a cornucopia of suspects for you, but my guess would be that your perpetrator used a condom."

"Why is that?" Michael asked.

"Powder," Pete answered. "There was a trace of cornstarch on her right thigh."

Michael knew that rubbers were often packed in powder to make them easier to use. All the condom makers used the same ingredients, so there was no way of tracing it back to a single manufacturer. Not that knowing whether he used a Trojan or a Ramses would narrow the search.

"I'm guessing it was lubricated," Pete added. "There were also traces of a compound not inconsistent with nonoxynol-9."

Trent seemed to find this interesting. "Were there any traces of this on the stairs?"

"Not that I found."

Trent surmised, "So, he must have had sex with her somewhere else, probably inside the apartment, before the struggle in the stairway."

Michael tuned them out. A whore like Monroe wasn't going to waste her hard-earned money on extravagances like lube and spermicide. Better to just grit her teeth and save the cash. Deal with the consequences later.

Michael said, "The condom must have belonged to the doer."

Trent looked surprised, as if he'd just remembered Michael was in the room. "That's possible." Michael spelled it out for him. "The doer didn't mean to kill her. Why bother with an expensive condom, right?"

Trent nodded, but didn't say anything else.

"Well," Pete broke the silence. "As I was saying ..." He went back to his lecture, opening the woman's mouth, showing the stub where her tongue used to be attached. "There aren't any major arteries in the tongue, barring the lingual artery, which spreads out like the roots of a tree, tapering at the ends. You would have to go into the mouth a few inches to get to it, in which case you couldn't use your teeth." He frowned, thinking for a moment. "Picture a dachshund trying to fit his snout into a badger hole."

Michael didn't want to, but he found the image playing in his mind, the yippy bark echoing in his ears.

"In this case," Pete continued, "the incision separated the frenulum linguae from the organ, bisecting the submandibular duct." He opened his own mouth and lifted up his tongue, pointing to the thin stretch of skin underneath. "The removal of the tongue in and of itself is not a life-threatening injury. The problem is, she fell onto her back. Perhaps the shock of the event or the various chemical substances in her body affected her. Subsequently, she passed out. Over the course of a few minutes, the blood from the severed tongue engorged her throat. My official cause of death will be asphyxiation due to the blockage of the trachea by blood, causing respiratory arrest, secondary to exsanguination from the traumatic amputation of the tongue."

"But," Michael said, "he didn't mean for her to die."

"It's not in my purview to imagine what goes through a man's mind when he is biting off a woman's tongue, but if I were a gambling man, and my ex-wives will tell you I am, then yes. I would guess that the attacker did not intend for her to die."

Trent said, "Just like the others."

"There are more?" Pete asked, perking up. "I've not heard of any cases similar to this."

Trent told him, "There are two girls that we know of. The first had her tongue bitten, but not completely severed. It was sewn back on and she was fine—relatively speaking. The second lost her tongue. Too much time had passed to safely reattach it."

Pete shook his head. "Poor thing. Was this recent? I haven't read anything about it."

"The first attack happened on state land, so we were able to keep it quiet. The second girl's parents shut out the press and the local cops held back the details. There's no story if nobody's willing to talk."

"What about the third one?" Michael had to ask. "The little girl?"

Trent filled Pete in on the case. "My opinion is she bit it herself," he concluded. "She's young, ten years old. She must have been terrified. The local PD is good, but they don't have a lot of experience with this sort of violent crime. I think it was probably very hard for them to elicit a statement from her."

"No doubt," Pete agreed, but Michael wondered why Trent hadn't said any of this earlier. Maybe he had been feeling out Michael, seeing if he could pass the test.

Shit, Michael thought. He was tired of jumping through hoops. He asked the doctor, "How old do you think this one is?" He nodded to Aleesha Monroe.

"It's hard to say." Pete studied the woman's face. "Her teeth are a mess because of the drug. Given the hard nature of her life and her prolonged drug dependency, I'd put her in the late-thirties; possibly older, possibly younger."

Michael looked at Trent. "But not a teenage girl."

"Definitely not," Pete agreed.

"So, we've got two teenagers thirty miles away and an old junkie in Atlanta and the only thing linking them is this tongue shit." He tried to stare his meaning into Trent. "Right?"

Trent's cell phone rang. He glanced at the screen, then excused himself with an apology as he left the room.

Pete gave a heavy sigh, covering up the body, tugging the sheet tight over her head. "Messy situation."

"Yeah," Michael agreed. He was watching Trent through the glass doors, wondering what the fuck was up with the guy.

"He seems on the ball," Pete said, meaning Trent. "I have to say, it's a nice change of pace seeing one of your compatriots dressed so smartly."

"What?" Michael asked. He'd been watching Trent, trying to hear the call.

"The suit," Pete clarified. "It makes an impression."

"Like a fucking undertaker," Michael answered, thinking Pete wasn't exactly ready to step into a GQ spread. His white lab coats were always starched and clean, but that was because the state took care of the laundry bill. Underneath, Pete generally wore jeans and a wrinkled button-down shirt, his collar wide open, revealing a patch of gray chest hair and a gold medallion that any of the Bee Gees would have been ashamed to wear.

"It is a tenuous connection," Pete said. "The three cases."

"You're telling me."

"But it does give one pause that the tongues were all bitten off. That's not a common twist." He picked up the evidence bag with the tongue and held it up as if Michael hadn't seen it plenty last night. "I'd have to say in all my years doing this job, I've never run across anything similar. Bite marks, yes. I always say if you want scientific proof that we have evolved from animals, you need only look at the average rape victim." Pete placed the tongue beside Monroe's arm. "Bite marks were all over her breasts and shoulders. I counted at least twenty-two. It's a base instinct, I suppose, to bite during a vicious attack. You see dogs and big cats do it in the wild." He chuckled. "I cannot tell you how many nipples I've seen bitten off. Five or six instances of the clitoris being severed. One finger ..." He smiled at Michael. "If only these monsters had horns. It would be so much easier finding them."

Michael did not like the way the doctor was looking at him, and he sure as hell didn't want to hear his opinions on sexual predators. He said, "Tell Trent I'm downstairs when he's finished yapping on the phone."

He left through the emergency exit, taking the steps at a full trot. His instinct was to get into his car and leave Trent with his thumb up his ass, but he wasn't about to fuck around with the guy. Even if Greer didn't call him on it, Michael knew better than to make an enemy of the well-dressed asshole from the GBI.

"Where's the fire?" Leo asked. He was standing at the bottom of the stairs smoking a cigarette.

"Give me one," Michael said.

"Thought you quit."

"You my mother?" Michael reached into Leo's shirt pocket and took the pack.

Leo clicked the lighter and Michael took a deep drag. They were on the garage level of the building. The odor of car exhaust and rubber was overwhelming, but the cigarette smoke burning through Michael's nostrils cut the smell.

"So," Leo began. "Where's fucknuts?"

Michael let out a stream of smoke, feeling the nicotine calm him. "Upstairs with Pete."

Leo scowled. Pete had banned him from the morgue after a predictably ill-timed joke. "I went down to Records."

Michael squinted past the smoke. "Yeah?"

"Will Trent's file is sealed."

"Sealed?"

Leo nodded.

"How do you get your file sealed?"

"Got me."

They both smoked for a minute, silent in their thoughts. Michael looked down at the floor, which was covered with cigarette butts. The building was strictly nonsmoking, but telling a bunch of cops they couldn't do something was like telling a monkey not to throw its shit.

Michael asked, "Why'd Greer call him in? Him specifically, I mean. This SCAT team, whatever the fuck it is."

"Greer didn't call him." Leo raised his eyebrows like he was enjoying the mystery. "Trent was sitting in his office when Greer got to work."

Michael felt his heart start beating double time in his chest. The nicotine was getting to him, making him light-headed. "That's not how it works. The state boys can't just come in and take over a case. They have to be asked in."

"Sounded to me last night like Greer was gonna ask him anyway. What's the big deal how it came down?"

"Never mind." Despite Leo's disgusting people skills, the man knew a lot of people on the force. He had made an art out of developing contacts and could usually get the dirt on anybody.

Michael asked, "You able to find out anything about him?"

Leo shrugged, winking his eye against the smoke from his cigarette. "Sharon down in Dispatch

knows a guy who dated a girl he worked with.”

“Christ,” Michael hissed. “Next you’re gonna tell me you gotta friend who knows somebody who’s gotta friend who—”

“You wanna hear or not?”

Michael bit back what he really wanted to say. “Go.”

Leo took his time, rubbing his cigarette between his thumb and forefinger, taking a drag, then letting it out slow. Michael was two seconds from throttling him when Leo finally provided, “The news is that he’s a good cop. Doesn’t make a lot of friends—”

“No shit.”

“Yeah.” Leo chuckled, then coughed, then smacked his lips like he was swallowing it back down.

Michael looked at the cigarette in his hand, his stomach turning.

Leo paused, made sure he had Michael’s attention. “He’s got an eighty-nine percent clearance rate.”

Michael felt sick, but not because of the smoke. In its infinite wisdom, the Federal government had called for measuring the clearance rate—the number of solved cases—in each police agency so that some pencil pusher in Washington could track the progress on his little charts. They called it accountability, but to most cops it was just a shitload more paperwork. Any idiot could have predicted that this would cause a massive pissing contest among the detectives, and Greer fed into it by posting their numbers each month.

Trent had them all beat by about twenty points.

“Well,” Michael said, forcing himself to laugh. “It’s easy to solve a case when you take it over from some cop who’s already done all the work.”

“This SKIT thing is new to him.”

“SCAT,” Michael corrected, knowing Leo was trying to bait him but unable to stop playing.

“Whatever,” Leo mumbled. “What I’m saying is, Trent was working major crime before he was tapped.”

“Good for him.”

“He had a huge case a few years back with some gal over in kiddie crimes.”

“Gal got a name?”

Leo shrugged again. “Couple of guys were snatching kids down in Florida, swapping them back and forth with their buddies in Montana. It was all going out of Hartsfield; they were moving them through there like cattle. Your buddy’s team cracked it open in a month. Gal gets a big promotion, Trent stays where he is.”

“He was head of the team?”

“Yep.”

“Why didn’t he get promoted?”

“Have to ask him that.”

“If I could ask him, I wouldn’t be here talking to you.”

Leo’s eyes flashed, like his feelings had been hurt. “That’s all I got, man. Trent’s a straight arrow, knows his job. You want more, you need to call somebody downtown and find out yourself.”

Michael stared at his cigarette, watching it burn. Gina would kill him if she saw him smoking. She’d smell it on his hands as soon as he got home.

He dropped the butt onto the ground, grinding it in with his heel. “Is Angie still working Vice?”

“Polaski?” Leo asked, like he didn’t quite believe his ears. “You don’t wanna go fucking with that pollack.”

“Answer the fucking question.”

Leo took out another cigarette and lit it from the first. “Yeah. Last I heard.”

“If Trent comes looking for me, tell him I’ll meet him back down here in a few minutes.”

Michael didn’t give Leo time to answer. He ran back up the steps to the third floor, his lungs rattling in his chest by the time he opened the door. Vice was a mostly nighttime endeavor, so half the squad was in the room filling out paperwork from last night’s sweep. Angie had obviously worked catch. She was wearing a halter-top that stopped three inches above her belly button and a blonde wig was splayed on her desk like a dead Pomeranian.

He waited for her to look up, and when she did, she wasn’t exactly happy to see him. As Michael walked over, she leaned back in her chair, crossing her legs under a skirt so short he

looked away out of decency.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded. "Jesus, you look like hell."

Michael ran his fingers through his hair. He was sweating from the sprint up the stairs. The smoke was still in his lungs and he coughed something that sounded like a death rattle. Christ, he'd be joining Ken in a wheelchair if he kept this up.

He said, "I need to talk to you a minute."

She looked wary. "About what?"

Michael leaned over her desk, trying to keep the conversation between them.

"Uh-uh," she said, pushing him back as she stood up. "Let's go out into the hall."

He followed her, aware that the rest of the squad was watching. The truth was that Michael had liked working Vice. You watched the girls, you picked up the johns, you seldom got shot at or had to tell a parent that their son or daughter had been found floating in the Chattahoochee. He hadn't left because he wanted to. Angie had been a problem for him. They hadn't exactly gotten along, and the fact that she was agreeing to talk to him now was up there with the world's biggest surprises.

She tugged at her skirt as she stepped into a nook across from the elevators. Beside her, an ancient vending machine hummed, the lights flickering. She asked, "You here to talk about Alesha Monroe?"

"The pruss?" He hadn't even thought to pull her record.

"You don't remember her?" Angie asked. "We banged her up a couple of times until she hooked up with Baby G."

Michael answered "Yeah," though Angie shouldn't really expect him to remember one hooker out of the thousands they had arrested on the weekend sweeps. Some Saturday nights, they called out a wagon just to transport all the girls to the station. Cabs lined up outside the precinct to take them right back out onto the street a couple of hours later.

Michael began, "I just—"

The elevator door dinged behind him. Michael looked over his shoulder and saw Will Trent.

"Shit," Michael muttered.

"Kit Kat," Trent said, and Michael's brain took its sweet time figuring out what the fuck the guy was talking about. Trent stood in front of the vending machine, digging in his pocket for change.

Michael decided to make nice. "This is Angie Polaski," he said. Then, as if it wasn't obvious from the way she was dressed, he added, "Vice."

Trent was sticking coins into the machine. He gave her a nod, but his eyes didn't quite meet hers. "Good morning, Detective Polaski."

"Trent's with the GBI," Michael said. "Greer called him in to give us a hand with the Monroe case."

Michael was watching Trent, waiting for the guy to point out that Greer hadn't actually called him, that he'd shown up at the lieutenant's doorstep on his own. Trent, for his part, was tracing his finger along the glass front of the machine, trying to read the code under the Kit Kat bars so he could press it into the control panel. He was squinting; Michael figured the guy needed glasses.

"Oh, fer fucksakes," Angie muttered. "It's E-six." She punched the code in herself, her garishly long fake fingernails clicking on the plastic keys. She told Michael, "I'll get the file on Monroe."

She was walking back toward her squad before Michael could think to say anything else. He saw Trent watching her walk, the way her ass moved in the high heels.

"I worked with her a while back," Michael told him. "She's all right."

Trent peeled back the wrapper on the candy bar and took a bite.

Michael felt the need to explain. "She's kind of got an attitude."

"If I had to dress that way for work every day, I don't imagine I'd be very cheerful."

Michael watched Trent's jaw work as he chewed. The scar on his cheek seemed more pronounced. "How'd you get the scar?"

Trent looked at his hand. "Nail gun," he said, and Michael could see a pink scar cutting through the skin on the webbing between the man's thumb and index finger.

That hadn't been the scar Michael had meant, but he played along. "You into home repair or something?"

"Habitat for Humanity." Trent shoved the last of the Kit Kat into his mouth and tossed the wrapper into the trashcan. "One of my fellow volunteers shot me with a galvanized nail."

Michael felt another piece of the puzzle slide into place. Habitat for Humanity was a volunteer group that built homes for low-income families. Most cops eventually ended up volunteering for something. Working the streets, you tended to forget that there were actually good people out there. You tried to salve this wound in your psyche by helping people who actually wanted your help. Michael had worked at a children's shelter before Tim had been born. Even Leo Donnelly had volunteered with the local Little League team until they'd told him he couldn't smoke on the field.

Trent said, "I'd like to see the crime scene."

"We tossed her place last night," Michael told him. "You think we missed something?"

"Not at all," Trent countered. Michael tried to find any guile in his tone but came up empty.

"I'd just like to get a feel for the place."

"You do this with the other cases?"

"Yes," Trent said, "I did."

Angie was back, her high heels click-clacking on the tile floor. She held out a yellow file folder. "This is what I've got on Monroe."

Trent didn't reach for the file, so Michael took it. He flipped open the cover, seeing Aleesha Monroe's mug shot. She was attractive for what she was. The hardness in her eyes was a challenge as she stared straight into the camera. She looked irritated, probably doing the math, figuring how much money she was going to lose before she made bail.

"Her pimp's Baby G," Angie told them. "Mean motherfucker. Been up for assault, rape, attempted murder—probably ordered a hit on two other guys, but there's no way they can pin it on him." She indicated her mouth, showing her front teeth. "Has a gold grill with crosses cut into them like he's Jesus's own."

Michael asked, "Where does he hang out?"

"At the Homes," she said. "His grandmother lives in the same building as Aleesha."

Trent had tucked his hands into his pockets again, and he was staring at Polaski like she was a Martian from space. His silence was annoying, and he exuded an air of superiority, like he knew more than he was saying and thought it was some kind of joke that they couldn't figure it out.

Michael asked him, "You got anything to add to this?"

"It's your case, Detective," Trent answered. He told Angie, "Thank you for your assistance, ma'am," flashing what might have been a smile on someone less patronizing.

Angie looked at Michael, then Trent, then back at Michael. She lifted an eyebrow, asking a question Michael couldn't answer. "Whatever," she muttered, holding up her hand in the universal sign of dismissal. She turned her back on both of them, and Michael was too pissed to admire the view this time.

He asked Trent, "What's your fucking problem?"

Trent seemed surprised by his tone. "I'm sorry?"

"You gonna just stand there all day or are you here to get your hands dirty?"

"I told you—I'm just here to advise."

"Well, I've got some advice for you, Mr. Here to Advise," Michael said, his fists clenching so hard he could feel his fingernails digging into his palms. "Don't fuck with me."

Trent didn't seem threatened by the warning, but considering Michael had to crane his neck up to give it, this didn't come as a complete surprise.

"All right," Trent said. Then, as if that had settled everything, he asked, "Would you mind going to the Homes again? I'd really like to see the crime scene."

CHAPTER FIVE

Everything Will Trent said and did grated on Michael's nerves, from his "of course," when Michael said he would drive to the way he stared blankly out the car window as they traveled up North Avenue toward the Homes. The GBI agent reminded him of those geeky kids in high school, the ones who kept slide rules in their breast pockets and quoted obscure lines from Monty Python. No matter how many times he watched it, Michael still didn't get Monty Python and he sure as shit didn't get geeks like Trent. There was a reason these guys got the shit beaten out of them in school. There was a reason it was guys like Michael doing the beating.

Michael took a deep breath, then coughed, his lungs still pissed about the cigarette. He thought about Tim, how his son wasn't normal, how this attracted abuse from other kids. There was already a group of bullies at Tim's school who had given him some grief—stealing his hat, flattening his sandwich at the lunch table. The teachers tried to stop it, but they couldn't be everywhere all the time and some of them weren't real happy to begin with about Tim's being mainstreamed into their classrooms. Maybe Will Trent was Michael's karma playing out. He was being tested. Be nice to this freak and maybe Tim would get the same kind of pass.

"Oh," Trent said, pulling a small tape recorder out of his jacket pocket. "I've got the nine-one-one call." He pressed the play button before Michael could comment. A tinny, high-pitched voice bleated from the small speaker, *You gotta come to building nine at the Homes. They's a woman being raped pretty bad.*

Michael drummed his fingers on the steering wheel as he waited for a red light to change. "Play it again."

Trent did as he was told, and Michael strained his ears, trying to hear background noise, to figure out the tone and tenor of the voice. Something was off, but he couldn't put his finger on it.

"Raped," Michael echoed. "Not 'killed'."

Trent added, "The caller doesn't sound frightened."

"No," Michael agreed, accelerating as the light changed.

"I would think," Trent began, "if I were a woman, that I would be frightened if I saw, or even heard, another woman being attacked."

"Maybe not," Michael contradicted. "Maybe if you lived in the Homes, you would've already seen your fill of this kind of violence."

"If that were the case," Trent said, "then why would I report it?" He tried to answer his own question. "Maybe I knew the woman?"

"If you knew her, then you'd sound more upset than that." Michael indicated the recorder. The caller had sounded calm, like she was reporting the weather or the score from a particularly boring game.

"It took over thirty minutes for the unit to come." Trent didn't seem to be making a condemnation when he pointed out, "Grady has the slowest response time in the city."

"Anybody watching the news would know that."

"Or living in the Homes."

"We've checked everybody in the building, did door-to-doors that night. Nobody's popping up with a big sign hanging around his neck."

"No sex offenders in the buildings?"

"One, but he was banged up the whole day being interviewed on another case."

Trent rewound the tape and played it yet another time, letting it run into the emergency operator saying, *Ma'am? Ma'am? Are you there?*

Trent tucked the recorder back into his pocket. "The victim's a little old, too."

"Monroe?" Michael asked, trying to switch gears. Trent was finally talking to him like a cop. "Yeah, if Pete's right, she's probably around my age. Your girls were—what—fourteen? Fifteen?"

"White, too."

"Monroe was black, living in the projects, working the streets."

"The others were white, middle to upper class, came from solid families, doing well in school."

"Maybe he didn't have time to hunt down a new one," Michael suggested, feeling like he was walking on a very thin wire. He got that buzzing in his ears again, that something in his head that told him to shut up, don't trust this new guy, don't let him fool you.

"Could be," Trent allowed, but his tone of voice said he didn't find it likely.

Michael kept his mouth closed as he took a right into Grady Homes. The development looked a hell of a lot better at night, darkness covering the worst of its flaws. It was almost ten o'clock on a Monday morning, but kids were milling around on their bikes like they had been freed for the summer. Michael had done this same thing when he was a kid, straddling his Schwinn as he bullshitted with the other kids on his block. Only, Michael hadn't been passing dime bags out in the open like these kids were doing now, and he sure as hell wouldn't have had the balls to toss a wave at a couple of cops as they cruised through his neighborhood.

The BMW was still parked outside of building nine, two teenagers sitting on the hood with their arms crossed over their chests. They looked about fifteen or sixteen, and Michael felt a cold sweat at the soulless look in their eyes as they watched his car pull into the lot. This was the age that scared him most as a cop. They had something to prove, a quest to fulfill in order to grow from boy into man. Spilling blood was the quickest way to cross over.

Trent was looking at the boys, too. He gave a resigned "Great," and Michael was relieved to see him still thinking like a cop.

The front door to the building banged open and they both reached for their guns at the same time. Neither one drew as a short, fireplug of a man stalked down the broken sidewalk, pounding right past Trent's side of the car without giving them a second look.

The man wasn't wearing a shirt and his broad chest showed hints of thick muscle under jiggling fat, his pecs jerking up and down like tits with each step he took. He had an aluminum bat in one hand, and as he got closer to the boys on the car, he wrapped his other hand around the base, ready to break some balls.

Michael looked at Trent, who said, "Your call," but he was already getting out of the car.

"Shit," Michael hissed, opening his door, getting out just as the fireplug reached the boys.

"Get the hell off my car!" the man screamed, waving the bat in the air. Both teens stood up straight, arms dangling at their sides, mouths slack. "Get on a'fore I beat your asses, you lazy motherfuckers!"

Wisely, the kids bolted.

"Well," Trent said, letting out a breath.

"Stupid motherfuckers," the man repeated. He was looking at Michael and Trent, and Michael was pretty sure he wasn't talking about the boys anymore. "What the fuck you two pigs want?"

"Baby G?" Trent asked.

The man kept the bat up, ready to strike. "Who the fuck's asking?"

Trent took a step forward as if he wasn't scared his head would be knocked into right field at any moment.

Assault, Michael remembered Angie saying when she told them about Baby G. *Rape, attempted murder*.

Trent said, "I'm Special Agent Will Trent, this is Detective Ormewood." Michael waved, glad there was a car between him and the angry pimp. Trent was an idiot if he thought he'd get anything useful out of this thug.

"We're investigating the death of Aleesha Monroe."

"Why the fuck should I talk to you?" Baby G kept the bat in the air; his muscles tensed.

Trent looked back at Michael. "Any ideas?"

Michael shrugged, wondering how he was going to write this up in his report once he got Will Trent to the hospital. *Officer antagonized suspect ...* came to mind.

Trent turned back to the pimp, holding his hands out in an open shrug. "Honestly, I'm shocked my good looks and charm aren't enough for you."

Michael felt his jaw drop in surprise. He closed it quickly, let his hand reach down to his gun again so he'd be ready to react when the pimp figured out he was being disrespected.

Two or three seconds passed, then two or three more. Finally, Baby G nodded. "All right." He

smiled, showing the gold caps on each tooth, crosses cut through the centers showing the whites, just as Angie had described. "You got ten minutes before Montel comes on."

Trent held out his hand, as if they'd made a deal. "Thank you."

The pimp shook the offered hand, looking Trent up and down, saying, "You sure you a cop?"

Trent reached into his pocket and pulled out his badge.

Baby G glanced at it, then let his eyes do a once-over of Trent again. "You one weird motherfucker."

Trent tucked his badge back into his pocket, ignoring the observation. "You want to talk out here?"

Baby G dropped the bat to his side, leaning on it like it was a cane. "Them's my cousins," he said, indicating the car, obviously meaning the boys he'd chased off. "Up to no good. They should have they asses in school."

"It's nice that you take an interest in their lives," Trent allowed. He had tucked his hands into his pockets again, and was casually leaning against the back of the car like this was some kind of friendly conversation. "When did you last see Aleesha?"

Baby G took his time. "About six last night," he finally answered. "She was going off to work. Wanted a little something before she went out." He lifted his chin, waiting for Trent to ask what the little something was.

Trent obviously knew. He had seen the tracks on the hooker's arms just like Michael. "Did you give it to her?"

Baby G shrugged, which Michael took for a yes.

"Did she have any other suppliers?"

The pimp looked around as if he was checking his audience. He spit on the ground, puffing out his chest in defiance, but he still answered the question. "Hell no. She didn't have no money. Nobody was gonna float that ho for a dime."

"I could run up the street and blow just about anybody for a baggie," Trent pointed out. "No cash involved."

Baby G laughed at the thought. "Yo, bitch, not on my turf."

"I'm sure Aleesha reported all her income," Trent said, more like a question.

"Shit," Baby G grunted, like it was stupid to even suggest such a thing.

Trent asked, "She a good earner?"

"She like that needle in her arm. Do anything you ask to get it."

"Did she have any regulars? Men we should be looking out for?"

"Not sick mothers like what did that," he used the bat to indicate the top floor of the building where Monroe had been found. "I take care of my girls." He kept the bat raised in the air, using it to make his point. "If I'd a seen this motherfucker, you best be sure he'd be the one going in the ground right now, not my Leesha."

Trent nodded toward the building. "You live here?"

He softened a bit. "With my granny. She gettin' kind of old. I gotta look out for her."

"Were you with her last night?"

"Me an' my boys was out at the Cheetah watching the game."

"Do you mind if we speak with your grandmother?"

"Hell yes, I do. Don't go gettin' my granny mixed up with this shit. She didn't see *nothing*, you hear? She just an old lady."

"All right," Trent acquiesced. He looked back at Michael as if to ask if he had any questions. Michael shook his head and Trent told the pimp, "I know you want to go watch your program. Thank you for your time."

Baby G stood there, unsure of himself. He finally shrugged them off, repeating, "You just one weird motherfucker," before walking back into the building.

When the door had banged shut, Trent turned to Michael. "What do you think?"

"I think he's right," Michael said, pushing away from the car. "You're pretty fucking strange."

Trent's cell phone chirped, and Michael felt his earlier irritation spark again as Trent walked a few feet away to take the call.

"Yes, sir," Trent said. "Yes, sir."

Michael looked up at the sky, the dark clouds that were starting to roll in. The way today was going, a storm would break just as they were leaving the scene and he'd end up sloshing through the parking lot, ruining his new shoes.

Trent snapped the phone closed, tucking it into his vest pocket. "You need to go home,

Michael."

Michael felt his heart stop in his chest. "What?"

"You need to go home," Trent repeated. "There's been an accident."

DECATUR CITY OBSERVER

JUNE 22, 1985

ARREST MADE IN FINNEY MURDER

Police announced this morning that an arrest has been made in the murder of fifteen-year-old Mary Alice Finney. The suspect's name has not been released because he is a juvenile, but Police Chief Harold Waller describes the boy as a fifteen-year-old whose name was well known to the City of Decatur Police Department. The arrest was made after several neighbors identified the suspect as the stranger who walked Mary Alice Finney home from the party where she was last seen alive. Waller claims that a full confession is expected in what he has called "the most heinous violation" he has seen in his entire law enforcement career.

The girl's father is Paul Finney, a well-respected member of the bar as well as assistant district attorney for DeKalb County. Mother Sally Finney, a homemaker, has been active in the Women's League as well as a fund-raiser for Agnes Scott College. The couple have no other children. A candlelight vigil for Mary Alice Finney will be held on the Square at 8:30 tonight, and closed services will be held at the Cable Funeral Home tomorrow afternoon. The family asks for donations in lieu of flowers to be made to the Decatur City Library, one of Mary Alice's favorite places.

CHAPTER SIX

Michael drove like the devil, his hands gripping the wheel. Trent sat beside him, stone quiet even as Michael blasted through red lights and ran stop signs. The house was less than twenty minutes away from Grady Homes, but Michael felt like it was taking hours to get there. His heart was in his throat, pumping like a freight train. All he could think about was all the horrible things he had done to his family, how he didn't deserve them, how he would clean up his act, turn his life around, if only Tim was okay.

"Fuck!" Michael twisted the steering wheel hard to the left, narrowly avoiding a Chevy Blazer that had the right of way.

Trent had grabbed the side of the door, but he wasn't stupid enough to say anything about slowing down.

Michael straightened the wheel, making another hard left onto a back road that would take them out of heavy traffic and hopefully get them home sooner. The clutch slipped but quickly caught again as he accelerated. A light was flashing on the dashboard, the engine temperature gauge pushing well into the red. All he needed was for the piece of shit car to get him to the house. That's all Michael needed.

He hit the redial on his cell phone again, listening to the phone ringing at his house for the fiftieth time. Barbara's cell wasn't picking up and he hadn't been able to find Gina at the hospital.

"God damn it!" Michael screamed, smashing the phone against the dashboard, breaking it to pieces.

Greer had called Will Trent to tell him there was a problem, like Michael was some pansy civilian instead of a seasoned cop. All the lieutenant had said was that there had been some kind of accident involving a kid at Michael's house. Standard fucking procedure—don't tell them on the phone, don't freak them out so they drive their car over a bridge on the way to the scene. When Michael had tried to call Greer back for more details, the fucker had talked to him like he was twelve. "Just get home, Michael," Greer had said. "Everything's going to be okay."

"Bike," Trent said, and Michael saw the cyclist at the last second, nearly clipping the guy as he darted the car into the other lane. There was an oncoming truck, and Michael jerked the wheel back just in time to avoid a head-on collision.

"We're almost there," Michael said, as if Trent had asked. "Shit," he hissed, slamming the heel of his palm into the steering wheel. Tim was always getting into things he shouldn't. He didn't know any better. Barbara was getting old. She was tired most days, didn't have the energy to keep up.

The car fishtailed as he turned onto his street. There were two cruisers in front of his house, one of them parked in the driveway behind Barbara's car. Uniformed cops were milling around on the sidewalk in front of Cynthia and Phil's house. Michael's heart stopped when he saw Barbara sitting on the front porch, head in her hands.

Somehow, Michael got out of the car. He ran to her, bile rushing up his throat as he tried not to be sick. "Where's Tim?" he asked. She didn't answer quickly enough and he repeated himself, yelling, "Where's my son!"

"In school," she screamed back as if he was crazy. He had grabbed her wrists, dragging her up to standing. She had tears in her eyes.

"Hey," Trent said, a quiet word that held a warning.

Michael looked at his hands, not knowing how they had wrapped themselves around Barbara's wrists. There were red marks where he held her. He made himself let go.

Behind him, a coroner's wagon pulled up, its brakes grinding as it stopped and idled by the mailbox.

He put his hands on Barbara's shoulders, this time to hold himself up. They had said it was a kid. Maybe they got it wrong. Maybe Greer had lied.

"Gina?" Michael asked. Had something happened to Gina?

One of the cops was at the meat wagon. He motioned the driver toward the house next door. "In the backyard."

Michael's feet were moving before he knew it. He slammed open his front door and bolted up the hall. He heard footsteps pounding behind him and knew it was that bastard Trent. Michael didn't care. He threw open the back door and ran into the yard, stopping so fast that Trent bumped into him from behind.

Michael saw the white first, the skimpy robe, the see-through camisole. She was on her stomach, feet tangled up in the broken chain-link fence. Six or seven men stood around her.

Michael managed to walk toward her, his knees giving out when he reached the body. The mole on her shoulder, the birthmark on the back of her arm. He pressed his fingers into the palm of her small hand.

Somebody warned, "Sir, don't touch her."

Michael didn't care. He stroked her soft palm, tears streaming down his face, whispering, "Jesus. Oh, Jesus."

Trent was making noises to the group of cops, words Michael couldn't understand. He could only look at the back of Cynthia's head, see the long strands of her silky blonde hair draping around her shoulders like a scarf. He pulled the robe down, covering her bare bottom, trying to give her some dignity.

"Detective," Trent said. His hand was tucked under Michael's arm, and Trent easily pulled him up to his feet. "You shouldn't touch her."

"It's not her," Michael insisted, trying to kneel back down, wanting to see her face. It was some kind of trick. It couldn't be Cynthia. She was at the mall spending Phil's money, hanging out with her friends.

"I want to see her," Michael said. His body was shaking like he was cold. His knees didn't want to work again, but Trent supported him, keeping him up so he didn't fall back down. "I want to see her face."

One of the men, obviously the medical examiner, said, "I was just about to flip her anyway."

With help from another cop, the doctor gripped her by the shoulders and turned her so that she was facing up.

Cynthia's mouth gaped open, blood spilling out and dribbling down her neck like a slow leak from a faucet. Her beautiful face was marked by a deep cut slashing across her temple. Vacant green eyes stared up at the open sky. Strands of hair were stuck to her face, and he tried to lean down to brush them back but Trent wouldn't let him.

Michael felt hot tears stinging his eyes. Somebody should cover her. She shouldn't be exposed like this for everybody to see.

The medical examiner leaned down, pressing her jaw open, peering into her empty mouth. He said, "Her tongue is gone."

"Christ," one of the cops whispered. "She's just a kid."

Michael swallowed, feeling like he was choking on his grief. "Fifteen," he said. She'd just had a birthday last week. He'd bought her a stuffed giraffe.

"She's fifteen."

PART II

CHAPTER SEVEN

OCTOBER 2, 2005

John Shelley wanted a television. He had been working the same crappy job for the last two months, showing up every day on time, making sure he was the last to leave, doing every nitpicking shit job his boss assigned, and to him it wasn't just a matter of wanting, but *deserving* a television. Nothing fancy for him, just something in color, something with a remote control and something that would pick up the college games.

He wanted to watch his teams play. He wanted to hold the remote in his hand and if Georgia was playing bad, which was highly likely, he wanted to be able to turn the channel and watch Florida getting its ass kicked. He wanted to watch the cheesy halftime shows, hear the stupid commentators, see Tulane at Southern Mississippi, Texas A&M at LSU, Army-freakin'-Navy. Come Thanksgiving, he wanted an orgy of bowl games and then he'd switch to the big dogs: the Patriots, the Raiders, the Eagles, all leading up to that magic moment come February when John Shelley would sit in his crap room in his crap boardinghouse and watch the freaking Super Bowl all alone for the first time in his life.

Six days a week for the last two months, he had looked out the bus window and stared longingly at the Atlanta City Rent-All. The sign in the window promised "your job is your credit," but the asterisk, so tiny it could be a squished bug, told otherwise. Thank God he had been too nervous to walk right into the store and make a fool of himself. John had stood outside the front door, his heart shaking in his chest like a dog shitting peach pits, when he noticed the fine print on the poster. Two months, the tiny type said. You had to hold down a steady job for at least two months before they would allow you the honor of paying fifty-two weekly installments of twenty dollars for a television that would retail for around three hundred bucks in a normal store.

But John wasn't a normal person. No matter his new haircut or his close shave or his pressed chinos, people still felt that otherness about him. Even at work, a car wash where mostly transients showed up to wipe down cars and vacuum Cheerios out of the backs of SUVs, they kept their distance.

And now, two months later, John sat on the edge of his chair, trying to keep his leg from bobbing up and down, waiting for his TV. The pimply faced kid who had greeted him at the door was taking his time. He'd gotten John's application and rushed to the back about twenty minutes ago. Application. That was another thing they hadn't put on the sign. Street address, date of birth, social security number, place of employment, everything but his freaking underwear size.

The Atlanta City Rent-All was noisy for a Sunday afternoon. All of the televisions were on, bright images flashing from a wall of tubes, whispered undertones from nature shows, news channels and do-it-yourself programs buzzing in his ears. The noise was getting to him. Too much light was pouring in from the floor-to-ceiling windows. The televisions were too bright.

He shifted in his chair, feeling a bead of sweat roll down his back. John didn't wear a watch, but there was a big clock on the wall. This represented poor judgment on the store planner's part, considering the fact that all it served to do was remind people they were stuck here waiting for some kid fresh out of high school to tell the lucky customer that they had qualified for the extreme honor of paying five hundred bucks for a Simzitzu DVD player.

"Just a TV," John whispered to himself. "Just a small TV." His leg was bobbing up and down again and he didn't bother to stop it. His hands were clenching and unclenching, and that was bad. He had to stop doing that. People were staring. Parents were keeping their kids close.

"Sir?" Randall, John's own personal sales assistant, stood in front of him. He had a smile

plastered onto his face that would have given a Labrador pause. "Sorry to keep you waiting." Randall reached out his hand as if John might need help up.

"It's okay," John said, trying not to mumble as he stood. He started looking around, wondering what was going on. The kid was being too nice to him. Had something happened? Did someone call the police?

"We can show you these sets here," Randall offered, leading him to the back of the store where the big screens were displayed.

John stood in front of a television that looked as huge as a movie screen. The set was almost as tall as him and twice as wide.

Randall picked up a remote control the size of a book. "The Panasonic has advanced real black technology that gives you—"

"Wait a minute." John was walking around the television. It was only a few inches thick. He saw the price tag and laughed. "I told you what I make, man."

Randall flashed him a smile, took a step forward that made John want to take a step back. He kept his ground, though, and the kid lowered his voice, saying, "We understand when some of our customers have outside income sources they can't list on their credit applications."

"That right?" John asked, recognizing something illicit was happening but not quite sure what.

"Your credit report ..." Randall seemed almost embarrassed. "The credit cards came up."

"What credit cards?" John asked. He didn't even have a damn checking account.

"Don't worry about it." Randall patted John on the shoulder like they were old buddies.

"What credit cards?" John repeated, the muscles in his arm aching to slap the kid's hand away. He hated admitting he didn't know something. Being in the dark made you vulnerable.

Randall finally dropped his hand. "Listen, guy," he began. "No big deal, right? Just make the payments and we don't care. We don't report to anybody unless you stop paying."

John crossed his arms over his chest, even though he knew it made him look bigger, more threatening, to other people. "Lookit," he said. "I want that crappy TV up front, the twenty-two inch with the remote control. That's all I want."

"Dude," Randall said, holding up his hands. "Sure. No problem. I just figured with your credit score—"

John had to ask again. "What score?"

"Your credit score," the kid said, the tone of his voice passing incredulous and settling on plain dumbfounded. "Your credit score's the best I've ever seen here. We get some people in, they're not even breaking three hundred."

"What was mine?"

Randall seemed startled by the question. "We're not allowed to tell you."

John made his voice firm, let some of the gravel come out. "What was mine?"

Randall's pimples turned white, his skin a bright red. He whispered, "Seven-ten," glancing over his shoulder to see if his boss was watching him. "You could go to a real store, Mr. Shelley. You could walk into a Circuit City or a Best Buy—"

"Let me see it."

"Your report?"

John closed some of the space between them. "You said there were credit cards on there. I want to know what cards."

Randall looked over his shoulder again, but he should have been more concerned about what was in front of him.

"Stop looking behind you, kid. Look at me. Answer my question."

Randall's Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed. "Maybe I put in your social security number wrong. The current address was different—"

"But the name?"

"Same name."

"Same previous address in Garden City?"

"Yes, sir."

He summed it up for the kid. "You think there's another Jonathan Winston Shelley out there with my birth date and my previous address, living in Atlanta, who has a social security number that's close to mine?"

"No—I mean, yes." Sweat had broken out on Randall's upper lip and his voice began to shake. "I'm sorry, mister. I could lose my job if I showed you that. You can get a copy of it yourself for free. I can give you the num—"

"Forget it," John said, feeling like a monster for pushing the kid. The fear in his eyes cut like a piece of glass. John walked back through the store, past the television he wanted, and left before he said something he would regret.

Instead of going home, John crossed the street and sat on the bench beside the bus stop. He took one of the free community newspapers out of the stand and thumbed through it. The street had four lanes, but was pretty busy. Using the paper as a shield, he watched the store, tracking Randall and his fellow clerks as they talked people who should know better into signing away their lives.

Credit reports, credit cards, scores. Shit, he didn't know anything about this.

A bus came, the driver glancing out the door at John. "You gettin' on?"

"Next one," John said. Then, "Thanks, man." He liked the MARTA bus drivers. They didn't seem to make snap judgments. As long as you paid your fare and didn't make trouble, they assumed you were a good person.

Hot air hissed from the back of the bus as it pulled away. John turned to the next page in the paper, then went back to the front, realizing he hadn't read any of it. He sat at the bus stop for two hours, then three, leaving only once to take a piss behind an abandoned building.

At eight o'clock, Randall the salesboy left the rental store. He got into a rusted Toyota, turning the key and releasing into the otherwise quiet night the most obnoxious music John had ever heard. It had been dark for at least an hour, but Randall wouldn't have noticed John even if it had been bright as day. The kid was probably seventeen or eighteen. He had his own car, a job that paid pretty well, and not a care in the world except for the asshole with good credit who had tried to strong-arm him that afternoon.

The manager came out. At least, John guessed he was the manager: older guy, flap of hair stringing across a bald spot, yellowish skin and a round ass that came from sitting around all day telling people no.

The guy's groan could be heard from across the street as he reached up and pulled down the chain mesh that covered the front windows of the store. He groaned again as he stooped to lock the brace, then groaned a third time as he stood. After stretching his back, he walked over to a taupe Ford Taurus and climbed in behind the wheel.

John waited as the guy slipped on his seat belt, adjusted the rearview mirror, then put the car into reverse. The Taurus backed up, white lights flashing over red, then straightened out and left the parking lot, the engine making a puttering sound like a golf cart.

Ten minutes, fifteen. Thirty minutes. John stood up, giving his own groan from the effort. His knees had popped and his ass hurt from the cold concrete bench.

He looked both ways before crossing the street and walking past the store. The chains guarding the front doors and windows were strong, but John wasn't planning on smashing and grabbing. Instead, he went to the back of the building to the Dumpster.

The security camera behind the rental place was trained on the back door, the Dumpster free and clear. He slid open the steel door, releasing a metallic shriek into the night. The odor coming off the metal container was bad, but John had smelled worse. He started pulling out the small black kitchen garbage bags like the kind he had seen lining the trash cans in the rental store. He was careful, untying the knots instead of ripping the bags open to search them, then tying them back in the same knot before moving to the next one. After thirty minutes of going through the store's trash, he had to laugh at the situation. There was enough information in the trash bags—social security numbers, street addresses, employment histories—to launch a major con. That wasn't what he was looking for, though. He wasn't a conman and he wasn't a thief. He wanted information, but only his own, and of course he found it in the last bag he opened.

He tilted the credit report so that the security lights made it easier to read.

Same social security number. Same date of birth. Same previous address.

Jonathan Winston Shelley, age thirty-five, had two MasterCards, three Visas and a Shell gas card. His address was a post office box with a 30316 zip code, which meant he lived somewhere in southeast Atlanta—several miles from John's current room at Chez Flop House on Ashby, just down from the Georgia state capitol.

His credit was excellent, his checking account with the local bank in good standing. Obviously, he was a pretty reliable customer and had been for about six years. But for one "slow pay" on the Shell card, all his creditors were satisfied with his prompt payments, which was kind of funny when you thought about it, because for the last twenty years, Jonathan Winston Shelley hadn't gotten out much. The guards at the prison tended to keep a close eye on you when you were

serving twenty-two-to-life for raping and killing a fifteen-year-old girl.

CHAPTER EIGHT

John had known Mary Alice Finney all of his life. She was the good girl, the pretty cheerleader, the straight-A student, the person just about everybody in school knew and liked because she was so damn nice. Sure, there were some girls who hated her, but that's what girls did when they felt threatened: they hated. They spread nasty rumors. They were nice to your face and then when you turned around they stuck the knife in as far as it would go and twisted it around for good measure. Even in the real world, find some woman who's doing well for herself, being successful, and there's always going to be a handful of other women standing around saying she's a bitch or she slept her way to the top. That was just how the world worked, and it was no different in the microcosm of Decatur High School.

Actually, John later found that it was a hell of a lot like prison.

The Shelleys lived a couple of streets over from the Finneys in one of Decatur's nicer neighborhoods bordering Agnes Scott College. Their mothers knew each other in that circular world of the upper middle class. They had met the way doctors' and lawyers' wives have always met, at some fund-raiser or charity for the local high school, hospital, college—whatever institution served as an excuse to throw an elaborate party and invite strangers into their beautifully decorated homes.

Richard Shelley was an oncologist, head of the cancer treatment ward at Decatur Hospital. His wife, Emily, had at one point been a real estate agent, but she'd quit that job when Joyce, their first child, was born. John came three years later, and the Shelleys thought their world was complete.

Emily had been one of those mothers who threw herself into parenting. She was active in the PTA, sold the most Girl Scout cookies, and spent the end of most school years sewing costumes for the Quaker Friends School's graduation gala. As her two children grew up and stopped needing her—or wanting her, for that matter—she found herself with a lot of time on her hands. By the time John was in junior high and Joyce was two years away from attending college, she had gone back to the real estate agency part-time just to give herself something to do.

Their lives were perfect except for John.

The lying came early on and seemingly for no reason. John was at home when he had said he would be at football practice. He was at football practice when he said he would be at home. His grades started slipping. He let his hair grow long. Then, there was that smell. It seemed like he wasn't even bathing and his clothes, when Emily would pick them up off the floor of his dank bedroom to throw them in the washer, had an almost chemical feel to them, as if they had been sprayed with Teflon.

Richard worked long hours. His job was emotionally and physically demanding. He didn't have the time or inclination to be concerned about his son. Richard had been sullen when he was John's age. He had secrets when he was a teenager. He got into trouble but he straightened out, right? Time to take him off the tit. Give the boy some space.

Emily was worried about marijuana, so she did not register danger over the powdery residue she found in the front pocket of her son's jeans.

"Aspirin," he told her.

"Why would you put aspirin in your pocket?"

"I've been getting headaches."

As a child, John had put stranger things in his pockets: rocks, paper clips, a frog. She was worried about his health. "Do we need to take you to the doctor?"

"Mom."

He left her standing there in the laundry room, holding his pants.

The Shelleys, like most affluent couples, assumed that their money and privilege protected their children from drugs. What they did not realize was that those two factors helped their kids get *better* drugs. Even without that, Emily Shelley wanted to believe her son was a good boy, so she did. She didn't notice the glazed look he had in the mornings, the eyedrops he was constantly using, the sweet, sickly smell that came from the back shed. For his part, Dr. Richard didn't look across his newspaper at the breakfast table and see that his son's pupils were the size of half-dollars or that his nose bled more often than some of the cancer patients on his ward.

Life came apart in pieces.

A random search at the school yielded a bag of pot tucked into a pair of sneakers at the back of John's locker.

"Not my shoes," John said, and his mother agreed that the shoes didn't look like any she had seen him wear before.

A security guard at the local mall called them to let them know their son had been caught stealing a cassette tape.

"I forgot to pay for it." John shrugged, and his mother pointed out that he *did* have twenty dollars in his pocket. Why on earth would he steal something he could pay for?

The last piece came undone one Friday night. An intern at the hospital called, waking Richard Shelley to tell him his kid was in the emergency room, having overdosed on coke.

Talk about ripping off the blinders. Medical evidence—something his father could wave under his mother's nose as physical proof of their son's worthlessness.

At night, John would sit in his bedroom and listen to his parents argue about him until his father screamed something along the lines of "and that's final!" and his mother ran into her bedroom, slamming the door behind her. Muffled sobs would come next, and he'd turn up his stereo, Def Leppard screaming from the speakers, until Joyce (studying, of course) pounded on the wall between their bedrooms, screaming, "Turn it down, loser!"

John would bang back, call her a bitch, make enough noise so that his father came into his room, yanking him up by the arm and asking what the hell was wrong with him.

"What are you rebelling against?" Richard would demand. "You have everything you could possibly want!"

"Why?" his mother would ask her boy, tears streaming down her face. "Where did I go wrong?"

John shrugged. That's all he did when they tried to confront him—shrug. He shrugged so much that his father said he must have a neurological disorder. Maybe he should be put on lithium. Maybe he should be put in a mental home.

"How did it start?" his mother wanted to know. There had to be a way she could fix it, make it better, but only if she could find out how it began. "Who got you hooked on this? Tell me who did this to you!"

A shrug from John. A sarcastic comment from his father. "Are you retarded now? Autistic? Is that what's wrong with you?"

It had started with pot. There was a reason after all that Nancy Reagan told kids to just say no. John's first hit, fittingly, was right after a funeral.

Emily's brother, Barry, had died in a car accident on the expressway. Sudden. Fatal. Life-changing. Barry was a big guy, ate whatever he wanted, smoked cigars like he was Fidel Castro. He was on pills for high blood pressure, taking shots every day for diabetes and generally working his way toward the grave in a slow crawl. That he was killed by a truck driver who had fallen asleep at the wheel was almost a joke.

The funeral was held on a hot spring morning. At the church, John had walked behind the casket, his cousin Woody at his side. He had never seen another guy crying before, and John felt weird watching his tough cousin, four years older and cooler than John could ever hope to be, breaking down in front of him. Barry hadn't even been the guy's real father. Woody's mother was divorced—a shocking event in those days. She had only been married to Barry for two years. John wasn't even sure if the guy was his cousin anymore.

"Come here," Woody had said. They were back at his house, so empty now without Uncle Barry in it. His uncle had been a gregarious man, always there with a joke or a well-timed chuckle to take off the tension in the room. John's dad didn't like him much, and John suspected this was out of snobbery more than anything else. Barry sold tractor trailers. He made a good living, but Richard put the job on par with selling used cars.

"Come on," Woody told John, walking up the stairs to the bedrooms.

John had looked around for his parents, no reason but the tone in Woody's voice warning him that something bad was about to happen. Still, he followed him to his room, shut the door and locked it when he was told.

"Shit." Woody sighed, sinking into the beanbag chair on the floor. He took out a plastic film canister from behind a couple of books stacked on the shelf behind him, then pulled some rolling papers from under his mattress. John watched as he deftly rolled a joint.

Woody saw him watching, said, "I could use a toke, man. How about you?"

John had never smoked a cigarette before, never taken anything stronger than cough medicine—which his mother kept hidden in her bathroom like it was radioactive—but when Woody offered him the joint, he had said, "Cool."

He watched his cousin suck the smoke into his lungs and hold it, hoping for pointers. Sweat formed on John's upper lip as the joint was handed to him. He was more afraid that he would look stupid in front of his cousin than because he was doing something illegal.

John loved the relief that came from smoking a joint, the way it took the edge off of everything. He no longer cared that his father thought he was a total fuck-up or that his mother was constantly disappointed with him. His sister Joyce's perfection as she followed in their father's footsteps didn't grate as much after a toke, and he actually enjoyed being around his family more when he was high.

When his parents finally realized what was happening, they blamed that age-old culprit, the bad crowd. What they did not realize was that John Shelley *was* the bad crowd. In a few weeks, he'd graduated from gawky nerd to pothead, and he loved the attention his newfound transformation gave him. Thanks to Woody, he was the kid who had the stash. He was the one who knew where the cool parties were, where underage high schoolers were welcome as long as they brought some pretty girls along with them. He was dealing dime bags to his new friends by the time he was fifteen. At a family reunion, Woody gave him his first hit of coke, and after that, there was no looking back.

By seventeen, he was a convicted murderer.

As far as John could remember, Mary Alice Finney was the first friend he'd ever had who wasn't a member of his immediate family. Their mothers had carpooled, taking turns every other week shuttling the kids to school. The kids had sat in the backseat, giggling about stupid things, playing the silly games that you played to make the time go by faster. Through elementary school, they had stayed on pretty much the same path. They were the smart kids, the ones who had all of the advantages. By junior high, everything was different. Uncle Barry was dead. John was the leader of the wrong crowd.

"You've changed," Mary Alice had told him the day he'd cornered her outside the girls' locker room. She had kept her textbooks pressed tight to her chest, covering the front of her Police concert T-shirt as if she felt the need to protect herself. "I don't think I like the person you're choosing to become."

Choosing to become. Like he had a choice. He hadn't chosen his hard-ass father, his ditzzy mother who practically invented rose-colored glasses. He hadn't chosen Joyce, the perfect sister, the bitch who set the bar so high all John could ever hope to do was bounce on his toes, trying to touch the edge of the bar but never getting high enough to go over.

He had chosen this? He hadn't had a chance.

"Screw you," he told Mary Alice.

"You wish," she snapped, flipping her hair to the side as she turned on her heel and left him standing there like an idiot.

He had looked in the mirror that night, taken in his greasy long hair, the dark circles under his eyes, the acne spotting his cheeks and forehead. His body hadn't yet caught up with his enormous hands and feet. Even dressed up for church, he looked like a string bean standing on a couple of cardboard boxes. He was an outcast at school, had no real friends left and at the ripe age of fifteen, all of his sexual experience thus far had involved his sister's Jergens hand lotion and an active imagination. Looking in the mirror, John had taken all of this in, then sneaked out to the shed in the backyard and snorted so much coke that he made himself sick.

John hated Mary Alice from that day on. Everything bad in his life was her fault. He spread rumors about her. He made jokes at her expense and within her hearing so she'd know just how much he despised her. At pep rallies, he heckled her as she was leading cheers on the gym floor. Some nights, he would lie awake thinking about her, detesting her, and then he'd find his hand

had gone from resting flat on his stomach to reaching down into his shorts and all it took was picturing her at school that day, the way she smiled at other people when she walked down the hallway, the tight sweater she had worn, and he was gone.

"John?" His mother had some sixth sense and always seemed to knock on his bedroom door when he was jerking off. "We need to talk."

Emily wanted to talk about his failing grades, his latest detention, something she had found in the pocket of his jeans. She wanted to talk to the stranger who had kidnapped her son, to beg him to give her her Johnny back. She knew her baby was in there somewhere, and she would not give up. Even at the trial, John had felt her silent support as he sat at the table listening to the lawyers who said he was scum, facing a panel of jurors who wouldn't even look him in the eye.

The only person in that courtroom who still believed in John Shelley was his mother. She would not let go of that boy, that Cub Scout, that model airplane builder, that precious child. She wanted to put her arms around him and make everything better, to press her face to the back of his neck and inhale that odd scent of cookie dough and wet clay he got when he played in the backyard with his friends. She wanted to listen to him tell her about his day, the baseball game he had played, the new friend he had made. She wanted her son. She *ached* for her son.

But he was already gone.

SHELLEY TO BE TRIED AS ADULT IN FINNEY MURDER

District judge Billie Bennett ruled yesterday that fifteen-year-old Jonathan Winston Shelley of Decatur will be tried as an adult in the murder trial of Mary Alice Finney, also of Decatur. Attorneys for the accused argued extenuating circumstances, but speaking from the bench, Bennett said based on the defendant's previous arrests as well as other mitigating factors, she saw no reason why the youth should not be charged as an adult. Prosecutor Lyle Anders has said that his office will seek the death penalty.

Paul Finney, the slain girl's father, told reporters outside the courthouse that he was "pleased" with the judge's ruling. Shelley, charged with felony murder, will be the first teenager in DeKalb County to

be tried as an adult. In a separate ruling, Bennett denied a change of venue requested by Shelley's attorney.

Six convicted murderers have been executed by the state of Georgia since the United States Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the death penalty in *Gregg v. Georgia* (1976). The youngest offender executed in the state's history was sixteen-year-old Eddie Marsh, who was put to death February 9, 1932, for the murder of a Dougherty County pecan farmer. In March of this year, twenty-eight-year-old John Young, who at eighteen murdered three elderly people in their Bibb County home during the commission of a robbery, was put to death by electrocution at the Georgia Diagnostic and Classification Prison in Jackson.

CHAPTER NINE

OCTOBER 2, 2005

John hadn't slept well, which was nothing new for him. In prison, nighttime was always the worst. You heard screams, mostly. Crying. Other things he didn't like to think about. John had been fifteen when he was arrested, sixteen when he was incarcerated. By the age of thirty-five, he had lived in prison more years than he had slept in his parents' home.

As noisy as prison was, you got used to it. Being on the outside was what was hard. Car horns, fire engines, radios blasting from all over. The sun was brighter, the smells more intense. Flowers could bring tears to his eyes and food was almost inedible. There was too much flavor in everything, too many choices for him to feel comfortable going into a restaurant and ordering a meal.

Before John was locked up, you didn't see people jogging in the streets, headphones tucked into their ears, tight spandex shorts clinging to their bodies. Cell phones were in bags like big purses that you carried over your shoulder and only really wealthy people could afford to have them. Rap didn't exist in the mainstream and listening to Mötley Crüe and Poison meant you were cool. CD players were something out of *Star Trek* and even knowing what *Star Trek* was meant you were some kind of nerd.

He didn't know what to do with this new world. Nothing made sense to him. None of the familiar things were there. His first day out, he had gone into a closet in his mother's home, shut the door and cried like a baby.

"Shelley?" Art yelled. "You gonna work or not?"

John waved his hand at the supervisor, pushing his mouth into a smile. "Sorry, boss."

He walked over to a green Suburban and started wiping water off the side panel. That was another thing that had shocked him. Cars had gotten so huge. In prison, there had been one television that got two channels, and the older inmates got to decide what was playing. The antenna had been ripped off and used to pluck out somebody's eyeball well before John showed up, and the reception sucked. Even when the snow cleared and you could halfway see the picture, there was no sense of scale with the cars on screen. Then you wondered if what you were seeing was real or something just made for a particular show. Maybe the series was really about an alternative world where women wore skirts up to their cooches and men weren't beneath sporting tight leather pants and saying things like, "My father never understood me."

The guys always got a laugh out of that, shouting "pussy" and "faggot" at the set so that it drowned out the actor's next line.

John didn't watch much TV.

"Yo, yo," Ray-Ray said, bending down to sponge silicone onto the Suburban's tires. John looked up to see a police cruiser pulling into the drive of the car wash. Ray-Ray always said things twice, hence the name, and he always alerted John when a cop was around. John returned the favor. The two men had never really talked, let alone exchanged their life stories, but both knew on sight what the other was: an ex-con.

John started cleaning the glass over the driver's door, taking his time so he could watch the cop in the reflection. He heard the man's police radio first, that constant static of the dispatchers speaking their private code. The officer glanced around, pegging John and Ray-Ray in about two seconds flat, before he hitched up his belt and went inside to pay for the wash. Not that they would charge him, but it was always good to pretend.

The owner of the Suburban was close by, talking on her cell phone, and John closed his eyes as

he cleaned the window, listening to her voice, savoring the tones like a precious piece of music. Inside, he had forgotten what it was like to hear a woman's voice, listen to the sort of complaints that only women could have. Bad haircuts. Rude store clerks. Chipped nails. Men wanted to talk about *things*: cars, guns, snatch. They didn't discuss their feelings unless it was anger, and even that didn't last for long because generally they started doing something about it.

Every two weeks, John's mother had made the drive from Decatur down to Garden City to see him, but as glad as John was to see her, that wasn't the kind of woman's voice he wanted to hear. Emily was always positive, happy to see her son, even if he could tell by looking in her eyes that she was tired from the long drive, or sad to see that he'd gotten another tattoo, that his hair was in a ponytail. Aunt Lydia came, but that was because she was his lawyer. Joyce came twice a year with their mother, once at Christmas, once on his birthday. She hated being there. You could smell it on her. Joyce wanted to be out of that place almost more than John did, and whenever she talked to him, he was reminded of the way the black gangbangers and Aryans talked to each other. *You fucking nigger dog. You fuck-eyed white motherfucker. I'll kill you soon as I get the chance.*

His father came to see him twice in all the time he was locked up, but John didn't like to think about that.

"Excuse me?" The woman with the cell phone was beside him. He could smell her perfume. Her upper lip was a little bow tie, gloss making her mouth look wet.

"Hello?" she said, half-laughing.

"Sorry," John managed, shocked that she'd gotten this close to him without him even noticing. In prison, he would be dead right now.

"I said 'thank you,'" she told him. She held a dollar in her hand and he took it, feeling cheap and dirty at the same time.

John made a show of putting the bill in the communal tip box, knowing every eye in the place was watching him. He did the same thing when a customer handed somebody else a tip. No one trusted anybody around here and for good reason. You didn't need a college degree to figure out why a bunch of middle-aged guys were working for minimum wage plus tips at the Gorilla Car Wash.

Art came out of the office, yelling, "First shift, lunch," as he walked over to the cop standing by the vending machine. Shit, John hadn't noticed that, either. The cop had come outside, had been watching him, and he hadn't seen it happen.

John tucked his head down as he went into the back, clocking out and grabbing his lunch off the shelf. He had a soda in the refrigerator, but there was no way he was going back out there until the cop was gone and Art was back behind his desk counting his money.

Chico, one of the other workers, was sitting on the cement wall under the shade of a big magnolia tree that grew in the strip of grass in back of the car wash. John liked to sit there under the tree, enjoyed the solitude and the shade, but Chico had beaten him to it today. This sort of thing wouldn't have happened in the joint. Taking a man's space was like fucking his sister up the ass. Nothing happened in that place that didn't have some kind of price attached to it.

"How's it going?" John said, nodding at Chico as he walked past him to the carport that served as a detail shop. The detail guys went out for lunch. They made enough money to afford the luxury.

John sat on the ground under the canopy. He took off his ball cap and wiped the sweat off his forehead with the back of his hand. November used to mean winter, but now it meant you were lucky if the jacket you put on in the morning didn't have you sweating by noon.

Christ, even the weather had changed without him.

He glanced around before pulling a piece of paper out of his back pocket. The credit report. Part of him had wanted to shove it back in the trash bag last night, just let it go. So some motherfucker was pretending to be him. What did that mean to John Shelley? Obviously, the poser wasn't running some fraud. Why would he pay off the credit cards every month for six years? John had heard about all kinds of scams in prison, and though he hadn't really had access to any computers, he knew that the Internet was the best way to run an identity fraud. This, though. This was nothing like that. You took the money and ran. You didn't stick around and pay your monthly bills on time. It was like that old joke of ordering fifty pizzas to somebody's house, only you paid for them yourself with your credit card.

He folded the report and tucked it back into his pocket. He should leave it be. No good would come out of any of this. What John should do is exactly what his parole officer said: Concentrate

on rebuilding your life. Get a steady job. Show people you've changed.

It bothered him, though. Like a splinter that wouldn't come out, he had picked at it all night, trying to see the angle. There had to be an angle. Why else would someone do this? Maybe somebody with a past was using John's vitals as a cover. Could be some escaped ax murderer or blue-collar guy was on the lam and John Shelley seemed like a good cover.

He laughed at this idea, taking a bite of his peanut butter and banana sandwich. You had to be pretty desperate to assume the identity of a convicted murderer and registered sex offender.

The peanut butter caught in his throat and he coughed a couple of times before getting up and going to the coiled hose on the ground. John turned on the spigot and took a drink, watching Ray-Ray talking to some woman over by the vacuums. John could tell the other man was doing his usual jive, trying to work his magic on the woman. Judging by the way she was dressed, Ray-Ray could have saved some time and just given her some money. Most of the guys around the Gorilla availed themselves of the local talent. Straight up Cheshire Bridge Road, you ran into the Colonial Restaurant, a meat-and-potatoes kind of joint with hookers a'plenty trolling the apartments behind them. John had often heard the guys arguing Monday mornings about which was best: get them early when they were fresh and pay more, or go later when they were sloppy and pay less.

Street economics.

"Fuck off, asshole!" the hooker screamed, slamming her hands into Ray-Ray's chest.

Ray-Ray growled something and pushed her back until she fell on her ass.

John's first impulse was to stay exactly where he was. You didn't get involved in other people's shit. That was how you got yourself killed. This was a woman, but she worked the streets. She knew how to take care of herself. At least it seemed that way until Ray-Ray hauled off and punched her square in the face.

"Damn," Chico muttered, ringside at a championship wrestling bout. "Didn't even give her time to stand up."

John looked down at his shoes, which were soaking wet. The hose was still on. He could get into trouble for that. He went back to the spigot, turned it off, forgetting for a minute that it was righty-tighty and turning it lefty-loosey. He coiled the hose back in place. When he looked back up, Ray-Ray's foot was in the air, sailing down toward the hooker's face.

"Hey!" John said, then, "Hey!" again when Ray-Ray's foot made contact.

John must have run over to them. He must have said something else along the way, something loud that called even more attention to the situation. By the time his brain caught up with his actions, John's fist hurt like a hornet had stung him and Ray-Ray was splayed out on the ground.

"What the fuck," Art yelled. He barely topped five feet on a good day, but he stopped about two inches from John's chest, screeching up at him, "You fucking *monkey!*"

They both looked down. One of Ray-Ray's teeth was on the sidewalk swimming in a puddle of blood. The guy looked dead, but no one was dropping to check his pulse.

The cop stood in the doorway. Slowly, John let his eyes trace up the man's thick black shoes, following the sharp crease in his pants, skipping past his gunbelt where a large hand was resting on the butt of his gun and forced himself to look the guy in the face. The screw was staring straight back at John as he turned his radio down, the calls from the dispatcher turning to a whisper. "What's going on here?"

It took everything John had in him not to just assume the position right then and there. "I hit him."

"Well, no shit, asshole!" Art barked. "You are so fucking fired." He prodded Ray-Ray with his foot. "Jesus Christ, Shelley. What'd you hit him with, a fucking hammer?"

John's head dropped, and he looked at the ground. Oh, Jesus. He couldn't go back to prison now. Not after all of this. Not after everything he'd been through.

"I'm sorry," John said. "It won't happen again."

"You're damn right it won't," Art snapped. "Christ." He looked at the cop. "This is the thanks I get for giving these guys a second chance."

"I apologize," John offered again.

"Hey!" the hooker yelled. "Somebody wanna give me a hand?"

All of the men looked down, shocked, like they had forgotten her existence. The whore had a hard face, the kind that told her life story in the millions of lines wrinkling her skin. Blood poured from her nose and mouth where Ray-Ray's foot had done its damage. She was propped up on her elbows, a filthy white feather boa wrapped around her scrawny neck, a purple plastic-

looking miniskirt and a black tank top that showed the bottom of her sagging breasts barely covering her wasted body.

Nobody wanted to touch her.

"Hey, Knight in Shining Armor All," she said, shaking her hand toward John. "Come on, stallion. Help me the fuck up."

John hesitated, but then he reached down and pulled her up. She smelled of cigarettes and bourbon, and had a hard time standing on the spike heels of her shoes. Her hand dug into his shoulder as she steadied herself. He tried not to shudder in revulsion, thinking about where that hand had been. In the sunlight, her skin was sallow, and he guessed her liver was desperate enough to shit itself out of her navel if it was ever given the opportunity. She could have been thirty, she could have been eighty.

The cop took charge. "You wanna tell me what this is about?"

"He wouldn't pay me," she said, tilting her chin, indicating the prone Ray-Ray. Her voice was like loose rock rolling in a cup of phlegm. What words she didn't slur were probably not worth hearing.

"You gave him one on credit?" the cop asked, not bothering to hide his incredulity. The man had a point. John wouldn't sell Ray-Ray a petrified turd on credit.

"We was in there," she said, meaning the Port-a-John behind the building. "He tried to sweet-talk me, the lousy fucker. Said he was gettin' paid tomorrow."

The cop's eyebrow shot up. "You gotta be shittin' me."

"He followed me out here, trying to make a deal," she continued, clutching John's arm again as she swayed. "Like it's double coupon day at the fucking Kmart. Stupid cocksucker." She lifted a patent-leather heel and kicked Ray-Ray in the arm.

"Hey, hey, now," Ray-Ray said, groaning as he rolled over onto his back. John figured the asshole had been playing possum and wanted to beat him again for causing all of this.

The cop prodded Ray-Ray with his shoe. "You try to get a freebie, you stupid mope?"

Ray-Ray put his hand over his eyes, shielding the sun so he could look up at the cop without being blinded. "No, no, man. That ain't the thing. Ain't the thing at all."

"Get up, you fucking idiot," the cop ordered. "You." He pointed at the whore. "Where's your drag?"

She was busy wiping the concrete off her elbows. "Up by the liquor store."

There was a crash of static from the cop's radio, then, "*Unit fifty-one, fifty-one?*"

The cop clicked the mic, said, "Check," then pointed to John, talking over the information the dispatcher gave but obviously still listening. "You. Prince Charming. Make sure she gets back home safe. You," he pointed to Ray-Ray. "Don't make me tell you one more fucking time to get the fuck up or I will run your ass in so quick your P.O. won't even have time to call you a cab back to the pen." Ray-Ray jumped up and the cop clicked on the radio and said, "Roger, I'm there in ten minutes." As an afterthought, he asked Art, "You okay with all this?"

Art frowned, his forehead sloping into a V. "Yeah, whatever," he finally agreed. "Shelley, take the day off. Come back with your head in the right place tomorrow."

"Thank you," John said, so relieved he could have cried. "Thank you, sir. I won't disappoint you."

The respect brought him some back. "You want me to get rid of this stuttering freak?" Art asked John as he jabbed his thumb at Ray-Ray.

John thought about it for a good second, but he couldn't spend the rest of his life looking over his shoulder for this asshole. "We're fine," he said. "Right, Ray?"

"Yeah, yeah," Ray-Ray said. "We cool. We cool."

"Shut up," Art said. "I don't want to see you back here until Wednesday morning, you got that?"

Ray-Ray nodded. Twice.

Art gave the prostitute a scathing look, then told John, "Get her out of here before we start losing customers."

John didn't think he had a choice. The whore had grabbed on to him again, her bony fingers pressing into his arm just above the elbow. He started walking alongside her because something told him if he didn't, she'd end up face-first in the street.

Traffic whizzed by as they walked up Piedmont Avenue. John saw about a zillion SUVs and sports cars going up and down this road every day. With Buckhead at one end and Ansley Park at the other, the only crappy cars John saw on the road belonged to the maids, landscapers, pool

boys and all the other hapless souls who made their living doing the shitwork rich folks didn't have to do.

"Fucking asshole," the pross muttered as they waited for the light. Her bony fingers pressed deeper into his flesh as she tried to steady herself on her ridiculously high heels. "Hold up a minute," she finally relented, keeping her grip on him as she took off one, then the other shoe. "Fucking heels."

"Yeah," John said, because she was obviously expecting an answer.

"It's red," she told him, jerking him into the street as traffic stopped for the light. "Christ, my feet hurt." She looked up at him as they reached the other side of the intersection. "I gotta loose tooth, you know? From where he kicked me."

"Oh," John said, thinking she was either stupid or crazy if she thought he had the extra money to send her to the dentist. "Okay. Yeah. Sorry."

"No, you dumb prick. I'm saying I can use my hands but you can't put it in my mouth."

John didn't realize he was clenching his teeth until his jaw started to ache. "No," he answered. "That's okay."

"Lissen." She stopped, dropped her hand, and started swaying like a raft in the middle of a tsunami. "You can head on back, Romeo. I can make it the rest of the way myself."

"No," he repeated, this time taking her arm in his hand. With his luck, she'd fall into the street and the cop would pin a manslaughter charge on him. "Let's go."

"Whoops," she breathed, her knee buckling as she slipped on a broken section of sidewalk.

"Steady," he told her, thinking she was so thin he could feel the bone in her arm moving against the flesh.

Out of the blue, she told him, "I don't take it up the ass."

John couldn't think of which was worse: the thought of her mouth or the thought of her asshole. A quick glance at the sores on her arms and legs made him taste the peanut butter and banana sandwich from lunch.

"Okay," he said, not knowing why she felt like sharing and wishing to hell she'd stop.

"Makes me shit funny," she told him, giving him a sideways glance. "I thought I should tell you if that's what you were planning."

"I'm just going to make sure you get back," he assured her. "Don't worry about that other stuff."

"Nothin' comes for free," she told him, then laughed. "'Cept maybe this time. Of course, the walk—now, if you consider that your payment, it ain't exactly free."

"I was going this way anyway," he lied. "I live down here."

"Morningside?" she asked, referring to one of the wealthier neighborhoods backing onto Cheshire Bridge Road.

"Yeah," he said. "Three-story house with a garage." She stumbled again and he kept her from falling on her face. "Come on."

"You don't gotta be rough, you know."

He looked at his hand around her arm, saw immediately how tight he was holding it. When he let go, there were marks where his fingers had been. "I'm sorry about that," he told her, and really meant it. Jesus, he was thinking about women all this time and he didn't even know how to touch one without hurting her. "I'm just going to walk you back, okay?"

"Almost there," she told him, then mercifully fell into silence as she concentrated on navigating the bumpy path where the sidewalk ended and dirt took over.

John let her take the lead, keeping two steps behind her in case she fell over into the street. He let the enormity of what had just happened wash over him. What had he been thinking? There was no reason to get himself involved in Ray-Ray's troubles, and now he was losing a day's pay so he could take this pross back to her strip, where she'd probably make more money in one hour than he made in three. Christ. He could have lost his job. He could've been thrown back in prison.

Art got a nice stipend from the state for employing a parolee, plus extra tax breaks from the feds. Even with all that—all the so-called incentives that were out there—finding somewhere to work had been almost impossible when John had gotten out. Because of his status, he couldn't work with kids or live within a hundred yards of a school or day-care center. Legally, employers couldn't discriminate against a felon, but they always found a way around the law. John had been on nineteen interviews before finding the car wash. They always started out, "How you doing/we'd love to have you here/just fill this out and we'll get back to you." Then, when he

called the next week because he hadn't heard from them, it was always, "We've filled that job/ we found a more qualified candidate/sorry, we're cutting back."

"More qualified to pack boxes?" he had asked one of them, the shipping manager at a pie company. "Listen, buddy," the guy had answered. "I've got a teenage daughter, all right? You know why you're not getting this job."

At least he was honest.

The question was standard on every application. "Other than misdemeanor traffic violations, have you ever been convicted of a crime?"

John had to check yes. They always ran a background check and found out anyway.

"Please explain your conviction in the space provided."

He had to explain. They could ask his P.O. They could get a cop to run his file. They could go on the Internet and look him up on the GBI's site under "convicted sex offenders in the Atlanta area." Under Shelley, Jonathan Winston, they'd read that he raped and killed a minor child. The state didn't differentiate between underage offenders and adults, so he came up not as a person who had committed this crime when he was a minor child himself, but as an adult pedophile.

"Hello?" the hooker said. "You in there, handsome?"

John nodded. He'd been zoning out, following her like a puppy. They were in front of the liquor store. Some of the girls were already working, hoping to catch the lunch crowd.

"Hey, Robin," the hooker yelled. "Come on over here."

The woman who must've been Robin came over, doing a better job on her high heels than John's companion had managed.

Robin stopped ten feet away from them. "What the hell happened to you?" She looked at John. "Did you get rough with her, you motherfucker?"

"No," he said, then, because she was digging into her purse for something that would probably bring him a great amount of pain, he said, "Please. I didn't hurt her."

"Aw, he didn't do nothing, baby girl," the hooker soothed. "He saved me from that jackass down at the car wash."

"Which one?" Robin asked, her anger still well above ballistic. The way she was looking at John said she hadn't quite made up her mind about him and her hand was still in her purse, probably wrapped around a can of pepper spray or a hammer.

"Which one? Which one?" the hooker said, a good imitation of Ray-Ray. "That skinny nigger that says everything twice." She looked up at John, batting her eyelashes. "You like 'em a bit younger, don't you, honey?"

John felt his body stiffen.

"No, I don't mean it like that," she said, rubbing his back like she was soothing a child. There was something almost maternal to her now that she was back in her fold. "Lissen, Robin, do me a favor and give 'em a half-and-half. He really saved my ass."

Robin's mouth opened to respond, but John stopped her. He held up his hands, saying, "No, really. That's okay."

"I always pay my debts," the old hooker insisted. "Kindness of strangers or whatever the fuck." She followed a car with her eyes as it pulled into the parking lot. "Shit. That's my regular," she said, using the back of her hand to wipe the blood off from under her nose. She waved at John as she jumped into the man's car, yelling something he couldn't make out.

John watched the car leave, feeling Robin's eyes on him the entire time. She had the same steely stare as a cop: *what the fuck are you up to and where do I have to hit you to bring you to your knees?*

She said, "I'm not her fucking stand-in."

"Don't worry about it," he said, throwing up his hands again. "Really."

"What?" she demanded. "You too good to pay for it?"

"I didn't say that," he countered, feeling his face turn red. There were five or six other hookers openly listening to their conversation and the amused expressions on their faces made him feel like his dick was getting smaller and smaller with every second that ticked by.

He added, "And she didn't say anything about paying for it, anyway." When Robin didn't jump in with something else, he said, "I was just doing her a favor."

"You didn't do *me* any favors."

"Then don't do me any," he said, turning to go.

"Hey!" she screamed. "Don't walk away from me."

Without thinking, he had turned back around when she yelled. She was obviously playing to

the crowd. He felt himself shrink another few centimeters.

He tried to moderate his tone, asking, "What?"

"I said don't walk away from me, you stupid prick."

John shook his head, thinking his day couldn't get much worse. "You wanna do this?" he asked, reaching into his pocket. He had saved twenty bucks a week for the last three weeks just to make sure he could swing the payments on the TV. He had fifty bucks in his pocket and seventy tucked into the sole of his shoe. John doubted the girl made even half that during the lunch rush. Hell, he barely made that in a day.

Her chin went up in defiance. They must have picked up the gesture in hooker school or something. She asked, "How much you got?"

"Enough," he said. What the fuck was he doing? His tongue felt thick in his mouth and he had more saliva than he knew what to do with. Flashing the money had worked, though. The peanut gallery had shut up.

Robin stared at him another beat, then nodded once. "All right," she said. "You want dinner and a drink?"

John chewed his lip, trying to figure out how much that would cost him. "I just ate lunch," he told her. "If you want something to drink ..."

"God," she groaned, rolling her eyes. "Are you a cop?"

"No," he said, still not following.

"Half-and-half," she told him. "Dinner and a drink."

John looked over at the other women. They were laughing at him again.

"Shut up," Robin barked, and for a minute John thought she meant him. "Come on," she said, grabbing his arm.

For the second time that day, John was being led down the street by a hooker. This one was a hell of a lot better than the last one, though. She looked cleaner, for one. Her skin was probably soft. Even her hair looked good—thick and healthy, not stringy from too many drugs or covered with some cheap wig. She didn't smell like a smoker, either. John's cell-mate had been a chain-smoker, lighting one off the last. The guy couldn't even sleep for more than an hour without waking up to have a smoke and there were some days he smelled worse than a wet ashtray.

Robin pulled him into the woods behind the Colonial Restaurant, tossing over her shoulder, "You got enough for a room?"

He didn't answer, couldn't believe this was actually happening. She was holding his hand, walking him through the woods, like they were on a date. He wanted to hear her voice again. The tone was soothing, even though she was obviously in a hurry to get this over with.

She stopped, still holding his hand. "Hey, I asked if you have enough for a room." She indicated the woods. "I don't do it outside like some fucking animal."

He had to clear his throat so he could speak. His heart was pounding so hard in his chest that he could feel his shirt moving. "Yeah."

She didn't move. "You're sweating."

"Sorry," he said, taking back his hand, wiping the palm on the leg of his jeans. He felt a stupid, uncomfortable smile on his lips. "I'm sorry," he repeated.

She was giving him that hard look again, trying to figure out what he had in mind. Her hand was tucked into her purse. "You okay?"

John looked around, thinking no matter what she carried in her bag, it was a real mistake for her to be taking strange men into the woods. "It's not safe here," he said. "I could be anybody."

"You've never done this before." She wasn't asking a question, just stating the obvious.

He thought of Randall, that kid at the rental store, the way his Adam's apple had bobbed in his throat when John crowded in on him. John could feel his own throat clenching, making it hard for him to talk.

"Hey," she said, rubbing her hand on his arm. "Come on, big boy. It's okay."

John noticed that her voice had changed. He didn't know why, but suddenly, she was talking to him like he was a human being instead of something she had to scrape off the bottom of her shoe.

"I didn't want to do this," he told her, realizing his tone was different, too. Soft. Real soft like he was trusting her, sharing something with her. Without warning, his mouth opened, and out slipped, "Oh, God, you're so pretty," like he was some kind of pathetic freak. He tried to make it better, adding, "I know that sounds stupid, but you are." He scanned her face, trying to come up with something else to say, some proof that he wasn't some kind of freak she should pepper

spray.

Her mouth looked soft, the kind of mouth you could kiss forever.

No, he couldn't talk about her mouth. That was too sexual.

Her nose?

No, that was stupid. Nobody talked about pretty noses. They breathed, they ran sometimes and you blew them. They were just there on your face.

"You okay?" she asked.

"Your eyes," he blurted out, feeling like even more of an idiot than before. He'd said the words so loudly that she'd flinched. "I mean," he began, lowering his voice again. "I'm sorry. I was just thinking that your eyes ..." Christ, she was wearing so much makeup it was hard to tell. "I think you have nice eyes."

She stared at him, probably wondering how fast she could get the Mace out of her purse and douse him, maybe wondering if she could snatch his money when he went down. "You know," she finally said, "you don't have to woo me. Just pay me."

He tucked his hand into his pocket.

"Not now, baby," she said, nervous suddenly. He was doing something wrong. There was a way to do this and John didn't know.

"I'm sorry—" he apologized.

"You pay me in the room," she told him, waving for him to follow her. "It's just over here."

He stood in place, his feet refusing to move. Christ, he felt like he was a pimply kid again trying to get to second base.

She finally sounded annoyed. "Come on, big boy. Time is money."

"Let's stay here," he said, and when she started to protest, he talked over her. "No, not like that. Let's just stand here and talk."

"You wanna talk? Get a shrink."

"I'll pay you."

"This some twist for you?" she asked. "I start talking and you jerk yourself off? No way."

She was walking back toward the road and he scrambled to get the money out of his pocket. Some of the bills flew out of his hand and he dropped to the ground, picking them up. When he looked up, she was still moving away.

He said, "Fifty dollars!" and she froze.

She turned slowly, and he couldn't tell if the offer had made her more annoyed or just plain angry.

"Here," he said, standing up, walking over to her and putting the cash in her hand. There were a lot of ones, a couple of fives—all part of his take from the tip box back at the car wash.

He said, "I'll keep my pants on, okay? No funny stuff."

She tried to give him back the money. "Don't fuck with me, okay?"

"I'm not," he told her, hearing a tinge of desperation in his voice. He was going to scare her away again and this time no amount of money would get her back. "Just talk," he said, pressing the money back on her. "Just tell me something."

She rolled her eyes, but she kept the money. "Tell you what?"

"Anything," he said. "Tell me ..." Jesus, he couldn't think of a damn thing. "Tell me ..." He stared at her, willing her face to give him a clue—anything that would keep her here a little longer. He looked at her beautiful mouth, the way it was twisted with irritation and maybe something that looked like curiosity. "Your first kiss," he decided. "Tell me about your first kiss."

"You have got to be kidding me."

"No," he said. "I'm not." He took a couple of steps away from her, held his hands out to the side so she could see he wasn't going to do himself. "Just tell me about your first kiss."

"What, you want me to say it was with my sister? My father?"

"No," he said, shaking his head. "Please don't lie."

She crossed her arms, her eyes giving him the once-over. "You're giving me fifty bucks to tell you about my first kiss?"

He nodded.

She looked behind her, then looked back at him. She counted the money out, crisp bills tugged from one hand to the other as her lips moved silently. "All right," she finally said, tucking the wad of cash down the front of her shirt. "Stewie Campano."

He laughed at the name.

"Yeah," she said, smiling for the first time. She had perfect, straight teeth. "Real Romeo, our

Stewie."

"You went out with him?"

"Hell no," she said, insulted. "He was two years younger than me, one of my little brother's friends. We were playing around one day."

"Playing what?" Her brow furrowed and he quickly said, "No, I'm not looking for that. I just want to know what you were doing."

"Swimming in his pool," she said, hesitant, obviously still trying to see what John's angle was. "That was the only reason I'd go over there with my brother, because Stewie had a swimming pool."

John felt his smile come back.

She had decided to continue the story. "So, like I said, it was late one night, full moon and all that, and we were playing in the pool, just horsing around, and he looked at me and I looked at him and then he just leaned over and kissed me."

"Real kiss or a kid kiss?"

"Kid kiss," she said, a smile working its magic on her face. She was truly beautiful, the kind of dark-haired, olive-skinned woman that poets wrote about.

Her smile turned mischievous. "Then a real kiss."

"Go, Stewie," John said, creating the image in his mind—the backyard, the moon, the various floats and flotsam in a family pool. "How old were you?"

"Thirteen," she admitted.

"So Stewie was—"

"Ten. I know." She held up her hands. "Cradle robber. Guilty."

John was amazed at the kid's bravado. "God, I don't even think I knew what a tongue kiss was when I was ten."

"Yeah, well I was thirteen and I didn't know," she told him. Then she laughed, maybe at the memory or maybe at the absurdity of the situation. John laughed, too, and it was such a sweet release that for the first time in twenty-five years he honest to God felt like he was okay.

"Jesus," Robin said. "I haven't thought about that kid in years."

"What's he doing now, you think?"

"Doctor, probably." She laughed again, a short, sharp sound of pleasure. "Gynecologist."

John was still smiling. He said, "Thank you."

"Yeah." She pressed her lips together. "Hey, what's your name?"

"John."

She laughed like he was joking.

"No, really. John Shelley." He made to offer his hand, and she took a step back from him. "Sorry," he said, dropping his hand. What had he done? How had he ruined this?

"It's okay. I just need to get back." She checked over her shoulder. "My minder's gonna be looking for me soon and I—"

"It's okay," he told her. He had put his hands in his pockets because he didn't know what else to do with them. "I'm sorry if I—"

"No problem," she interrupted.

"I can walk you back."

"I know the way," she said, practically bolting back toward the road.

All he could do was watch her go, wonder what he had said wrong that made her run. Fifty bucks. He could buy a lot with fifty bucks. Food. Rent. Clothes. Laughter. The way her eyes sparkled when she really smiled. That wasn't something you could buy. Yeah, she had taken the money, but that laugh—that had been a real moment between them. She had talked to him, really talked to him, because she wanted to, not because of the fifty bucks.

John stood in the forest, rooted to the spot, eyes closed as he summoned up the memory of her voice, her laugh. She had a brother somewhere. She'd grown up in a neighborhood with a pool. Her parents had spent some money on orthodontics, maybe taken her to ballet lessons so she'd have that lean dancer's body or perhaps she'd been like Joyce, the kind of girl who metabolized food so quickly all she needed to do was walk around the block to keep her figure.

From the road, a car horn sounded and John opened his eyes.

Why hadn't he gone into that hotel room with her? Fifty bucks. That was a good day's work for him. A full day of wiping cars, cleaning up people's shit, waiting for Art to come out and inspect his work, point to some nonexistent smudge on a windshield so the customer thought he was getting his money's worth.

Fifty dollars and for what? The memory of someone else's kiss?

John snapped an overhanging twig as he walked back toward the road, careful to angle his path so he wouldn't end up at the liquor store. He could be holding her right now, making love to her. He stopped, leaning his hand against a tree, his lungs feeling like he'd gotten the breath knocked out of him.

No, he thought. He would be doing the same thing in that room that he was doing now: making a fool of himself. The truth was that John had never really made love to a woman. He had never experienced that intimacy that you read about in books, never had a lover take his hand in her own, stroke the back of his neck, pull his body closer to hers. The last woman he had kissed was, in fact, the only woman he had ever kissed and even then, she wasn't a woman but a girl. John remembered the date like it was seared into his brain: June 15, 1985.

He had kissed Mary Alice Finney, and the next morning, she was dead.

CHAPTER TEN

JUNE 10, 1985

When John was a little kid, he had loved playing in the dirt, building things with his hands then tearing them apart chunk by chunk. His mother would see him walking up the street, the mud on his pants, the twigs sticking out of his hair, and she'd just laugh and grab the hose, making him strip off his clothes in the backyard so she could squirt him down before letting him into the house.

At night, he slept hard from his busy days. John wasn't the type of kid to do things halfway. He was scrawny for his age, his chest almost concave, but he made up for it with sheer willpower. If there was any kind of game in the street, he was there, and despite his size, he was never picked last for any team. Stickball, baseball, dodgeball—he loved moving. Football was hardly a natural fit for his small frame, but he did all the leagues as soon as he was old enough to qualify. By junior high, he'd grown taller but his body was closer in proportion to a rubber band than a jock's athletic build. Still, the football coach had been impressed with his drive and John's first week of junior high found him on the field sweating his ass off, every muscle in his body screaming with joy at the prospect of playing with the big dogs.

In high school, he found out that you weren't allowed to play football when your grades sucked. He was more upset than he thought he'd be when he got dropped from the team. In a sudden burst of anger, he had thrown his helmet at the wall, punching a large hole into the Sheetrock. He had started walking around the neighborhood after school because he knew if he went home, his mother would ask him why he wasn't at practice. He had trashed the note the coach sent home and paid for the damaged wall with money from his illicit drug sales. He figured his parents would know soon enough what had happened when report cards were in and he wanted to enjoy his freedom as much as he could before Richard came down on him like the wrath of God.

Even after the rest of his life started falling apart, John still liked to walk. That first time he was suspended from school for the pot in his locker, he spent most of the day strolling around the neighborhood. After the cassette tape theft, his father grounded him for six months and except for his mother's kind heart ("Be back in an hour and don't tell your father") John probably would have atrophied in his room. Sometimes, he thought that was just what his dad wanted. Let the bad son fade away on his own; out of sight, out of mind. Dr. Richard still had Joyce, after all. He had one good child left.

John liked being outdoors, seeing the trees sway in the breeze, watching the leaves sail to the ground. He never got high on his jaunts. He didn't want to spoil things. Besides, the allure of coke was quickly fading. The visit to the emergency room, waking up feeling like his head was on fire, blood streaming out of his nose as he puked up the charcoal they had forced into his stomach, had been somewhat of an eye-opener. He had decided then and there to stick to pot. Nothing was worth dying for. Woody would give him shit for it, but John wasn't going to kill himself because he couldn't stand up to his cousin.

The night of the overdose, John's father had come to the hospital, shirt hastily thrown on, buttons done up wrong. The nurse had left John alone with his dad, thinking they'd have a bonding moment or something.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Richard had demanded. He was beyond angry. His voice was strained like it was going through a sieve and John's ears, already buzzing from being sick, could barely comprehend what he was saying.

Richard liked his quotes. He kept some of them taped to the wall of his study, and sometimes when he'd pull John in to talk to him about his son's latest fuck up, he'd just point to one of the sayings. "Stupidity is a learned behavior" was one of his favorites, but that night at the hospital, John knew that the days of his father pointing to faded pieces of paper in the hopes of giving him guidance were over.

"You are not my son," Richard said. "If it weren't for your mother, I would toss your useless ass onto the street so fast your head would spin." He slapped John on the side of the head as some kind of illustration. It wasn't a hard hit, but it was the first time since John was six or seven that his father had raised a hand to him, and he had never, ever hit him anywhere but his bottom.

"Dad—" John tried.

"Don't ever call me that again," Richard commanded. "I *work* here. I have colleagues—I have *friends*—here. Do you know how embarrassing it is to get a phone call in the middle of the night telling you your worthless son is in the ER?" His face was red, and he was leaning over the bed, inches from John's face. His breath smelled of mint, and it occurred to John that his father had taken the time to brush his teeth before coming to the hospital.

"Do you know who does this shit?" his father had asked, pushing away from the bed. "Worthless junkies, that's who." He paced along the length of the small room, hands clenching and unclenching. He turned around and gave a single nod of his head like he had decided something and there was no going back.

John tried again. "Dad—"

"You are not my son," Richard repeated as the door closed behind him.

"He'll get over it," his mother said, but John knew otherwise. He had never seen that look in his father's eyes. Disappointment, yes. Hatred ... that was something new.

John was thinking about that look as he walked around the neighborhood the day after his father's confrontation in the emergency room.

"Just an hour," his mother had said, but she hadn't added, "Don't tell your father," because they both knew that his father didn't care. As if the hospital scene weren't enough, Richard had come into John's room that morning and told him point-blank that he would feed and clothe him until he was eighteen, and then he wanted John out of his house, out of his life. He rubbed his hands together, then held them palm out to illustrate. "I wash my hands of you."

The breeze picked up and John pulled his jacket around him. Despite nearly dying the night before, he wanted a bump of coke, something to take the edge off. He wasn't going to do it, though. Not for his dad or his mom, but because he was scared. John didn't want to die, and he knew the coke would kill him sooner rather than later. He'd only snorted it a handful of times anyway, right? It shouldn't be hard to quit. Still, no matter how much pot he smoked, the craving ached inside his body like he'd swallowed a razor. God damn Woody and his stupid parties.

"Hey."

John looked up, startled out of his thoughts. Mary Alice Finney was sitting on one of the swings in the playground.

His hatred of her sparked like a flash fire. "What are you doing here?"

She said, "I didn't know you owned the playground."

"Shouldn't you be in school?"

"I skipped."

"Yeah, right," he said, snorting a laugh that made him taste blood in the back of his throat. "Shit," he said, putting his hand to his nose. Blood was coming out like a faucet had been turned on.

Mary Alice was beside him. She had a tissue in her hand—why did girls always have these things?—and she pressed it under his nose.

"Sit down," she told him, leading him over to the jungle gym. He slumped on the bottom bar, his bony butt feeling the cold through his jeans. "Tilt your head forward."

He had his eyes closed, but he could feel her hands on him: one on the back of his neck, one holding the tissue to his nose. You were supposed to lean back when your nose bled, but he didn't care as long as she was touching him.

She sighed. "John. Why are you doing this to yourself?"

He opened his eyes, watched blood drip onto the sand between his feet. "Did you really skip school?"

"I was supposed to have a doctor's appointment, but my mom forgot to pick me up."

John tried to turn his head, but she wouldn't let him. Mothers didn't miss doctors' appointments. It just didn't happen.

"Yeah," she said, like she could read his mind. "My parents are getting divorced."

John straightened up quickly, seeing stars for a moment.

She was embarrassed. She clutched her hands together, the bloody tissue between them. "My dad's been seeing this woman at his office." He could see the tight smile on her face. Perfect Mary Alice's parents were splitting up.

She said, "Her name is Mindy. Dad wants me to meet her. He thinks we'll be great friends."

John could hear Paul Finney saying this. The guy was a lawyer and he had the arrogance of most lawyers where he figured anything that came out of his mouth was the God's honest truth.

John stubbed his toe into the sand. "I'm sorry, Mary Alice."

She was crying, and he could see her watching her tears hit the sand just like he had watched his blood a few moments before.

He hated her, right? Only, he wanted to put his arm around her, tell her it was going to be okay.

He had to think of something to say, something to help her feel better. He blurted out, "You wanna go to a party?"

"A party?" she asked, her nose wrinkling at the thought. "What, with all your stoner friends?"

"No," he said, though she was right. "My cousin Woody is having a party Saturday. His mom's out of town."

"Where's his dad?"

"I don't know," John admitted. He'd never really thought about it, but Woody's mom was away so much that the guy practically lived alone. "You could drop by."

"I'm supposed to go to the mall with Susan and Faye."

"Come after."

"I don't really belong with those people," she said. "Besides, I figured you were grounded after what happened."

So, the whole school knew about his trip to the emergency room. John had figured he'd get at least a couple of days before the story leaked out. "No," he said, thinking of his father, the way he had looked at him this morning. It was the same way he had looked at dead Uncle Barry lying in his coffin, thin lips twisted in distaste. Glutton. Womanizer. Used car salesman.

Mary Alice asked, "Where does your cousin live?"

John told her the address, just three streets over. "Come on," he said. "Say you'll go."

She wrinkled her nose again, but this time she was teasing. "Okay," she said, then to give herself an out, "I'll think about it."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

OCTOBER 11, 2005

John was lying in bed at the flophouse, half asleep, when a knock came at his door. He rolled over and looked at his clock, squinting his eyes to read the tiny numbers. Six-thirty. He had another hour to sleep before he had to get up.

"Knock-knock," a woman said, and he laid back in bed with a grunt. "Rise and shine, choirboy," Martha Lam sang. The first thing he had found out about his parole officer was that she loved surprise inspections.

"Just a minute," he called back, sitting up in bed, rubbing his eyes.

"Not a minute, cowboy," Ms. Lam insisted, her voice polite but firm. "Open up this door, now, you hear?"

He did as he was told—quickly—because he knew if she got it into her head she could throw him back inside before the day was out.

She stood at the door with one hand on the jamb, a cheerful smile on her face like she was happy to see him. She was dressed up as usual: pressed black shirt, gold lamé vest and tight black leather pants. Between her hoochie-mama shoes and the Glock she wore strapped to her side, she could be the poster girl for a fetish magazine.

She glanced down at the tent in his boxers, then gestured down the hallway to the bathroom. "Go on and salute your little general. I'll just poke around on my own."

John put his hands over his crotch, feeling fifteen. "I just have to go to the bathroom," he explained.

She gave him that cheerful smile again, her southern drawl making her words sound polite. "Fill me up one'a them cups from the cooler in the hall, why don't you?"

He made his way to the communal bathroom as quickly as possible, peeing as fast as he could, spilling enough into the specimen cup for the random drug screening, then hurried back to his room. Ms. Lam would be going through his stuff now, and even though John knew there was nothing for her to find, he felt guilty, terrified she'd toss him back in prison. Guys back in the joint talked about parole officers, how they planted stuff on you if they didn't like you, how they were especially hard on sex offenders, looking for any excuse to send you back inside.

She was holding a framed photo of his mother when he got back.

"That was taken last year," he said, feeling a lump in his throat. Emily was standing in the visitor's hall at the prison. John had his arm around his mother, the dirty white cinderblock wall behind them serving as a backdrop. It had been his birthday. Joyce had taken the photo because his mother had insisted.

"Nice," Ms. Lam said. John always called her Ms. Lam, never Martha, because she scared him and he wanted to show her that he was capable of respect.

She opened up the back of the frame and checked it for—what? He didn't know, but he felt himself sweating until she put the photo back down on the cardboard box that served as a bedside table.

Next, she went through the paperback books he had borrowed from the library, thumbing through the pages, commenting on the titles. "*Tess of the d'Urbervilles*?" she asked, pausing on the last book.

He shrugged. "I've never read it before." He had been arrested the day after Ms. Rebuck, his English teacher, had announced in class that *Tess* would be their next major paper.

"Hm," she said, giving the book a second, more careful inspection.

She finally replaced the book and put her hands on her hips, surveying the room. John didn't have a chest of drawers so his clothes were folded and stacked in neat piles on top of the red cooler where he stored his food. He could tell she had already gone through the clothes because the shirt on top was folded differently, and he assumed she'd checked out the bananas, bread and jar of peanut butter in the cooler. There was one window in the room, but he had taped construction paper over it to block out the early morning sun. Ms. Lam had peeled back the edges to make sure there was no contraband hidden behind it. A bare lightbulb overhead illuminated the room and he noticed she had turned on the floor lamp beside the bed. The shade was askew. She had checked that as well.

She said, "Lift up your mattress, please," then, as if they were old pals, she explained, "I just had my nails done."

John took two steps into the tiny room and was at the mattress. He picked it up and leaned it against the wall so she could see the dirty box spring underneath. They both saw the back of his mattress at the same time. The bloodstains and some kind of gray circle of grime in the middle made her frown in disgust.

"That, too," she said, pointing to the box spring resting flat on the floor.

He picked this up, and they both jumped back like a pair of frightened little girls when a cockroach scuttled across the dank brown carpet.

"Bleh," she said. "No luck finding another room?"

He shook his head, dropping the box spring and mattress back into place. He had been fortunate to find this one. As in prison, even flophouses had standards and a lot of them wouldn't take sex offenders, especially if the victims had been young. John was stuck in a house with six other men who were all registered with the state. One of them had a record for going after an eight-year-old girl. Another liked to rape old women.

"Well," Ms. Lam smiled, cheerful again. "I guess the Pedo Arms will do for the time being." She indicated the cardboard box by his bed. "Open this, please."

"There's nothing—" He gave up, knowing there was no use. He took the stack of books off the box and put them on the bed, then placed the photo of his mother on top of them, not wanting the frame to touch the dirty sheets.

He opened the box, showing her it was empty.

She went down her checklist. "Not hiding any Viagra in here, are you?" John shook his head. "Illegal drugs? Porn? Weapons of any kind?"

"No, ma'am," he assured her.

"Still working at the Gorilla?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Anything changes, you'll tell me about it first, right?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well." She had her hands tucked into her hips again. "All righty, then. Clean bill for today."

"Thank you," he said.

She wagged a manicured finger at him. "I'm watching you, John. Don't you forget that."

"No, Ms. Lam. I won't."

She looked at him a moment longer, then shook her head as if she couldn't understand a thing about him. "You stay out of trouble and we won't have any problems, okay?"

"Okay," he agreed. Stupidly, he added, "Thank you."

"I'll see you around," she said, heading for the door. "Keep your nose clean."

"Yes, ma'am," he agreed. He closed the door behind her, leaving his palm flat against the wood, resting his head on the back of his hand and just trying to breathe.

"Knock-knock," he heard above him. Ms. Lam was in charge of the old-lady rapist, too. John didn't know the guy's name because every time he saw him in the hall, it took all of John's willpower not to deck him.

He turned back to his room, blocking out Ms. Lam's voice as she made her cheery rounds upstairs. John hated people going through his shit. The most important thing he had learned in prison was that you never touched another man's property unless you were willing to die for it.

He picked up his T-shirt, one of the six that he owned, and refolded it. He had a pair of chinos, two pairs of jeans, three pairs of socks and eight pairs of boxers because for some reason his mother had always brought him underwear in prison.

John used his foot to upright one of his sneakers. Ms. Lam had searched them, too. The tongues were pulled out, the inserts crooked. Thirty dollars for a pair of shoes, John thought. He

couldn't believe how expensive clothes and shoes had gotten while he was inside.

Upstairs, he heard Ms. Lam say, "Uh-oh!" John froze, knowing she had found something. He heard the rapist mutter a response, then Ms. Lam's voice loud and clear: "Tell it to the judge."

There wasn't much of a scuffle. She had a Glock, after all, and it wasn't like there was anywhere to run in the dilapidated house they all called home. John couldn't resist sticking his head out the door when he heard them making their way down the stairs. Ms. Lam had one hand on the rapist's shoulder, one on the cuffs that were locking his hands behind his back. The guy was still in his underwear, no shirt, no socks, no shoes. They'd have a real nice time with him in the holding cell, as Ms. Lam well knew.

She saw him peering from behind the door. "He messed up, John," she said, as if that wasn't obvious. "Take it as a lesson."

John didn't respond. He closed the door, waiting until he heard a car door slam on the street, an engine turn over, the car pull away.

Still, he checked out the window, pulling back the construction paper in time to see Ms. Lam's red SUV stop at the light at the end of the street.

John dropped to his knees and picked at the edge of the filthy brown carpet. He tried not to think about the roach they had seen or the mouse turds between the carpet and the pad. He found the credit report right where he had left it. Not contraband, but what would Ms. Lam say if she found it? "Uh-oh!" And then he'd be gone.

John slipped on his jeans and shoved his feet into his sneakers. He took the stairs two at a time. There was a phone in the hallway that they could use for local calls, and he picked it up, dialing the number he knew by heart.

"Keener, Rose and Shelley," the receptionist on the other end said. "How can I direct your call?"

John kept his voice low. "Joyce Shelley, please."

"Who can I say is calling?"

He almost gave her a different name, but relented. "John Shelley."

There was a pause, a hesitation that kept him in his place. "Just a moment."

The moment turned into a couple of minutes, and John could picture his sister's frown when her secretary told her who was on the line. Joyce's life was pretty settled and she seemed to be doing well. She had rebelled against their father in her own way: instead of becoming a doctor, she had dropped out of medical school her second year at Emory and switched to law. Now, she did real estate closings all day, taking a flat fee for getting folks to sign on the dotted line. He couldn't imagine her doing something so boring, but then, Joyce probably got a good laugh out of him wiping soapy water off of cars all day.

"What is it?" his sister whispered, not even bothering with a hello.

"I need to ask you something."

"I'm in the middle of a closing."

"It won't take long," he said, then kept talking because he knew she'd cut him off if he didn't. "What's a credit score?"

She spoke in her normal voice. "Are you an idiot?"

"Yeah, Joyce. You know I am."

She gave a heavy sigh that sounded more labored than usual. He wondered if she had a cold or maybe she'd started smoking again. "All the credit card companies, the banks, anybody who lets you buy anything on credit, report to credit agencies about how well you pay your bills, whether you're on time, whether you're slow, if you make the minimum payment or pay it all off each month or whatever. Those agencies compile your payment histories and come up with a score that tells other companies how good a credit risk you are."

"Is seven hundred ten a good score?"

"John," she said. "I really don't have time for this. What kind of scam are you running?"

"None," he said. "I don't run scams, Joyce. That's not why they sent me to prison."

She was quiet and he knew he had pushed her too far. "I haven't forgotten why they sent you to prison," she said, the edge to her voice telling him she was having a hard time keeping control.

"What if somebody got my information and used it to get credit cards and stuff?"

"Then it'd wreck your score."

"No." He clarified, "What if they were paying off the cards and everything every month?"

She hesitated a moment. "Why would they do that?"

"I don't know, Joyce. That's why I'm asking you."

"Are you for real?" she demanded. "What is this, John? Just ask me what you need to know. I've got work to do."

"I *am* asking you," he said. "It's just that someone ..." He let his voice trail off. Would this implicate Joyce in whatever was going on? Could she somehow get in trouble for having knowledge of this? He didn't know how the law worked. Hell, last week he hadn't even known there was such a thing as a credit score.

He didn't know, either, if Ms. Lam tapped the phone.

He finally said, "It's this scam some guys were running in prison."

"Jesus." She was whispering again. "You'd better not be getting involved in it."

"No," he said. "I'm keeping my nose clean."

"You'd better be, John. They will throw your ass back in jail so fast you won't even have time to think."

"You sound like Dad."

"Is that your way of asking how he's doing?"

John realized he was holding his breath. "No."

"Good, because he wouldn't want me telling you anyway."

"I know."

"Christ, John." She sighed again. He was upsetting her. Why had he called her? Why did he have to bother her with this?

He felt tears in his eyes and pressed his fingers into the corners to try to stop them. He remembered when they were little, how she used to play with him, dress him up in Richard's clothes, pretend she was his mother. They had tea parties and cooked cupcakes in her Easy-Bake Oven.

He asked, "Do you remember that time we melted Mom's present?" John was six, Joyce was nine. They had saved their allowance and bought a bracelet for their mother's birthday. Joyce had suggested they bake it in a cake to surprise her, something she'd read about in a book. They didn't realize the bracelet was costume jewelry, and when they put it in the little oven, turned on the hundred-watt bulb to cook the cake, the bracelet had melted into the rack. The smoke had set off the fire alarm.

"Remember?" he asked.

Joyce sniffed, not answering.

"You okay?" he said. He wanted to know about her life. Was she seeing anybody? She'd never been married, but she was so damn pretty and smart. There had to be somebody in her life, somebody who wanted to take care of her.

"I'm getting a cold," she said.

"You sound like it."

"I gotta go."

He heard the soft click of the phone as she hung up.

The next three days were riddled with storms—the clouds spitting down rain one minute, parting for the sunshine the next—and John was basically out of a job until they cleared. He found himself wishing he hadn't blown fifty dollars on that hooker. But then, sometimes he found himself wishing he had fifty more to give her. What question would he ask her this time? Maybe, what did it feel like to be in love? What did it feel like to hold somebody who wanted to hold you back? He wanted to talk to her again. He wanted to know about her life.

Unfortunately, he couldn't afford it.

Growing up, John hadn't had to worry about how to put food on the table or clothes on his back. His parents took care of everything. There were always fresh sheets on the bed, the toilet was magically clean and whenever he opened the refrigerator, it was filled with all the things he liked to eat. Even in prison, everything was provided for him. They had a strict schedule and firm rules, but as long as you did what you were told, you didn't have to worry about anything.

During a good month at the car wash, John pulled in about a thousand dollars after taxes. Rent for his ten-foot by ten-foot roach-encrusted room was four hundred fifty dollars—a premium, to be certain, but no one else would take him in so his landlord felt entitled. Renting an apartment would have made things cheaper, but John couldn't swing the hefty deposit, let alone the various connection charges and down payments utility companies required. MARTA wasn't cheap, either.

The city offered a Monthly Trans Card for unlimited bus and subway rides, but that cost around fifty-two dollars a month. Sometimes, John couldn't afford to pay all that up front and he ended up shelling out a buck seventy-five each way in order to get to and from work.

Food, which mainly consisted of dry cereal, banana and peanut butter sandwiches and the occasional piece of fruit, ran around a hundred twenty dollars a month. John had to buy milk in small containers he could drink right away and stick with nonperishable foods. The cooler in his room was used to keep the roaches out; John couldn't buy a bag of ice every day, especially in the summer when the heat would turn it to water before he could get it home on the bus.

For the privilege of being paroled, he paid the state two hundred thirty dollars a month. Rape and murder wasn't cheap, and if he failed to make a payment, his ass went straight back to prison. The first money order he bought each month was made payable to the state.

This usually left him with a little less than seventy-five dollars each week for things that he needed. That was from a good week, though, and some weeks he pulled in considerably less. John forced himself to save money, skipping meals sometimes, making himself so dizzy from lack of food that he practically fell into bed at night. Once, in desperation, he had gone into one of the millions of cash-until-payday stores spotting the poorer parts of the city, but John couldn't bring himself to pay 480 percent interest on a week-long loan. Even if he had been, they required you to have a checking account so they could wire the money directly to your bank. No bank in the world would give John Shelley a checking account.

Health insurance was a fantastical dream. John lived in terror of getting sick.

After the ill-fated phone call to his sister, John walked through the rain, kicking puddles, wishing he could kick himself for calling Joyce. She had enough trouble without him putting more on her. The truth was, he just wanted to talk to her, wanted to see how she was doing. John called her maybe once a month and she was always as happy to hear from him as she had been this morning.

A MARTA bus squealed to a stop in front of him and John checked the number before getting on. This month had been a good one, so he waved his Trans Card in front of the reader, giving the driver a nod of recognition.

"Getting cold," the driver said.

"Sure is," John agreed, enjoying the simple banter until he realized he'd have to buy a winter jacket. God, how much would that cost?

The bus jerked as it accelerated and John grabbed the back of a seat to steady himself as he walked down the aisle. The bus was packed, and he found a seat by an old black woman who was reading a Bible in her lap. Despite the weather, she was wearing a large pair of black sunglasses over her eyeglasses. She didn't look up when he sat down, but he knew she had read him out of the corner of her eye.

There were scams to make money. There was always a scam, always an angle. Prison was full of men who thought they had discovered the perfect scheme. John knew that some of the guys at the Gorilla would steal receipts out of cars and change them into cash. The big chain stores were the best. All you had to do was walk in and find the same item number as what was printed on the receipt, then hand it to the girl behind the desk and get the cash. Easy money, they all said. Ray-Ray said it twice.

He changed buses at the Lindbergh station, passing the closed car wash on the way. Figuring he was running what amounted to a fool's errand, he took the long route down Cheshire Bridge Road, knowing it would pass the liquor store where he had met Robin. That whole week, he had been thinking about her, wondering what she was up to.

Somehow, he had imagined this kind of life for her, one that mirrored his own. Maybe she had been a little spoiled like Joyce, a daddy's girl. He wondered about her younger brother, friend to Stewie the kisser. What was he like? Did she call him up some days when she was having an especially bad time? Was he as upset to hear from her as Joyce was when John called? John couldn't imagine what it'd be like to have a sister who was a whore. He'd want to kill every freaking man who even looked at her.

The bus passed the liquor store, and he could see three working girls standing under the cover of the awning. One of them was the loudmouth who had fought with Ray-Ray. None of them was Robin.

John sat back in his seat, watching the fancy restaurants go by. The bus stopped at the corner where the movie theater was, and he stood so that the old black woman could get off. He read the marquee, not recognizing any of the movies. He had gone to a movie with his first paycheck,

shocked when he got to the ticket counter and saw the prices. Ten bucks! He couldn't believe how much a movie cost. Even a matinee was expensive.

The bus took a right at the intersection and the scenery changed, turning more residential. John stared out the window as the houses got bigger, the yards nicer. Morningside, Virginia Highland, Poncey-Highland. Through Little Five Points, past the new Barnes and Noble, Target, Best Buy. It didn't start to get bad again until they were well down Moreland Avenue. Liquor stores, corner groceries and auto parts stores lined the filthy street. Signs advertised cheap check cashing, low-cost insurance; one proudly proclaimed, "The only place in town selling clothing by the pound."

Men with dirty T-shirts wrapped around their bare shoulders stood at the bus stop, slipping on their shirts at the last minute before they got on. The bus took on a new odor as construction workers started to file in. Mexicans, Asians, blacks. Pretty soon, John was the only white person on the bus.

He got off the bus when the street turned almost pretty. This part of Moreland was bordered by Brownwood and Grant Park. Families had started to move in, reclaiming the in-town area for their own. They took care of their houses, kept their yards trimmed and demanded better treatment, nicer restaurants, safer streets, than the previous inhabitants had. John had learned a long time ago that the reason the middle class had it so good was because they *expected* things to be better. They wouldn't settle for less than they were worth. They'd just get into their shiny cars and go where they were appreciated. Poor people, on the other hand, were used to just taking what was given to them and being grateful for it.

For the moment, the rain had cleared, the sun peeking out from behind dark clouds. John didn't want to go back up Moreland, so he got off the bus and walked into Brownwood Park, cutting through the woods. He had looked up this area in the street atlas he found in the library and was glad to see the roads were much as he expected. New construction was going up all around him, three-story mansions towering over 1950s ranch houses. How much did something like that cost, John wondered. What kind of job did you need in order to be able to buy your own house, raise your kids, maybe drive a nice secondhand car? He couldn't fathom the amount of cash that would take.

He took Taublib Street into East Atlanta Village, surprised to find a couple of nice restaurants and a coffee joint where he had expected abandoned buildings and auto-body repair shops. There were a couple of boutiques, a bakery and a pet store. He looked in the window where a fat orange cat was sunbathing on a bag of dog food. A cat would be nice, some kind of animal to keep him company. The cockroach Ms. Lam had found didn't really count. That would be a luxury for another day. John could barely afford to feed himself.

At Metropolitan Avenue, he took a right, walked down a few blocks and found himself in front of the East Atlanta branch of the post office. John stared at the squat, institutional-looking building. The sign outside showed the same zip code as the credit report: 30316.

The place was packed, cars filling the front and side lot, spilling onto the street even though there were signs warning against it. The driveway to the light blue Victorian house next to the post office was blocked by a large cargo van.

The rain had started again, a light drizzle that darkened the sky. John walked down Metropolitan about fifty feet, then turned around and walked back. He watched people going in and out of the post office, wondering why the hell he had come here.

After thirty minutes of pacing up and down the street, John realized that there was nothing stopping him from actually going inside the building. His local post office was gloomy and smelled of bacon grease for no apparent reason. He bought his money orders for rent and his state fine there because it was only a ten-minute walk from where he lived. There were a lot of immigrants in the neighborhood, and sometimes people would bring in chickens and other small animals to ship to God only knew where. Oftentimes, he'd hear a rooster crowing while he was waiting in line.

The East Atlanta branch was well-lit, clean and just seemed to have a good vibe. Right across from the front door were rows of post office boxes, small ones at the top, large ones at the bottom. To his left was the office where two women were helping customers as quickly as they could. A line of people went out from the lobby all the way to the stamp vending machine by the front door. John pulled a blank envelope out of his back pocket and got in line, trying to act like he belonged. Inch by inch, the line moved forward, and he didn't look back at the mailboxes until he was up close to the glass doors leading into the office.

Box eight-fifty was on the first row about eye level. The box next to it had an orange sticker pasted to it, the words too faded to read.

"Have a good one," one of the ladies behind the desk called as a customer brushed past John on her way out. He stepped back quickly to get out of the woman's way, mumbling an apology as rain dripped from his hair. When he looked back up, he saw someone heading toward the boxes.

John held his breath, clutching the envelope in his hand as a skinny black woman talking on her cell phone jabbed her key into the lock of box eight-fifty. She was laughing into the phone, saying something derogatory about a family member, when she jerked the key back out, saying, "Shit, girl, I just put my key in the wrong box."

She pushed the key into the lock below eight-fifty, cradling the cell phone with her shoulder as she kept on talking.

"Sir?" the woman behind John said.

The line had moved, but John hadn't. He smiled, saying, "Sorry. Forgot my wallet," and stepped out of line.

What a stupid waste of time. There was no way he could sit on this box all day, and the odds of whoever had taken his name just showing up when John happened to be there were ridiculously low. He'd have better luck buying a lottery ticket.

He pushed open the door, tossing the blank envelope into the trash. The sky had opened up again, sending down a cold deluge. John shivered. A hundred dollars. A good winter coat would be at least a hundred dollars. Where would he get that kind of money? How long would it take to save up for a freaking coat?

He hunched his shoulders as he stood at the bus stop, cursing himself and the rain. He would have to start looking for a new job. Maybe something inside, something that had regular hours and didn't depend on the weather. Something where they didn't mind if you had a record, and if that record said you were the kind of man who should be put down like a rabid dog to protect the rest of the world from the evil inside of you.

John's job choices were limited to the dangerous ones. Half the guys in prison were there because they'd knocked over a convenience store or a mom-and-pop diner. Most of the guys on death row had gotten their start robbing the local Quickie Mart, ending their criminal careers by putting a bullet in some low-wage worker's head for the sixty bucks in the cash drawer. Before Ms. Lam had hooked him up at the Gorilla, John had almost been desperate enough to try the convenience stores. He knew now that he couldn't keep working at the car wash, not through the winter. He needed a way to find money, and fast.

The bus was late, the driver irritated when he finally pulled up. John's mood matched everybody else's as he sloshed up the stairs and walked to the back, his thirty-dollar sneakers practically disintegrated from the rain. He fell into the empty seat at the back of the bus, half-wishing the lightning zig-zagging out of the sky would come through the window and hit him right in the head. He'd end up brain-damaged, a drooling vegetable taking up space in a hospital somewhere. He was beginning to see why so many guys ended up back in prison. He was thirty-five years old. He had never driven a car, never really dated, never really lived. What the hell was the point, John thought, staring glumly out the window as some guy struggled to close an umbrella and get into his car at the same time.

John stood up as the bus pulled away, looking out the window, keeping his eyes on the man. How many years had passed? His brain wouldn't let him do the math, but he knew it was him. John was slack-jawed as he watched the man give up on the umbrella and toss it into the parking lot before slamming his car door shut.

Yes. It was him. It was definitely him.

Just as a million raindrops fell from the sky, there existed a million chances that John would go to the post office on the right day at the right time.

A million to one, but he had done it.

He had found the other John Shelley.

CHAPTER TWELVE

John couldn't remember being arrested—not because he was in shock at the time but because he had been semiconscious. Woody had come by that morning to check on him and hooked him up with some Valium. John had taken enough to tranquilize a horse.

Apparently, the cops had come to his house with an arrest warrant. His father had led them up to John's room and they had found him passed out on his bed. John remembered coming to, his face on fire where his father had slapped him. The cops dragged him out of the house, handcuffs biting into the skin on his wrists. He passed out again on the lawn.

He woke up in the hospital, the familiar taste of charcoal in his mouth. Only, this time, when he tried to move his hand to wipe his face, something clattered against the bed rail. He looked down at his wrist, his eyes blurry, and saw that he was cuffed to the bed.

A cop was sitting by the door reading a newspaper. He scowled at John. "You awake?"

"Yeah." John fell back asleep.

His mother was in the room when he next came around. God, she looked horrible. He wondered how long he had been asleep because Emily looked like twenty years had passed since he had climbed up the stairs to his room, turned Heart down low on the stereo and taken a handful of the little white pills his cousin had given him.

"Baby," she said, rubbing his forearm. "Are you okay?"

His tongue was lolled back in his mouth. His chest hurt like he had been slammed in the sternum with a sledgehammer. How had he managed to breathe all this time?

"You're going to be okay," she said. "It's all a mistake."

It wasn't though—at least as far as the police were concerned. The district attorney came in an hour or so later, Paul Finney standing behind the man, glaring at John like he was ready to jump onto the bed and throttle him right then and there. The cop must have picked up on this, too, because he was staying close to Mr. Finney, making sure nothing got out of hand.

The DA made the introductions. "I'm Lyle Anders. This is Chief Harold Waller." The cop by Mr. Finney was holding a sheet of paper. He cleared his throat, looking down at it like he was reading from a script.

John looked at his mother. She said, "It's all right, baby."

"Jonathan Winston Shelley," Waller began. "I'm arresting you for the rape and murder of Mary Alice Finney."

John's ears did that thing where he felt like he was underwater. Waller's lips were moving, he was definitely saying something, but John couldn't understand him.

Lyle Anders finally reached over and snapped his fingers in front of John's face. "You understand what's happening, son?"

"No," John said. "I didn't—"

"Don't say anything," his mother shushed, putting her fingers to his lips. Emily Shelley, PTA sponsor, den mother, baker of brownies and master of Halloween disguises, straightened her back and addressed the three men in the room. "If that's all?"

They loomed over his small mother, Paul Finney especially. He was a big man to begin with, but his rage made him larger.

Anders said, "He needs to make a statement."

"No," she said, this woman who was his mother. "Actually, he doesn't."

"It'd be in his best interest."

"My son has been through a horrible ordeal," Emily answered. "He needs rest."

Anders tried to speak directly to John, and even when Emily blocked his way, he still made an

attempt. "Son, you need to get on top of this and tell us what happened. I'm sure there's a reason you—"

"He has nothing to say to you," Emily insisted, her voice firm. John had only heard her speak this way once, when Joyce was ten and she'd tried to walk on the railing to the top deck at the house.

One by one, Emily looked them all in the eye. "Please leave."

Paul Finney lunged for John, but the cop caught him. "You son of a bitch," Mr. Finney spat at John. "You'll fry for this!"

Mr. Finney had been an all-state wrestler. Anders and Waller had their hands full trying to keep him off John. In the end, they had to physically pick him up and carry him out of the room. As the door closed, he screamed, "You'll pay for this, you fucker!"

His mother's bottom lip was trembling as she turned back to John. He thought, oddly, that she had been upset by Mr. Finney's language.

He asked, "Where's Dad?" Richard was the one who took care of things, cleaned up the messes. "Mom?" John asked. "Where is he?"

Her throat worked, and she reached out, taking his hand. "Listen to me," she said, urgent. "They're going to come back any minute and take you to jail. We only have a few seconds."

"Mom—"

"Don't talk," she said, squeezing his hand. "Listen."

He nodded.

"Don't say anything to the police. Don't even tell them your name. Don't tell them where you were that night, don't tell them what you had for dinner."

"Mom—"

"Shush, Jonathan," she ordered, pressing her fingers to his lips. "Don't talk to anyone in jail. No one is your friend in there. They're all looking out for themselves and you should, too. Don't say anything on the phone because they tape the conversations. There are snitches everywhere."

Snitches, John thought. Where had his mother heard that word? How did she know about any of this? She wouldn't even watch *Kojak* because she thought it was too violent.

"I want you to promise me, John," she insisted. "Promise me that you will not talk to anyone until your aunt Lydia shows up."

Aunt Lydia. Barry's wife. She was a lawyer.

"John?" she prompted. "Do you promise? Not a word? Don't even talk about the weather. Do you understand me? This is the most important thing I have ever told you to do and you must obey me. Do not talk to *anyone*. Do you hear me?"

He started crying because she was. "Yes, Mama."

The door opened and Waller was back. He glanced at the scene, mother and child, and John saw part of him soften. He sounded almost kind when he told Emily, "Mrs. Shelley, you're going to have to step outside now."

Her hand tightened around John's. She looked down at him, tears spilling out of her eyes. For some reason, he had been expecting her to say that she loved him, but instead, she mouthed, "*No one*."

Talk to no one.

Anders let Emily leave before he reached into his pocket and pulled out the keys to the handcuffs. The moment of softness was gone as quickly as it had come.

He told John, "You listen to me, you little bastard. You're gonna get out of that bed, get your clothes on and put your hands behind your back. If you give me a millisecond of trouble, I will come down on you like a ton of bricks. Do you understand me, you murdering piece of shit?"

"Yes," John said, breathless with fear. "Yes, sir."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

OCTOBER 15, 2005

Coastal State Prison was located near Savannah in a town called Garden City, Georgia. The names sounded beautiful on paper, conjuring up a quaint seaside town you might find on a postcard. Whoever selected the spot for the state correctional department must have gotten a pretty good joke out of the whole thing.

Coastal was a maximum-security facility, only a few years old by the time John got there and remodeled ten years into his sentence to accommodate the influx of violent criminals. Today, the prison consisted of seven housing units with twelve two-man cells and twenty-four four-man cells. There were forty-four segregation cells, thirty disciplinary cells and fifteen protective custody cells. The L-building housed over two hundred men, N had another two hundred and O and Q were open dorms with bunk beds laid out like general military quarters. All told, around sixteen hundred men called it home.

John didn't think he'd ever willingly go back to Coastal, but he had taken off work and boarded the Greyhound bus at six that morning. The ticket had cost him the rest of his television money, but that was hardly the point. He tried to sleep on the bus, leaning his head against the window, but all he could do was think about that first time he had made this trip in handcuffs and shackles. He couldn't go back in. He could not die in prison.

He had brought a book—*Tess of the D'Urbervilles*—and he made himself read it during the nearly five-hour journey. John kept having to backtrack in the book, his mind wandering as each mile ticked past. How had his mother made this drive every two weeks, rain or shine? No wonder she had looked exhausted by the time she got there. No wonder she had looked so defeated that first time she was allowed to visit him. She did it for twenty years, though, and she had only missed three visits during all that time.

Tess had just confided her noble ancestry to Angel when the Greyhound pulled up outside of the state prison. John used his ticket to mark his place, then put the book in the plastic grocery bag he had brought along with him.

At visitor processing, John burned with shame as he was searched and questioned—not because he was above it all, but because he finally knew what his mother had gone through every time she had come to see him. He did the math as they searched his grocery bag, opening the carton of cigarettes, checking the book almost page by page. Over five hundred times she'd made this trip. How had Emily endured this? How could he have brought this humiliation down on his mother? No wonder Joyce had been so livid. John had never hated himself more than at this moment in time.

He sat on one of the plastic chairs as he waited for his name to be called. His knee was bobbing again, but everyone else in the room looked perfectly calm. Mostly, it was women with their children. They had come to see daddy. One kid near John held a crayon drawing of an airplane. Another was crying because they hadn't let her bring her teddy bear in. Something unusual had shown up on the X-ray and the mother had refused to let them inspect it.

"Shelley?" a uniformed woman called. None of the guards had recognized him, but considering the volume of prisoners and visitors they had each week, this shouldn't have come as a surprise.

"Shelley?" she called again.

John stood, clutching his grocery bag to his chest.

"Table three," she said, nodding him in.

He put his bag on the X-ray belt, the third time it had been screened, and walked through the

metal detector and into the visitors' room. He stopped at the end of the belt, staring at the room, trying to see it the way his mother had. There were picnic-style metal tables bolted to the floor all around the twenty-by-thirty room. Men sat on one side, their wives or girlfriends or hookers they'd paid to come see them sitting on the other. Kids were running around laughing and screaming and, about every ten feet, there was a guard standing with his back to the wall. Cameras were everywhere, their lenses swinging back and forth in slow disapproval.

Ben Carver sat at one of the back tables, table three. He was dressed in his usual white shirt, white pants and white socks. He had a pair of matching patent-leather slippers that his mother had sent, but Ben seldom wore them outside the cell because he didn't want them to get dirty.

Everybody had a persona in prison, a different personality they adopted that helped them survive. The thugs got meaner, the Aryans more cruel, the gays gayer and the loonies absolutely fucking nuts. Ben fell into this latter category, and he worked it like a master thespian. Not that John thought it was much of a stretch for the man. By the time the GBI caught up with him, Ben had killed six men in the surrounding Atlanta area. His particular twist was to cut off their right nipples for souvenirs. During his arrest at the main branch of the Atlanta post office where Ben had worked as a mail sorter for eighteen years, one of the cops became a little overzealous and slammed Ben to the ground. A piece of tissue—later identified as the right nipple of his last victim—flew out of Ben's mouth where he had been sucking on it like a Lifesaver.

This lurid detail combined with Ben's appropriate last name of Carver had made a big splash in the press. Unlike John, he made the national news, even got his own nickname: the Atlanta Carver. Ben had never been particularly pleased with the moniker, but then he was also angry with Wayne Williams, the man convicted in the Atlanta Child Murders case, for pushing him off the front page a few weeks after his arrest.

"My dear boy," Ben said, smiling his thin smile as he sized up John. His lips were wet, a black stain at the center where he usually kept a cigarette. His teeth were likewise marked, nicotine drawing a bull's-eye right at the center. One of the first things Ben had told John was that he had something of an oral fixation. "Better cigarettes than your right tit, my dear boy." John had never complained about his smoking after that.

"So," Ben said.

John stood at the table, not sure whether he wanted to sit. He told Ben, "You look good."

"Of course I do." He pretended to primp his hair, which was practically nonexistent, winking at someone behind John.

Though Ben was in protective custody, there wasn't really a room set up to accommodate visitors in that wing, so he had to sit with the general population on the rare occasion someone came to see him. Any prisoner from the Level III mental health unit was at his most vulnerable during visitation. He had to rely on his fellow inmates being too distracted by their whores or too respectful of their wives and girlfriends to pull out a shiv and rip open his belly.

John said, "I had to see you."

Ben tsked his tongue, and John tried not to think about what the man would have in his mouth right now if the cops hadn't caught him. "Didn't I tell you not to ever come back to this hell hole?"

"It's good to see you," John said, and he meant it. He hadn't seen a welcoming face since he'd gotten out.

"Well," Ben said, smacking his lips. "What have you brought me?"

John took the carton of unfiltered Camels out of the bag.

"Oh, you shouldn't have!" Ben cradled the carton to his chest. "My sweetness, please do sit. You know I don't like hovering even if it does give me a wonderful view of your package."

John sat, feeling embarrassed by Ben's language. He had forgotten how Ben spoke to him, the way he made you feel dirty even if he was just asking you what time it was. John had to remind himself this was part of Ben's act, the way he got through the day without cutting his own throat open.

Ben confided, "Oprah is doing her favorite things today."

Oprah, the only program the entire cell bloc could agree on.

"I'm sure it'll be a good one," John said. He didn't add anything else as a guard walked by, lingering near their table for a few minutes before moving on.

"Now," Ben said, "you know I can't stay away from my nicotine for long. What do you desire?"

John leaned in close, keeping his hands flat on the table so the guard could see he wasn't doing anything to break the rules. "I've got a problem."

"I assumed as much."

The guard had moved on. John resisted the urge to look over his shoulder. Ben was scoping out the situation behind him just as John was keeping his eye on everyone behind Ben.

"Precious," Ben said, "let's keep in mind the walls have ears."

The tables, more like. John wasn't sure whether it was true or not, but everyone in the prison believed there were bugs all over the visitors' room—some under the tables, some overhead in the fluorescent lights. The cameras were visible enough, sweeping the room back and forth, zooming in on suspicious visitors. You couldn't trust a priest in here.

In low tones, John told Ben about the television, the credit report, the post office. He told him about the man with the umbrella, careful not to say his name because who knew if the rumors were true.

When he had finished, Ben said, "I see."

John sat back a little. "What should I do?"

Ben's full lips pressed together and he put his finger where the black dot was burned into the flesh. "The question, my love, is not an easy one."

"He's jacking me up for something," John said, then, because he wasn't sure, "Right?"

"Oh, indeed," Ben agreed. "There's no other reason for this type of behavior. No reason at all."

"He's using me as a cover."

"He's framing you, my love."

John shook his head, leaning in close again. "It doesn't make sense. This started six years ago. I was in here six years ago. It's an airtight alibi."

"True, true," Ben agreed, tapping his finger to his lip again. "Did he know you got out?"

John shrugged. "He could find out."

"But did he know?" Ben said. "I must say, my darling, that it came as a surprise even to me when you spoke so eloquently to the parole board. Such a silver tongue."

John nodded. He had surprised himself.

"Let's pose a what-if," Ben suggested. "What if your friend assumed you would rot away here in our little Maison du Feces?"

"Okay."

"And what if, much to his surprise, he found our little darling boy got out?"

"Yeah?"

"And what if he felt threatened by your return?" Ben leaned in closer. "He has something going, obviously."

"Yes," John agreed.

"And he doesn't want you to interfere with this little side thing, does he?"

"Right."

"So, what does he do?"

Both men went quiet, tried to think it to the next step.

"I don't know," John admitted, frustrated. "I need to find him."

"You've tried all the obvious routes?"

"Yeah." He had checked the phone book, but the guy wasn't listed. He'd even tried the computer at the library, feeling like an idiot as he followed the printed directions on how to do an Internet search. Nothing.

John said, "I have to find out what he's up to."

Ben fingered the carton of cigarettes, picking at the edge. John knew he was running out of time. "Of course, I could use the contacts from my previous life to get you this fella's current address."

"You've still got people?" John was surprised Ben was admitting this where he might be heard. There had been "sources close to the case" at the time of Ben's trial who claimed that he had used the post office's intercompany mail to send some of his souvenirs to fellow fetishists.

Ben slapped on a wide smile. "Through rain, sleet and snow ... but you have yet to tell me the information I need to know."

The name. He needed the name. John glanced around, opened his mouth, but—

"Hush, hush," Ben warned.

Another guard walked by, standing just opposite their table. Both men fell silent again, and John stared at his hands, questioning the logic of coming here. Who else could he talk to? He couldn't get Joyce wrapped up in this. The only people he knew were convicted felons and whores.

The guard moved along and Ben made a funny face. In a lot of ways, this man had been a father to John. How had that happened? How could somebody so evil, so absolutely without any redeeming qualities, be his friend?

There was no explaining it except to say that Ben thought he and John were two of a kind.

"I'll tell you what," Ben said. "I have a car."

"What?"

"It's at my mother's house. I'll call her today and say a friend is going to borrow it."

Ben was smarter at this than him. John was just going step by step, not even thinking it through. So what if he found out the guy's address? It's not like he could follow him around on a MARTA bus.

John asked, "Does it still run?"

"Mother used to drive it to church every Sunday but her gentleman friend, Mr. Propson, takes her now," Ben said. "Beulah Carver. I daresay she's the only one in the book. She'll give you the key, but don't tell her how you know me."

"You've been in jail for almost thirty years. Don't you think she'll figure it out?"

"I kept men's nipples in her refrigerator for three years and told her they were herbal treatments for alopecia. What do you think?"

John conceded the point.

"Okay." Ben's eyes darted somewhere over John's shoulder, and he spoke quickly, dropping the act for a moment. "You need to follow him," he said. "Follow this man and find out what he's doing, where he's going. Everything happens for a reason. Everything." He stood as another guard walked by. "Now go, my love, and thank you for the lovely gift." He tapped the carton of cigarettes.

John stood, too. "Ben—"

"Go," he insisted, throwing his arms around John's shoulders, hugging him close.

The guards converged en masse—physical contact was strictly forbidden—but Ben held on tight, his wet lips brushing just under John's ear. He was laughing like a hyena when they pulled him off, but he had the presence of mind to hold on to the cigarette carton.

"Good-bye, sweet boy!" Ben called as they dragged him to the door.

John waved back, resisting the urge to wipe off Ben's saliva until the man had been taken out of view.

About five years into his sentence, John had asked Ben why the older man never made a pass or tried anything with him. John was bigger then. Just like his mother had always predicted, he had finally grown into his hands and feet. Weights at the gym had bulked him up and he had enough hair on his body to warm a polar bear.

Ben had shrugged. "Don't eat where you shit."

"No," John persisted, not letting him get away with a sarcastic nonanswer. "Tell me. I want to know."

Ben had been doing a crossword, and he was annoyed at first, but then he saw John was serious and set the paper aside.

"There's no sport in it," Ben finally said. "I like the seduction of the show, my boy. I am an actor on a stage and you ..." He gave his wet smile. "You are a rube."

The rube hadn't done too bad this time, though. In the few seconds Ben's face had been pressed close to his, John had been able to tell him all he needed to know.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

After the jury returned with his sentence, John had been taken back to his cell at the county jail. They had left the cuffs on but taken away his belt and the laces in his shoes so he wouldn't do anything crazy. They needn't have bothered. He was too stunned to move, let alone figure out a way to kill himself in his tiny five-by-eight cell.

Twenty-two to life. Twenty-two years. He would be thirty before he was eligible for parole. He would be an old man.

"It's good," his mother had said, tears in her eyes. She didn't cry much after he was arrested, but now she let the tears flow. "It's good, baby."

She meant it was good because he had avoided the death penalty. A fourteen-year-old in Massachusetts had just made national headlines for beating another fourteen-year-old to death with a baseball bat. A twenty-eight-year-old in Texas had recently been executed for a crime he committed at the age of seventeen. Juvenile offenders were no longer a novelty. John could have been on his way to death row right now instead of looking at a lifetime behind bars.

"We can appeal," his mother told him. "It won't be long," she said. "We'll appeal."

Behind her, his aunt Lydia looked dubious. Later, he would find out that but for one juror, a father of three boys, one of whom was John's age, everyone else had voted for death. The rest had taken one look at John, then at the supersized photos of Mary Alice's mutilated body, and wanted him to die, too.

In the holding cell, John kept going over and over everything that was said about him during the trial. The state's psychologist had seemed nice enough when they talked a few months ago, but at trial he had told the entire courtroom that John was obviously a delusional psychopath, a cold-blooded killer who showed no remorse. Then, there were the kids from John's school who had stood up during the sentencing phase to talk about what a good girl Mary Alice was and what a horrible person John Shelley had always been. Principal Binder, Coach McCollough ... they had all talked about him like he was Charles Manson.

Who was that person they were talking about? John didn't recognize him. Half of those kids hadn't even said two words to him in the last three years, but now they acted as if they knew everything about him. There had been that split when they went from elementary to middle school, and the popular clique had left John behind. If not for sports, he would have been some kind of geek left to hang in the wind. When he was kicked off the football team, none of them would even meet his eye in the hallway. Now, according to these "friends" of his, John was some kind of ... monster.

John had been staring at the concrete floor of the cell, following the cracks spreading out like a palm reader trying to divine his future. When he looked up, Paul Finney was standing on the other side of the bars.

Mary Alice's father was smiling.

"Enjoy yourself now, you little piece of shit," he told John. "This is as good as it gets from here on out."

John didn't answer. What would he say?

Mr. Finney leaned closer, hands gripping the bars. "Think about what you did to her," he whispered. "Think about her when you bend over in the shower."

John didn't understand. He was sixteen years old. Even if Mr. Finney had explained it to him in minute detail, John would have probably shaken his head, said it wasn't possible.

But it was.

They kept him at the county jail for the evening, guards strolling by his cell every half hour to

make sure he wasn't trying to twist his sheets into a noose. Coastal State Prison was near the Atlantic Ocean, several hundred miles away in a town John had never heard of. The prison's policy was strict about visitors. He would have to be in a full month before they would allow his mother to see him. They said it was a period of acclimation, time to let the prisoner get used to his surroundings and make sure he deserved the privilege of having a guest come to see him. The longest John had ever gone without seeing his family was a weeklong church holiday he had spent in Gatlinburg, Tennessee.

They woke him at dawn to get a head start on traffic, and John shuffled onto the prison transport bus, feet shackled, arms handcuffed in front of him. His wrists were so slender that they had borrowed smaller cuffs from the women's jail. He had always been rail thin, and stress made it worse. He'd lost almost twenty pounds during the trial and his ribs were clearly visible under the baggy orange jumper he wore.

There were other men on the bus, and they whistled and hooted when John got on. He smiled because he thought it was some kind of rite of passage.

"Be strong," his mother had said, using more of her tough *Kojak* talk. "Don't let them get to you and don't trust any of them with anything."

One of the guards had slammed his baton on the cage separating the driver's area from the prisoners. He pointed to a seat directly behind the driver, telling John, "Sit."

The bus was not air-conditioned, the ride bumpy. John's chains clanked like Jacob Marley's the whole way. He played games in his head, games he and Joyce used to play when they took family vacations to Florida. How many license plates from out of town could he find? How many cows were on one side of the road? How many on the other?

His bladder was so full by the time they got to the outer limits of Savannah that his eyes were watering with pain. He knew instinctively there was no rest stop on this trip, and he kept his legs squeezed together when the bus pulled through the first gate of the prison, then the second, then the third.

He felt a sharp pain in his bladder when he stood, but he was glad he had the shackles around his ankles because it gave him an excuse to keep his legs together. The guard led the way to the first building, John in the front, the rest of the prisoners towering behind him. One of the men kept kicking at John's heels and he walked faster, his bladder screaming in his gut.

They were all led to an open bathroom with a row of urinals. Slowly, each man was uncuffed, unshackled. John, embarrassed, waited for someone else to go before he did. He could feel eyes on him as he reached down to the fly of his jumper. The uniform was for a grown man, so the crotch had settled somewhere around his knees. Nerves kept him from being able to go at first, but he finally was able to release a thin stream of urine.

"Looks like a little Vienna sausage," the man beside him said. He was staring right at John's penis. When John looked up at him, the man gave a smile that showed a row of crooked teeth. "I'm getting hungry just lookin' at it."

"Shut up," one of the guards ordered. The patch on his uniform read "Everett" and he held a baton between both of his hands like he was blocking a tackle. "Everybody take your clothes off and stand on the black line."

John's face went bright red. Because of his age, he had been kept in isolation at the county jail during his trial. The guards had still searched him plenty of times, but never like this. His entire life, he had never stood naked in front of a bunch of strangers. His hands felt numb as he worked the buttons on his jumper, and he tried not to look down at the other men, though of course he could see. They were huge—all of them. Their bodies were grown men's bodies, hair sprouting everywhere. John was a late bloomer. He shaved his face maybe once a week and then it was out of wishful thinking more than necessity. He looked like a girl next to them, like a frightened little girl.

Everett started going through the rules, listing things they could and could not do. While he was talking, another guard walked behind the prisoners with a flashlight, making each man bend over and hold themselves open for inspection. Another man put on a pair of gloves and stuck his fingers into their mouths to check for contraband or weapons. A third took out a hose and washed them all down, then sprayed powder on them to delouse their bodies.

They were each given a pair of white pants and a white T-shirt. John was given an extra small shirt but his pants were large enough to fit an elephant. He had to hold them up around his waist as he walked, carrying his pillow and his sheets in one hand, the meager toiletries they had been given precariously balanced on the top.

He moved as if he were in a fog, staring straight ahead, trying not to be sick.

"Shelley," Everett said. His baton was resting on the outside of an open cell door. "In here."

John walked into the cell. It reeked of urine and shit from the stainless steel toilet in the corner. The sink mounted to the wall had been white at some point in its life, but rust and grime had made it dirty gray. There was a desk on the left, two bunk beds stacked on the right. You could touch the opposite walls just by standing in the middle of the cell and holding both your arms out. A guy who looked to be about twenty-five lay on the top bunk and he turned to look at John, smiling.

"You're the bottom," he said.

There were more wolf whistles, but Everett was already moving on, assigning the next cell to the next prisoner.

"Zebra," the guy said, and John guessed that was his name.

"John."

"How old are you?"

"Sixteen."

Zebra smiled. His teeth were black and white, striped like a zebra. "You like it?" he said, pointing to his teeth. "We can do yours that way, too. You want?"

John shook his head. "My mom would kill me."

Zebra laughed; a shocking sound in the concrete building. "Go on and make your bed, Johnny. You like being called Johnny?" he asked. "That what your mommy calls you?"

"Not really," John said. Not since he was a baby, anyway.

"You'll be all right in here, Johnny," he said, reaching out and ruffling John's hair so hard that John had to tilt to the side.

Zebra gave a private chuckle. "I'll take care of you, boy."

And he did.

After lights-out, every night like clockwork Zebra was down on the bottom bunk, pressing John's face into the pillow, raping him so hard that the next day blood came out when he sat on the toilet. Crying did not stop him. Screaming only made him ram harder. By the end of the first week, John could barely stand.

Zebra was a predator. Everybody in the prison from the warden to the guards to the guys who came in to take off the trash knew that. He kept John to himself for that first week, then he started trading him out to the other men for cigarettes and contraband. Three weeks later, John was in the prison hospital, his asshole shredded, his eyes swollen shut from crying.

This was the first of two visits Richard Shelley made to visit his son in prison.

He was led back to the hospital by the guard named Everett, whom John hadn't seen since his first day in lockup.

"Here he is," Everett told Richard, stepping back against the wall to give the man some space. "You got ten minutes."

Richard stood at the foot of John's bed. He just stared, for a long time not saying anything.

John stared back, feeling relieved and ashamed at the same time. He wanted to reach out to his dad, to tell him he loved him and that he was sorry for all he had done and that Richard was right, John was worthless. He didn't deserve anything his dad could offer but he wanted it, he needed it so bad that his heart felt like it was on fire.

Richard spoke with some effort. "Are you in pain?"

John could only nod.

"Good," his father said, sounding as if some justice had been done. "Now you know how Mary Alice felt."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

OCTOBER 25, 2005

John didn't want to think about his first night in prison, but it kept coming back to him like a waking nightmare. Someone walked behind him at work and he would flinch. A loud noise from the street sent his heart into his throat. He would bend over to get the sponge out of the bucket, put some shine on the wheels of a truck or a sedan, and it would flood into his brain.

After Zebra had passed him around, John had spent a full month in the hospital wing at Coastal, learning how to shit again. When he got out, he found that he'd been transferred into the protective ward with all the serious sex offenders. Maybe they had thought Ben Carver would have a field day with John, finish the work that Zebra had started, but the older man had taken one look at the scrawny sixteen-year-old boy and said with great disappointment, "A brunette! I asked for a blonde!"

John didn't know who was responsible for transferring him into protective custody, but even if he did, John wouldn't know how to thank him. Sometimes he thought it was Everett, the guard, but then sometimes he would be lying in his bunk at night and let his mind play out this fantasy story where it was his dad who had rescued him. Richard stormed into the warden's office. Richard wrote an angry letter to his state senator. Richard demanded fair treatment for his son.

John laughed at his foolish boyhood dreams as he slid his card into the time clock, waiting for the loud chu-chunk as he signed himself out of the car wash for the day. The weather had been good for several weeks, and holiday shoppers had been out getting their cars washed. John hadn't had time to go to Ben's mother's house and pick up the car until yesterday afternoon. He had been working on his learner's permit when Mary Alice had died, but that was a long time ago and he had sweated like a whore in church at the prospect of getting behind the wheel. If he got caught in the car, Martha Lam would throw his ass back in jail. Of course, if he didn't use the car, he might end up back there anyway.

Over the telephone, Ben's elderly mother had been open and friendly, "pleased to talk to a friend of Ben's." When asked, she assured him that the insurance was paid on the car. Mrs. Carver had further explained to John that her Mr. Propson was taking her to a church social over in Warm Springs on Sunday, but could he please remember to return the car with a full tank of gas. John had agreed to everything, but she had kept him on the phone for another fifteen minutes to tell him about her sciatica. Both sets of John's grandparents had died while he was in prison, none of them ever bothering to visit. He had listened intently to her woes, making the right noises at the right times until the pedophile from across the hallway had glared at him and demanded to use the phone.

John had found the dark blue Ford Fairlane parked in the carport as promised. The key was tucked into the visor along with the title and insurance card. What mattered to John most at that moment was that it cranked on the first try. He put the car in gear and rolled into the street, his foot stuttering between the gas and the brake as he practiced up and down the one-lane road running outside Mrs. Carver's house. Praise Jesus it wasn't a manual transmission or he would have left the car where he found it. John had spent most of the afternoon figuring out how to drive the Fairlane and by the time he pulled out onto the two-lane highway his hands were hurting from clutching the wheel.

He could do it, he kept saying, teeth gritted as he drove down I-20 back toward Atlanta. All he needed to do was make sure he looked like he knew what he was doing. Not too slow, not too fast, confidence high, arm out the window. That's all the cops ever looked for: somebody who

looked guilty. Their little cop radar went up and they could feel indecision coming off you like a pulse.

John had told himself that he was getting in some more practice when he got into the Fairlane around midnight last night. He couldn't fool himself for long when the car ended up parked across the street from the liquor store on Cheshire Bridge Road. He waited for thirty minutes, but Robin obviously wasn't working. Driving back home, he figured if he'd had a tail it would've been hanging between his legs.

Since gas was another luxury he couldn't afford, John left the car wash on foot, walking up Piedmont, crossing the intersection to Cheshire Bridge. He pretended he was going for a stroll at first, but then decided self-delusion was as stupid as what he had planned for later that night. Ben had finally come through. John had gotten two postcards in the mail this week—the only mail he'd ever gotten at the boardinghouse. The first one was postmarked in Alabama and listed a series of numbers: 185430032. The second card was from Florida and read, *On our way to Piney Grove. See you when we get back!!!*

John hated puzzles, but he knew enough to go to the library and sit down with the atlas again. After a couple of hours of staring aimlessly out the window, he got it. 30032 was the zip code for Avondale Estates. 1854 Piney Grove Circle bordered Memorial Drive on the edge of Decatur.

"Hey, baby!"

The hookers were out at the liquor store, including the older woman John had rescued at the car wash. He should probably learn her name, but he knew it would only make him sad if he did. Giving her a name meant she had a family somewhere. She had been a kid at some point, gone to school, had hopes and dreams. And now ... nothing.

One of the women asked, "You wanna date?"

He shook his head, keeping his distance. "I'm looking for Robin."

"She's at the theater," the hooker said, jerking her chin toward the road. "*Star Wars* is playing. She figures the last time any'a them guys saw a pussy was when they was being born out of one."

The girls laughed good-naturedly at the joke.

"Thanks," John said, tossing them a wave before they could offer him more of their wares.

The theater was a pretty good distance from the liquor store, but John had time. He let himself concentrate on breathing the air, even the exhaust from the cars. You couldn't do this in prison. You had to find other ways to get lung cancer.

His hamstrings were aching by the time he reached the movie theater. *Star Wars*. He had seen that when he was a kid, probably six or seven times. Every weekend his mother had driven him and his friends to the theater, dropping them off and coming back a few hours later. This was before the drugs, before John was cool. He had loved that movie, relished the escape.

In prison, Ben had been in charge of everything they did and even as he grew older, John had kept it that way because it was easy. The bad part was that all of John's cultural knowledge was that of a man over thirty years his senior. He didn't know many movies or television shows from the last two decades. No one on his wing visited the main hall on movie night because they weren't stupid enough to mix with the general population. Doris Day, Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin—these were the singers always playing on the small transistor radio Emily had brought John his first Christmas inside. Music had been so important to him as a kid, the sound track to his disaffected life. Now, he couldn't have named a current popular song if someone had put a gun to his head.

John had already convinced himself that Robin wouldn't be at the theater so he was surprised when he nearly bumped into her turning the corner.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, looking pleased, he thought, then nervous.

"The girls told me you were here," he explained. He could see a line of young men snaking around the building. "Busy night?"

"Nah." She waved it off. "Stupid fuckers want to see the movie first. I guess I'll come back later."

"How long's the movie?"

"Jesus, I don't know." She started walking back toward the liquor store and he followed her. She turned around, demanding, "What are you doing?"

"I thought I'd walk you back."

"Lookit," she said. "This ain't no *Pretty Woman*." She added, "And you sure as shit ain't Richard Gere."

John had no idea what she was talking about. The only Richard Gere movie they'd watched in

prison was *Sommersby*, and that was only because it had a kid in it.

She clarified, "We're not going to fall in love and get married and have babies, okay?"

John hadn't thought about it, but maybe that had been his plan.

He told her, "I just wanted to let you know that I'm not going to see you anymore."

"You've only seen me once, you stupid fuck."

"I know," he said. When she started to walk away again, he followed her. "Please stop," he said. "Listen to me."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "All right. Go."

"I've just ..." God, now that she was listening, he didn't know what to say. "I've been thinking about you," he said. "Not in a sexual way." His face must have shown otherwise because she rolled her eyes. "Okay, maybe sex," he admitted.

"Unless you're here to pay me for your happy junior-jerk, I gotta get back to my drag."

"It's not like that," he said. "Please."

She started walking again and John got in front of her, walking backward because he knew she wouldn't stop.

"I'm mixed up in something," he said.

"Color me shocked."

"I was in prison."

"Am I supposed to be surprised?"

"Please," John said. He stopped walking and she did, too. "I don't want to be mixed up in this, but I am. I have to do something about it. I don't want to go back to prison."

"Somebody blackmailing you?"

He thought about it. "Maybe," he said. "I don't know."

"Go to the cops."

He knew she wasn't being serious. "I just wanted to see you again, to let you know that I couldn't see you anymore. After this, I mean." He paused, trying to make sense. "I don't want you mixed up in it, is what I'm saying. This guy, he's bad. He's really bad, and I don't want you to get hurt."

"You're scaring me here," she said, her bored tone belying the statement. "Who's trying to hurt me?"

"Nobody," John said. "He doesn't even know you exist." He rubbed his face with his hands, letting out something like a groan. "This doesn't mean anything to you," he said. "I'm sorry I bothered you with this. I just wanted to see you one last time."

"Why?"

"Because of what you told me about your first kiss. I just ..." He tried a smile. "I was a real loser in school. Girls didn't really want to have anything to do with me."

"I got a news flash, junior. They still don't." Her words were sharp but her tone told him she was teasing.

He said, "I went to jail real early. I was up for twenty years."

"Am I supposed to feel sorry for you?"

He shook his head. He had stopped expecting people to feel sorry for him a long time ago. "I want to thank you for telling me that story about Stewie and all. I've been thinking about it a lot, and it's a really nice story."

She chewed her bottom lip, her eyes searching his. "All right. You told me."

"And I ..." His voice trailed off. He'd rehearsed this a hundred times at work, but now nothing was coming to him.

"You what?" she prompted. "You wanna fuck me?"

"Yeah." He couldn't lie. "Yeah, I really do."

"Well, shit, you could've saved me some fucking time just saying that to begin with." She started back up the road, saying, "It's ten for the room, thirty for a half-and-half. No Greek, no hitting or I'll rip your fucking cock off."

She was about ten feet away before she realized he wasn't following her. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"Thank you," he repeated. Then, "Good-bye."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"Look at me," his mother had said, leaning over the table in the visitors' room. It was her first time seeing him since he'd gotten to Coastal, and neither one of them said anything about Zebra, the hospital, the fact that John was having to sit on an inflatable cushion just to talk to her.

"You will *not* waste away in here," she told him. "You *will* do something with your life."

He sat there crying, big tears rolling down his cheeks, his chest shaking as he tried to keep in the sobs.

"You aren't a boy anymore, John. You are a strong man. You will survive this. You will get out of here eventually."

Emily still had hope for the appeals. She believed in the justice system, didn't think the founding fathers had designed this sort of treatment for a sixteen-year-old boy.

"I got you these," she said, indicating the textbooks she'd brought in with her. Math and science, his two favorite subjects back when he actually enjoyed school.

She told him, "You can still get your GED."

John stared blankly. He was wearing a diaper to catch the pus coming out of his ass and his mother was worried about him graduating from high school.

She said, "You'll need it to get into college when you get out."

Education. Emily had always insisted that education was the only thing that truly enriched your life. As far back as he could remember, his mother had always had a book she was reading, some article she'd clipped from the paper or a magazine that she found interesting and wanted to remember.

"Are you listening to me, Jonathan?"

He couldn't even nod.

"You'll get your GED, and then you'll go to college, okay?" She took his hand in hers. His wrists were still bruised where the men had held him down. One of the guards stepped forward, but didn't break them apart.

"You will not give up in here," she told John, her grip tight, as if she could force some of her strength into him, take the pain away and carry it herself. She had always said that she would rather suffer herself than see her children hurt, and John saw for the first time that it was true. If Emily could, she would trade places with him right now. And he would let her.

"Do you understand me, Jonathan? You will not give up in here."

He hadn't spoken to anyone in four and a half weeks. The taste of his own shit and other men's come was still stuck to the back of his throat like molasses. He was scared to open his mouth, scared his mother would smell it on him and know what he had done.

"Tell me, John," she had said. "Tell me you will do this for me."

His lips were stuck together, chapped, bleeding. He kept his teeth clamped tight, stared at his hands. "Yes."

Two weeks later, she asked him if he had been studying. He lied to her, said he had. John was celled up with Ben by then, not sleeping at night because he was terrified the older man was biding his time, playing out some game as he waited for the right moment to make his move.

"Sweetheart," Ben had finally said. "You flatter yourself if you think you're my type."

In retrospect, John was his type: young, dark hair, slim build, straight. Ben had never crossed that line, though, and there were only two times that John had seen him truly angry. The most recent was when the planes had been crashed into the Pentagon and World Trade towers. For days after, Ben had been too livid to speak. The first time he showed his anger was years before, when he had caught John with drugs.

"You will not do this, boy," Ben had ordered, his hand gripped so tightly around John's wrist that the bones felt ready to break. "You hear me?"

John looked into his eyes, knew that the last man who had seen Ben Carver this angry had ended up floating naked and facedown in a shallow pond outside an abandoned church.

"I will turn them loose on you, son. Like a pack of jackals. Do you understand me?"

The protective custody wing had ten cells with two men each. Six of them were pedophiles. Two liked girls, four were stalkers of young boys. At night, John could hear them jerking off, whispering his name as they moaned their release.

"Yes, sir," John had answered. "I promise."

The rest of the offenders in the wing were like Ben. They preyed on adults on the outside, so John felt fairly safe around them. But sex was sex, and on the inside, you took fresh ass where you could get it. He had found out later from Ben that all of them had at separate times offered various trades for a go at the new boy. Prison etiquette dictated that as cellmates, Ben had first dibs. As time wore on and Ben didn't take his due, some of the guys got twitchy; but every last one of them, from the baby-rapers to the child-killers, was afraid of Ben. They thought he was a sick bastard.

Those first few years in lockup, John blocked off every day in his calendar with a big X, counting down until he was released. Aunt Lydia was working on his case, trying to find every angle she could exploit to get him out. Appeal after appeal was rejected. Then, Aunt Lydia came one day with Emily and they both told him that the Georgia Supreme Court had refused to hear his case. Lydia had been his champion, the only other person aside from his mother who had insisted he fight it out in court and not take the plea the state offered.

Her expression said it all. It was the end of the line. There were no other options.

The state plea had been fifteen years no parole. Lydia had told him not to take it, that she would fight for his innocence with every bone in her body. Now he was looking at twenty-two to life.

Aunt Lydia shook with sobs. John ended up being the one to comfort her, trying to soothe her with his words, absolve her from the guilt she felt for not saving him.

"It's okay," he told Lydia. "You did your best. Thank you for doing your best."

When John got back to his cell, he started reading his latest issue of *Popular Mechanics*. He didn't cry. What was the use? Show his emotions so some murdering child rapist in the next cell could get off on his pain? No. John had toughened up by then. Ben had shown him the ropes, how to make it in prison without getting knifed or beaten to death. He kept to himself, never looked anyone in the eye and seldom spoke to anyone but Ben.

What John found out in prison was that he was smart. He didn't come to the realization out of vanity. It was more like an epitaph, a sort of eulogy to the person he could have been. He understood complex formulas, mathematical equations. He liked to study. Sometimes, he could almost feel his brain growing inside of his head, and when he solved a problem, figured out a particularly difficult diagram, he felt like he'd won a marathon.

And then the depression would set in. His father had been right. His teachers were right. His pastor was right. He should have applied himself. He should have—could have—put his brain to work and *done* something with his life. Now, what did he have? Who cared if you were the smartest convicted murderer in prison?

Some nights, John would lie awake in bed thinking about his father, how disgusted Richard had been that one time he'd visited his son. John was learning other things about life while he was incarcerated. As bad as Richard was, he had never hurt John the way some of his fellow inmates had been hurt. His father may have been thoughtless, but he wasn't cruel. He had never tortured him. He had never beaten him so badly that a lung collapsed. He had never put a gun to his son's head and told him to choose between letting some old bastard suck him off so daddy could have a bag of dope or getting a bullet in his brain.

Years passed, and John saw that he had adapted. He could take prison. His days were long and drawn out before him, but he had learned the patience, had built the capacity, to do hard time. The possibility for parole came up for him his tenth year in, and then again every two years after. He was a week away from his sixth parole board hearing and a year and a half away from completing his twenty-two-year sentence when Richard visited his son for the second and last time in prison.

John had been expecting Emily in the visitors' room, and he'd been staring at the metal detector, waiting to see her come through, when Richard had blocked his view.

“Dad?”

Richard’s lip curled in distaste at the word.

John had barely recognized him. Richard’s hair was a shock of white, still thick and full, a sharp contrast to his well-tanned face. As always, his body was fit. Richard saw obesity as a sign of laziness and he was a health nut long before it became a national obsession.

Emily had divorced Richard a year after John’s conviction, but the two had stopped living together under the same roof the day John was arrested. Richard did not go to the trial, did not pay a dime for his son’s defense, refused to testify on his behalf.

“You’ve finally done it,” Richard said, not sitting at the table but looming over John, his disapproval and disgust raining down like a summer shower. “Your mother has end-stage breast cancer. You’ve finally killed her, too.”

A week later, John sat in front of the parole board, looking them each in the eye in turn, telling them how he had finally come to realize that he had no one to blame for his incarceration but himself. He had hated Mary Alice Finney. He was jealous of her popularity, of her friends, her status. He had been a drug addict, but that was not an excuse. The coke had only lowered his inhibitions, his ability to judge between right and wrong. He had followed her home the night of the party. He had broken into her bedroom and brutally raped her. When he started to come down from the coke, he realized what he had done and murdered her in cold blood, mutilating her body to make it seem as if a psychotic stranger had killed her.

His record was remarkably clean. John had been a model inmate with only two infractions on his record, both over a decade old. He had attended every class the prison offered: Victim Impact, Family Violence, Corrective Thinking, Depression Group, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Life Issues, Communication Skills, Anger Management, Focus Group and Worry Control. He had finished his GED, completed a bachelor’s degree and was in the middle of completing a postsecondary degree when an amendment to the 1994 Crime Bill banned federal education grants to prisoners. John volunteered at the prison hospital where he taught CPR and basic hygiene to the other inmates. He had attended on-the-job training sessions in horticulture and food preparation. A letter penned by John and attached to his file stated that his mother was sick, and he just wanted to go home and be there for her the way she had been there for him all these years.

The official notice granting him parole came on July 22, 2005.

Emily had died two days earlier.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

JANUARY 6, 2006

Cousin Woody. The cool one, the popular one. He had a weight machine in the garage and he spent most of his days working out and smoking dope. His chest was ripped, six-pack abs separated by a trail of hair leading down to his privates. Girls climbed all over him like kudzu up a pine. He drove a silver Mustang hatchback, brand-new. He got the kids at the local school to sell some of his stash for him so he always had money burning a hole in his pocket. His widowed mother was on the fast-track at her law firm, always working late nights, always leaving her son alone. Mr. "Come Upstairs," Mr. "You Wanna Toke?" Mr. "Just Snort It Up Your Nose."

Cool Cousin Woody.

John had been following Woody for almost two months now, parking the Fairlane at the Inman Park MARTA station because gas was too expensive to use the car for anything but business. That's how John thought about it: business. He was the CEO of Keep John Out of Prison. The fucking chief financial officer, the vice president, the secretary, all rolled up into one.

From the beginning, Woody had made it easy for John to keep tabs on him. He had always been a creature of habit, and his adult life had proven no different. John could set his watch by the guy. He went to work every day, came straight home after, kissed the wife if she was home, tucked in the kid, then planted himself in front of the television for the rest of the evening. He did this every evening the first week, and John was beginning to think he was wasting his time when Sunday rolled around. The kid wasn't there—the wife hadn't brought him back from church and John assumed he had been left with a family member. The wife left around six, dressed for work, leaving her husband all alone in the house.

Woody waited about thirty minutes after she was gone, then he got into his car and drove away. Weeks passed with him doing this, then a month, then another. Every Sunday night, Woody was in that car like clockwork.

With time, John had gotten good at keeping his distance, making sure Woody couldn't see the Fairlane trolling along behind his car. Not that Woody seemed to be looking anywhere except toward the row of women who lined the streets of downtown Atlanta. He'd stop, wave one over, then drive her into an alley or park on an empty street. John would see the woman's head go down for a few minutes, then it'd bob back up for good and she'd get out and Woody would move on down the road, have himself back in front of the TV an hour later.

Then one night, he'd changed the pattern. He took a left out of his street instead of a right, heading east up Highway 78. John had been forced to hang back farther than usual because there weren't many cars on the road. He'd jerked the steering wheel hard at the last moment to take an exit, following Woody up a winding road for about twenty minutes, passing a sign that read, *Welcome to Snellville ... Where Everybody's Somebody!*

John had parked the car on a residential street, going on foot because that's what Woody was doing. It was cold out, the first week of December, but John was sweating bad because he was smack in the middle of a neighborhood, sleeping kids packed into every house around him. He got so caught up in his fear that he lost sight of his target. He scanned the empty streets, walking down dead-ends, getting so turned around that he couldn't even find the Fairlane.

John was worrying about his own safety now. He hid in the shadows, tensed at every noise, certain some cop would pull up, run his record and wonder what brought a pedophile to this neck of the woods.

Suddenly, in the distance, he saw a man walking with a little girl beside him. Both of them got

into Woody's car and drove off. John found the Fairlane five minutes later, cursing himself the whole way back to Atlanta. The next two weeks, he scanned the papers, looking for news of something bad happening in Snellville—an abducted child, a murder. There was nothing, but he knew it was just a matter of time.

The truth was simple: Woody was using John's identity for a reason. He was trying to cover his tracks. John had spent enough time surrounded by criminals to know when he was seeing one in action. It was just a matter of time before whatever Woody was up to landed squarely back on John's shoulders.

John decided then and there that he would kill himself, or find someone else to do it for him, before he would go back into prison. He had already lost twenty years of his life rotting away among pedophiles and monsters. He would not go back to that. He would not put Joyce through that pain and humiliation again. He had been strong on the inside, his will hardened steel, but the outside had made him soft and he knew that he could not take the loss of what little life he had carved for himself. He would put a bullet in his own brain before he did that.

John saw his sister around this time. Just before Christmas, Joyce had called him at the boardinghouse and he had been so surprised to hear her voice that he thought maybe someone was playing a joke on him. Only, who would play a joke? He didn't know anybody, didn't have any friends on the outside.

They met for coffee at a fancy café off of Monroe Drive. John had worn a new shirt and his only good pants, the chinos Joyce had sent to him so he would have something to wear when he left Coastal. The custom was to just give the inmate back the clothes he'd come in with, but John was several sizes larger than that scrawny kid who'd ridden the prison transport down to Savannah.

The night before, he had taken off work early so he could go to the gift shop down the street. John had spent an hour picking out a Christmas card for Joyce, going back and forth between the cheap ones and the nice ones. The weather had made business at the Gorilla sporadic. Art was laying off guys left and right. John had saved as much money as he could during the flush times, but he had finally had to get a winter coat. Even though he told himself he was never going to wear used clothes again, John had no choice but to go to the Goodwill Store. The only coat he could find that halfway fit him was torn at the collar and had a funky smell to it that he couldn't wash out at the Laundromat. It was warm, though, and that was all that mattered.

Joyce was five minutes late to the café, and John was sweating it out over the fact that he'd had to pay three dollars for a cup of coffee just to be able to sit at one of the tables when she rushed in. She looked harried, her sunglasses pushed onto the top of her head, her long brown hair down around her shoulders.

"Sorry I'm late," she said, pulling out a chair and sitting across from him. She left about six inches between her and the table, even more space between her and John.

"You want some coffee?" He started to stand to get it for her but she stopped him with a terse shake of her head.

"I've got to meet some friends in ten minutes." She hadn't even taken off her coat. "I don't know why I called you."

"I'm glad you did."

She looked out the windows. There was a movie theater across the way and she was watching the people who were standing in line.

John pulled the Christmas card out of his pocket, glad he had gone for the more expensive one. Three sixty-eight, but it had glitter on the outside and the inside was folded so that when you opened it, a snowflake popped up. Joyce had loved pop-up books when they were little. He could remember her giggling over one that had farm animals jumping off the pages.

He held out the card. "I got you this."

She didn't take it, so he set it on the table, slid it toward her. He had spent most of last night testing out his thoughts on notebook paper, not wanting to give her a card with words scratched out or worse, to write something stupid that would ruin the card and make him have to buy a new one. In the end, he had simply signed it, "love, John," knowing there was nothing else he could say.

He asked, "What have you been up to?"

She focused back on him as if she had forgotten he was there. "Work."

"Yeah." He nodded. "Me, too." He tried to make a joke of it. "Not like what you do, but somebody has to clean those cars."

She obviously didn't think he was funny.

He stared at his cup, rolling it in his hands. Joyce was the one who had called him, inviting him to this place where he couldn't even afford a sandwich off the menu, yet he felt like the bad guy.

Maybe he *was* the bad guy.

He asked her, "Do you remember Woody?"

"Who?"

"Cousin Woody, Lydia's son."

She shrugged, but said, "Yeah."

"Do you know what he's up to?"

"Last I heard, he joined the army or something." Her eyes flashed. "You're not going to try to get in touch with him again?"

"No."

She leaned forward, urgent. "You shouldn't, John. He was bad news then and I'm sure he hasn't changed now."

"I won't," he said.

"You'll end up back in jail."

Would she care? he wondered. Would it be better for her if he was back at Coastal instead of living right under her nose? Joyce was the only living person in the entire world who remembered John the way he used to be. She was like a precious box where all his childhood memories were stored, only she had thrown away the key the minute the police had dragged him out the front door.

Joyce sat back in her chair. She looked at her watch. "I really should go."

"Yeah," he said. "Your friends are waiting."

She met his eyes for the first time since she'd walked in. She saw he knew she was lying.

Her tongue darted out and she licked her lips. "I went to see Mom last weekend."

John blinked back sudden tears. In his mind, he saw the cemetery, pictured Joyce standing at his mother's grave. The buses didn't go out there and a cab would cost sixty dollars. John didn't even know what his mother's headstone looked like, what inscription Joyce had decided on.

"That's why I called you," she told John. "She would've wanted me to see you." She shrugged. "Christmas."

He bit his lip, knowing if he opened his mouth he would start crying.

"She always believed in you," Joyce said. "She never once thought you were guilty."

His chest ached from the effort of reining in his emotions.

"You ruined everything," Joyce told him, almost incredulous. "You ruined our lives, but she wouldn't give up on you."

People were looking, but John didn't care. He had apologized to her for years—in letters, in person. Sorry didn't mean anything to Joyce.

"I can't blame you for hating me," he told her, wiping a tear with the back of his hand. "You have every right."

"I wish I could hate you," she whispered. "I wish it was that easy."

"I would hate you if you had done ..."

"Done what?" She was leaning over the table again, an edge of desperation in her voice. "Done what, John? I read what you said to the parole board. I know what you told them. Tell *me*." She slapped her hand on the table. "Tell *me* what happened."

He pulled a napkin from the container on the table and blew his nose.

She wouldn't let up. "Every time you were up in front of the board, every time you spoke to them, you told them you weren't guilty, that you wouldn't say that you had done it just so you could get out."

He took another napkin so he'd have something to do with his hands.

"What changed, John? Was it Mom? You didn't want to disappoint her? Is that what it is, John? Now that Mom's gone, you could finally tell the truth?"

"She wasn't gone when I said it."

"She was wasting away," Joyce hissed. "She was in that hospital bed wasting away and all she could think about was you. 'Look after Johnny,' she kept saying. 'Don't let him be alone in there. We're all he has.'"

John heard himself sob, a bark like a seal that echoed in the restaurant.

"Tell me, John. Just tell me the truth." Her voice was quiet. Like their father, she didn't like to

show her feelings. The more upset she got, the lower her tone tended to be.

"Joyce—"

She put her hand on his. She had never touched him before, and he could feel her desperation flowing through her fingertips and needling under his skin. "I don't care anymore," she said, more like a plea. "I don't care if you did it, Johnny. I really don't. I just want to know for myself, for my own sanity. Please—tell me the truth."

Her hands were beautiful, so delicate, with such long fingers. Just like Emily's.

"John, please."

"I love you, Joyce." He reached into his back pocket and took out a folded piece of paper. "Something is going to happen," he said. "Something bad that I don't think I can stop."

She took her hand away, moved back in her chair. "What are you talking about, John? What have you gotten mixed up in?"

"Take this," he said, putting the credit report on top of the Christmas card. "Just take this and know that whatever happens, I love you."

John hadn't brought the Fairlane with him, but he didn't want Joyce to see him waiting at the bus stop outside the entrance to the mall so he jogged up the street toward Virginia-Highland, catching MARTA there. He didn't want to go home, couldn't face his roach-infested hovel or his fellow rapists in the hallway, so he went to the Inman Park station and picked up the Fairlane.

He didn't normally follow Woody until the evenings on the weekend. John's first two weeks of reconnaissance had proven the guy pretty much stayed inside unless his wife made him take out the trash. John had been thinking, though, that maybe Woody was more clever than he seemed. Maybe he had another car somewhere. It wasn't much of a stretch, considering the post office box and the credit cards. Maybe John Shelley had purchased a car during the last six years.

This close to Christmas, Woody's neighborhood was decked out with colorful lights and decorations. Luminaries made of old milk jugs lined the street. Just the week before, John had watched an old lady walking her dog go around and light each one.

It was a nice neighborhood.

John tucked his car between an SUV and a station wagon parked in the church lot, glancing at the times on the sign outside to check when the services were over. Woody's wife always took the kid to church on Sundays, then spent most of the time with a woman who was probably her mother.

From the church, John walked down a side street that ran parallel to Woody's house, whistling as if he was just a guy taking a walk. He plotted the distance in his head, cutting across a field until he could see what had to be the back of Woody's house. There weren't many trees for cover and John felt exposed. Anybody could come out their back door and see him. He was about to turn around when that very thing happened. A woman came out, standing in the open doorway. John froze because he was right in her line of sight, but she wasn't looking at him. She was turned toward Woody's house next door, her hand held up in a salute as she shielded her eyes from the sun.

John dropped flat to his stomach. The girl's backyard was overgrown with weeds, but anybody who was looking could have seen him lying there. Thankfully, her eyes were following something more interesting. John saw Woody walk across his yard, hopping over a chain-link fence that had been taken down by a tree. He went right to the girl, not even tossing a look in John's direction, picked her up and started kissing her.

John watched as she wrapped her skinny legs around him, their lips locked together as Woody carried her into the house and slammed the door closed.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

JUNE 15, 1985

John waited all night for Mary Alice to show at the party, smoking enough pot to make his lungs ache in his chest. Woody kept catching his eye, giving him the thumbs-up like he was cheering him on. John could have kicked himself for telling his cousin that he'd invited a girl to the party. It was bad enough Mary Alice wasn't here, but looking like an idiot in front of Woody made it a million times worse.

John had already given up hope when around midnight, she walked through the front door. The first thing he noticed was how out of place she looked in her freshly ironed Jordache jeans and high-collared white shirt. She looked beautiful, but everybody else was dressed in varying degrees of black: filthy jeans, stained heavy metal T-shirts, greasy hair.

She was about to turn right around and leave when he grabbed her arm.

"Hey!" She sounded surprised and giddy and wary all rolled into one.

"You look nice," he told her, raising his voice over Poison blaring from the stereo.

"I should go," she said, but she didn't make to leave.

"Come have something to drink."

He could see her thinking it out, wondering what he meant by drink, wondering if she should trust him.

"Woody has soft drinks in the kitchen," he said, thinking he'd never used the words "soft drink" in his life. "Let's go."

She still hesitated, but when John stepped aside so he could walk behind her to the kitchen, blocking her exit, she finally relented.

He saw Woody as they passed the stairs. His cousin was leaning against the banister, his pupils blown, a lazy smile on his face. One of the girls from the only black family in the neighborhood was stuck to him like Velcro, her arms wrapped around his neck, leg snaked around his. They kissed long and deep while John watched. She was gorgeous, with creamy dark skin and exotically braided hair. Leave it to Woody to score with the best-looking girl at the party.

He gave John the thumbs-up again, but this time he wasn't smiling.

The kitchen was filled with smoke and Mary Alice coughed, waving her hand in front of her face. In the corner, a couple was making out, and John found himself stopping to stare because the guy had his hand right down the front of the girl's jeans.

"Cool party," another guy said, bumping into John. His drink spilled over John's hand, and he apologized, passing John the half-full plastic cup as a peace offering. John had already had more than enough alcohol that night, but he took a large gulp from the cup, the liquid burning his throat as it went down.

When John looked around for Mary Alice, she was already heading out the back door.

"Hey," John said, chasing after her.

She stood by a tall oak, looking up at the stars. Her hair was messed up and she looked nervous. Maybe he could hold her hand. Maybe he could kiss her.

She laughed for no reason. "I couldn't breathe in there."

"Sorry."

She saw the cup in his hand. "Give me that."

"I don't know what's in it," he said. "You'd better not."

"You're not my father," she said, taking the drink from him. She kept her eyes on his as she took a healthy swallow of the dark liquid. "Tastes like Coke and something else."

He hoped to God it wasn't something else. Woody was nineteen years old and all of his buddies were a couple of years older than that. Some of them were into hard drugs, stuff John didn't even want to know about. There was no telling what was floating around.

John said, "Sorry about this. I didn't think it would be that wild here."

She took another swig from the cup and gave him a sloppy smile. God, she was so pretty. He had been hating her so long that he'd forgotten she was gorgeous.

She lifted the cup again and he stopped her. "You're going to get sick." He was actually thinking that even if she puked, he would still kiss her.

"Are you stoned?"

"No," he lied. He was so nervous he would have smoked a goat's ass if he thought it'd help calm him down.

She took another swallow and he didn't try to stop her. "I want to get stoned."

He would have been less shocked if she'd said she wanted to fly to the moon. "Mary Alice, come on. Take it easy on that stuff. You don't want to make yourself sick."

"It's good enough for you," she said, draining the cup. She turned it upside down to show him it was empty. "I want another one."

"Let's just stay out here for a while."

"Why?" she asked. She was swaying a little and he reached out to steady her. "I thought you hated me."

He could smell her perfume and the hairspray in her hair. Her skin felt hot under his hand. He could hold her, just pull her into his arms and hold her all night. "I don't hate you."

"You say nasty things to me all the time."

"I don't," he said with such conviction that he almost believed himself.

She pulled away from him. "My parents think I'm at home."

"Mine, too."

"Did you get suspended from school?"

"No."

"They should suspend you," she said. "My dad says you're a total loser."

"Yeah," he said, wishing she hadn't finished the drink. "My dad, too."

She said, "He moved out of the house tonight."

"Your dad?"

"He just packed his bags and left while I was at the mall. My mom said he was moving in with that woman from work." She hiccupped softly. "She wouldn't stop crying."

Mary Alice was crying, too, but he was still at a loss as to how to comfort her. Finally, he said, "I'm sorry."

"I called him at the number he left," she told John. "Some girl answered."

John's tongue wouldn't move in his mouth. What should he say?

"He said he'd see me on the weekends. He says Mindy will take me shopping."

John repeated, "I'm sorry."

"Why do you hang around with that jerk?" Mary Alice asked.

"Who?" John turned around, following her gaze to Woody. His cousin practically fell off the back stairs as he walked toward them. He laughed at his lack of coordination, so John laughed, too.

"Wet your whistle," Woody said, handing John another drink.

John took a sip, trying to pace himself because his head was already swimming.

"Hey, girlie," Woody said, leaning against John as he stared at Mary Alice. "What took you so long? I was beginning to think my cousin here made you up."

John started to make introductions, but something stopped him. He didn't like the way Woody was looking at her, the open lust in his eyes. The guy already had Alicia back in the house ready to do whatever he wanted and now he was going after Mary Alice. It wasn't fair.

"We were just going," John said, taking Mary Alice's hand as if she belonged to him.

"So soon?" Woody asked, and John realized he was blocking their way. "Come on back inside with your old cousin Wood. I got something for you."

"I don't think so." John threw the empty cup into the yard. "I should take her home. Her mom will be looking for her."

"Just a little hit," Woody insisted. "Or another, I guess I should say." He winked at Mary Alice.

"Think you can handle a drink, sweetheart? Might help dry those pretty blue eyes of yours."

Mary Alice looked odd. She was smiling, almost flirting. "I wasn't crying."

"Sure, babydoll."

"Woody," John began, but Woody put his hand over John's mouth to stop him, telling Mary Alice, "This one likes to talk too much."

She laughed, and John felt his anger spark up. She was laughing with Woody. She was laughing at *him*.

Woody asked, "You think you can handle a little drink, little girl?"

Her lips went into this sexy kind of half-smile. "I can handle it."

"Mary Alice," John said.

Woody had taken away his hand and wrapped his arm around Mary Alice's shoulders. He licked his lips as he looked down her shirt, telling John, "Shut up, Cousin."

Mary Alice laughed. "Yeah, John, shut up."

Woody pulled her closer in and she tilted up her head. He kept his eyes locked on John's as he pressed his open mouth to Mary Alice's.

She started to kiss him back and John felt like somebody had ripped his heart out of his chest. He stood helpless as Woody's hand went down Mary Alice's blouse, cupped her breast like groping her was something he did every day. His mouth got wider against Mary Alice's and she jerked away, coming to her senses a second later than she should have.

She yelled, "Stop it!" as she tumbled toward John.

John caught her, holding her up. The button had ripped off her shirt where Woody's hand had reached inside.

"You're disgusting," she told Woody, claspings the blouse closed, tears springing into her eyes.

Woody was smiling. "Come on, baby. Don't be like that."

"I can't believe you," she cried. "Your tongue is disgusting."

His smile became more sinister. "Watch it now."

She curled in closer to John, crying, "Please, take me home."

John started to lead her away, his eyes on Woody, not liking the way his cousin was staring at them.

"Get back here," Woody ordered, reaching out for her again.

"Leave her alone!" John yelled, fists clenched. Woody had about a hundred pounds on him but John firmly believed he could and would kick his ass if he so much as touched another hair on Mary Alice's head.

"Whoa." Woody held up his hands, taking a step back. "Didn't know you'd already claimed her, little man. Go on. Take her home to her mommy."

"Stay away from her," John warned. "I mean it."

"No hard feelings," Woody said, but he was still leering at Mary Alice like a lion who had been denied its prey. "Best man wins."

"Damn straight."

"Here," Woody said, digging into his front pocket. "Parting gift." He tossed a bag of powder to John. "No hard feelings, right, Cousin?"

CHAPTER NINETEEN

FEBRUARY 6, 2006

John had found out about the news story by accident. He had been vacuuming out the cargo space of a mud-splattered Subaru Forrester. He picked up a stack of newspapers to throw in the trash and the whole pile fell from his hand like playing cards scattered on a table. He bent down to gather up the pages and saw two words he had never noticed before: Local Edition.

The Subaru's owner was from Clayton County, but John knew if there was a special insert for one town, there had to be one for the others.

He had told Art he was having stomach problems so he could leave work early and headed straight downtown to the main branch of the Fulton County Public Library. The newspaper's online archive required a credit card for access, so instead he requested microfiche of the Gwinnett County local editions going back the last three months. Two hours later, he'd found what he was looking for. The story was dated December 4, 2005.

SNELLVILLE GIRL ABDUCTED FROM LOCAL NEIGHBORHOOD.

There weren't many details. No name was mentioned, just the age—fourteen—and that she had been walking from her home to visit an aunt down the street. Obviously, the family wasn't talking to the press and there was no mention of suspects or leads the police were following. John scanned the next few weeks and found only one more story. This one added the detail that the girl had been found hiding in a ditch the next day.

John's heart had been in his throat from the moment he'd found the article. Slowly, he put the pieces of the puzzle together. Ben's game of what-if kept coming back to mind. What if Woody had been using John's identity to cover his tracks for the last six years? What if Woody had assumed John would never get out of prison? What if Woody found out John was walking among the free and had decided to do something about it?

The car behind beeped its horn and John sped up, taking the first side street he came to and pulling up behind a parked cable truck. His heart was pounding so hard that he felt dizzy. Vomit swirled in the back of his throat, threatening to come up in a hot rush of panic and fear.

He put his head on the steering wheel, playing out the night before. Sunday. Super Bowl Sunday. The fucking Falcons were playing that night and John didn't want to watch it on TV, didn't want to hear the game on the radio. He wanted to see what Woody was doing, wanted to watch him like he could stop what had happened from happening again. And again.

The wife had gone to work and Woody had waited thirty minutes before heading out. He had taken his usual route into Atlanta, but this time he'd turned into Grady Homes. John had followed him, so tense he'd forgotten to keep back, a couple of times thinking for sure Woody had seen him, that he'd been caught.

A white guy driving a dark blue Ford Fairlane through the projects on a late Sunday afternoon was too conspicuous, but John had followed him in anyway. When Woody had stopped in front of a row of hookers, John had driven past him, thinking he'd be better served keeping an eye on his cousin in the rearview mirror. Nothing ever worked out as planned, though, and when Woody drove with the hooker to the back of the complex, John got out of his car and followed on foot.

Now, John broke into a cold sweat when he thought about what had happened next, what he

had seen. He could still hear it, those piercing screams, the primal fight for life.

John got out of the car, nodding to the guy in the cable truck. Casual. Cool. He belonged here.

He tucked his hands into his pockets as he walked down Woody's tree-lined street, trying to convey the image that he was just a normal guy going for a stroll, even though having his hands in his pockets made him uncomfortable; they didn't allow pockets in prison.

The woman John guessed was the grandmother took the kid to school Monday mornings. She did some shopping after, sometimes had coffee with her friends. She stayed out of the house for at least an hour and that was all John needed.

He took the same route behind the houses, head up, whistling like he didn't have a care in the world. He trudged through the backyards, keeping a careful eye on the houses, figuring that in a working-class neighborhood like this most people were either at work or too busy to look out their back windows.

The chain-link fence was still broken. John hopped over it, heading straight for the back door as he slipped on a pair of latex gloves he had stolen from the guys in the detail shop. Woody didn't have a dog, but there was a dog door cut into the bottom panel of the back door. John was too big to fit through, but he reached his arm in, feeling blindly for the lock. His fingers grazed the knob and he twisted the catch.

He stood back up, looking around to make sure he wasn't being watched, then opened the door. John tensed as he waited for an alarm to go off. He wasn't an experienced burglar, but he assumed Woody was too arrogant to spend money on an alarm system.

He was a cop, for Chrissakes.

John bypassed the kitchen and went straight to the family room. He went to the desk in the corner, ignoring the big-screen TV, the digital equipment lying around the house that screamed out that Woody made a good living, that he could afford to buy an expensive pair of shoes or a nice meal whenever he wanted. Hell, he could afford a lot of things, couldn't he? Two identities, to begin with. What else was he up to?

Woody was too smart to leave anything incriminating in the obvious places. His checkbook with the joint account he shared with his wife was right out in the open, their bills stacked neatly in an in-tray. They owed a lot, but they made what to John seemed like a fortune. Thousands of dollars a month in and out, a brand-new car for the wife, expensive school for the kid. It was almost too much to grasp.

In the garage, there was every tool you could imagine, though from what John had observed, Woody spent most of his time holding down the couch. There was a kid who came sometimes to mow the yard, so why Woody needed an enormous riding lawn mower with a freaking cup holder was a mystery. What angered John the most was the pool table in the middle of the garage. The thought of Woody out here with his kid, maybe some neighbors or the guys from work, drinking beers and playing pool made John more livid than anything else he had found.

John went through the drawers of the workbench, careful not to move anything out of place. He found a stack of porn mags under the tray in the toolbox, all the headlines promising "barely legal action" and "cum shots galore." He flipped through the pages one by one, looking for clues, trying not to stare at the young girls—children, some of them—spread out for the world to see. Maybe something inside of John had been turned off in prison, but all he could think about when he saw their soulless gazes was Joyce, and how insecure and vulnerable she had been at that age. He put the magazines back under the tray, wishing he hadn't seen them.

Woody's bedroom was next, a huge master suite with a king-sized bed where the fucker probably made love to his wife every night. The bathroom was enormous, bigger than John's room back at the hovel. Even the kid's room was large, a racecar for a bed, toys spilling out of the chest under the window. John felt odd being in the kid's room. The little bed would be changed for a big one soon. The kid would start growing up, wanting his privacy more. He'd go to school, meet a girl, take her to the prom. It was just too depressing to be in there, so John backed into the hall again.

He returned to the master bedroom, certain he had missed something. He tried to think like his parole officer, Ms. Lam, looking for contraband. He checked under the mattress, felt the pillows for hard lumps. He went through the shoes in the closet and the shirts in the drawer.

Shirts. All designer labels. Soft cottons, some silk. Woody's underwear was Calvin Klein, his pajamas Nautica.

"Christ," John whispered, so caught up in hating Woody that he couldn't breathe. "Think," he said, like that would make it happen. "Think."

Two bottles of men's cologne were on the dresser. John wasn't interested in the brands, but what had been placed in front of them. A large folding knife. Woody had carried this same knife when they were teenagers. He said it was because he dealt with some badass motherfuckers in his drug dealings, and John had believed him, imagining tense standoffs and risky drug deals as his cousin brandished the sharp, serrated blade.

Woody carried a knife. How had he forgotten that?

"Who are you?"

John spun around, shocked to see the next-door neighbor standing in the doorway to the bedroom. She was wearing a silky white nightgown with a robe. The outfit hung from her child's body like a wet sack on a pitchfork. Her voice was a little girl's, high-pitched, almost squeaky.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded, but he could tell she was scared.

"I might ask you the same thing," he said, palming the knife, trying to call up the authoritative tone adults used when they spoke to kids.

"This isn't your house."

"It's not yours, either," John pointed out. "You live next door."

"How do you know that?"

"Woody told me."

She glanced down at his hands, the latex gloves, the knife. "Who's Woody?"

The question tripped him up, and she must have sensed his hesitation, because she bolted down the hall.

"Hey!" John called, chasing after her through the living room, the kitchen. "Hold up," he yelled, but she had already flown through the open door and into the yard.

She chanced a look over her shoulder as she made for the fence. He remembered that he still had Woody's knife in his hand, realized how that must look to her, and stopped. She hesitated again, but her body was still moving. Moving forward.

He watched her fall in slow motion, her bare foot catching on the broken fence, her head slamming into the ground. John waited. She didn't get up. He waited some more. She still did not move.

Slowly, he stepped into the backyard, the grass soft under his feet. He remembered how it had felt when he got out of Coastal to walk on grass for the first time in twenty years. His feet were used to solid concrete or red Georgia clay packed hard as brick from thousands of men pacing it every day. The grass in the cemetery had felt so soft, like he was stepping on clouds as he followed his mother's coffin toward her grave.

Twenty years and he had forgotten what grass felt like. Twenty years of loneliness, of isolation. Twenty years of Emily suffering the bimonthly degradation of visiting her son. Twenty years of Joyce being eaten up inside by the knowledge of what kind of monster her brother was.

Twenty years of Woody living on the outside, getting a good job, marrying, having a kid, making a life.

John stepped carefully over the fence. He realized he still had Woody's folding knife in his hand, and he put it on the ground beside him as he knelt by the girl. He had learned how to check a pulse at the prison hospital. She didn't have one. Even without that evidence, he could see from the way her skull was broken that she had probably died the minute her head had slammed against a large rock on the other side of the fence. Her blood was smeared across the quartz, pieces of long blonde hair sticking into the wet.

He sat back on his heels, his mind going over the last time he had seen Mary Alice. Her eyes. He would never forget her eyes, the way she had stared into nowhere. Her body told the real story, though. She had endured horrible things, unspeakable things. In his mind, he could still recall the blown-up pictures from his trial, the photographs showing Mary Alice Finney's violated body splayed out for the world to see. He remembered his aunt pacing back and forth in front of the jury, and how he'd thought at the time that Lydia's pacing was bad because all it did was draw their attention to the pictures that were right behind her.

"It's okay," John had told Lydia when she'd come to Coastal and explained that their appeals were exhausted, that he would more than likely die in prison. "I know you did everything you could."

Lydia had told him not to talk about drugs with the police, not to mention Woody because bringing her son into it would open up John's past drug abuse and they didn't want that, did they? If Woody was put on the stand, he'd tell the truth.

They didn't want Woody telling the truth, did they?

That night at the party, Woody had said, “No hard feelings,” tossing him the baggie. Was that when he had decided to hurt Mary Alice?

No hard feelings. John didn’t have any feelings left—just rage that burned like he’d swallowed gasoline and lit a match.

He looked down at the girl. She was a child, but she was also a messenger.

John’s stomach clenched as he slid his gloved fingers into her mouth, pinched her tongue between his thumb and forefinger.

Woody had brought all of this to John’s door. John would put it right back on his. The most important thing he learned in prison was that you never touched another man’s property unless you were willing to die for it.

“Woody,” he had called him, but that was a boy’s name and Woody wasn’t a boy anymore. Like John, he was a man. He should be called by a man’s name.

Michael Ormewood.

John picked up the knife.

CHAPTER TWENTY

JUNE 15, 1985

"You need to walk it off," John told Mary Alice. "You can't go home like this."

"Have you ever kissed a girl?"

He blushed and she laughed.

"Mark Reed," she told him. "He thinks he's my boyfriend because he kissed me after the game."

John kept quiet, saying a silent prayer of death for Mark Reed, quarterback of the football team, driver of a red Corvette, and proud owner of much body hair, which the fucker liked to show off around the locker room like he was working at freaking Chippendale's.

"You didn't answer me," Mary Alice said, and John thought about Woody's bag of white powder in his pocket.

She could read his mind. "Let me try it."

"No way."

"I want to."

"No you don't."

"Come on." She reached into his pocket and her hand brushed against him. John sucked in air so hard he was surprised his lungs didn't explode.

Mary Alice was holding the bag up to the streetlight. "What's so good about it?"

John couldn't answer. He had more pressing matters requiring his attention.

She opened the bag.

He came to his senses. "Don't do that."

"Why not? You do."

"I'm a loser," he said. "Isn't that what you told me?"

There was a noise behind them and they both turned to look.

"Cat," Mary Alice guessed. "Come on."

She had taken his hand and John let her lead him down the street toward her house. John stayed quiet as she took him through her backyard. He knew her bedroom was on the bottom floor, but he hadn't been expecting her to open the window and climb in.

"What are you doing?"

"Shh."

A twig snapped behind him. He turned again, but all he could see was shadows.

Mary Alice said, "Come on."

He climbed up, stopping halfway over the sill, whispering, "Your mom will kill me if she finds me in here."

"I don't care," she whispered back, turning on a Hello Kitty lamp that cast a thin halo of light.

"You sleep with a nightlight?"

She playfully slapped his shoulder. "Just get in."

John landed softly. Her bed was pushed up underneath the window. They were both sitting on her bed. Mary Alice's bed. John felt his erection return with a vengeance.

If Mary Alice noticed, she didn't say. "Show me how to do it," she asked, handing him the bag of coke.

"I'm not going to."

"I know you want to."

He did. God, he did. Anything that would give him the ability to get past his own idiotic

personality and kiss her.

“Show me,” she repeated.

He unknotted the bag and used his finger to scoop some out.

“You snort it,” he said. “Like this.”

John coughed, almost a gag, as the powder hit the back of his throat. It tasted bitter, metallic. He tried to get enough spit to swallow but his mouth was too dry. His heart did something funny, like a flop, then he felt as if a knife had slammed into it.

Mary Alice looked scared. “Are you—”

The coke hit his brain. Two seconds, tops, and he was so fucked up he couldn’t keep his eyes open. He saw stars—actual stars—and he fell forward, right into Mary Alice. She put her hands on his face to steady him and he tilted his chin up, his lips meeting hers.

The next thing he remembered was waking up with the worst headache he’d ever had in his life. There were shooting pains in his chest and he felt cold, though sweat covered his body. He rolled over, his skin sticking to the sheets. He was thinking that his mother was going to kill him for wetting the bed when he felt her body beside him.

Mary Alice was completely naked. Her neck was twisted to the side, her mouth open and filled with blood. He saw bruises on her legs and other parts of her. Patches of her pubic hair had been ripped out. Bite marks were all over her small breasts.

John was too freaked out to make any noise. He was panting, his bladder pressing for release as he pushed himself back away from her body. The open window was behind him. He reached up, his fingers sliding against the frame. Blood. He had blood all over his hand. He had lain in it all night, his clothes soaking it up like a sponge.

He heard a noise, a “huh-huh-huh,” but it was coming from him. Her face. He couldn’t stop looking at her face. So much blood. His bladder released, a warm, wet liquid flooding down his leg.

He had to get out of here. He had to leave.

John pressed himself against the wall, using his legs to push himself up over the window ledge. He fell through the open window and into the backyard flat on his back, the air puffing out of his lungs in a sharp cough.

He looked up at the sky. It wasn’t yet morning, the sun making the trees gray shadows against black. His legs shook, but he managed to stand, his pants sticking to his thighs, his bloody shirt like a second skin on his back where he had lain beside Mary Alice all night.

John ran, his heart pulsing in his throat.

He had to get out of there.

He had to get home.

THE FINNEY MURDER: TEN YEARS LATER

Ten years have passed since fifteen-year-old Mary Alice Finney was found raped and murdered in her parents' Decatur home, though the crime that rocked the small Atlanta suburb is still fresh in the minds of longtime residents. "It changed everything," claims Elizabeth Reed, whose son was dating Finney at the time of her death. "We went from being an open community to locking our doors at night."

Police were at first baffled by the murder of the young girl, a cheerleader and class president at Decatur High School. "She was just a normal girl living a normal life," says Reed. That all changed on June 16, 1985, as neighbors woke to a woman's screams. Sally Finney had gone to wake her daughter for church and instead found carnage.

"It was a difficult scene to process," retired police chief Harold Waller admits. "There was blood everywhere. We had never seen anything like it. We thought we were looking at the work of a psychopath...and of course, we were."

Court psychiatrists agreed with Waller's appraisal of the cold-blooded killer, saying that the boy's drug-fueled rage revealed an underlying psychosis. Although the killer claimed only "recreational" drug use, friends revealed a much darker side. Coach Vic McCollough, testifying about Shelley's violent temper on the football field, said that he finally had to suspend the boy from the team. A close friend who asked not to be named said at the time that Shelley had developed a fixation on Mary Alice Finney and seemed

to "burn with hatred" for the honor student.

In addition to being brutally raped, the body had several deep bite wounds about the breasts and thighs. The teenage killer further defiled the young girl's body by urinating on it. This, however, was not the most jarring discovery. During testimony at the trial, Waller revealed that the girl's tongue had been removed with a serrated knife.

Few in the neighborhood were surprised when local boy Jonathan Shelley was arrested for the crime. According to police, the fifteen-year-old had a history of drug abuse and petty theft. Principal Don Binder stated during trial that Finney was a known drug dealer on campus with a "serious problem." Found at the murder scene was a bag containing a mixture of cocaine and heroin, known in street terms as a "speedball." Shelley's bloody fingerprints were on the bag as well as in several key areas of the girl's room.

"We didn't lack for evidence," Waller says. "His bloody prints were all over the place." The defense pointed out during trial that there were several unidentified fingerprints found at the scene, but could not explain the most damning evidence: the six-inch serrated kitchen knife later found hidden in the closet of the boy's bedroom. The knife, one of a set from the Shelley kitchen, had been thoroughly cleaned, but traces of human blood

were found embedded in the wooden handle.

Emily Shelley, the boy's mother, testified at trial that she had cut herself using the knife, claiming the blood was her own. On cross-examination, she could not explain how or why the knife had found its way to the back of her son's bedroom closet.

"I have never believed for a moment that John Shelley is innocent," says state senator Paul Finney (R-Fulton). "He chose to go on a drug-addled rage and my daughter paid the heavy price for it." Sally Finney has never spoken on the record about the loss of Mary Alice, her only child. Neighbors say the mother refused to return to her home on St. Patrick Drive and that she filed for divorce from her husband during the trial. "This violence has torn my family apart," Paul Finney stated at the time. The twice-divorced senator is a known advocate for victims' rights and has coauthored or sponsored several Georgia State bills to make it tougher for violent criminals to make parole.

Fitting, as Shelley's first parole hearing was scheduled last Friday. Standing in front of the board, Shelley read from a prepared statement. "I did not commit this crime," he told the packed room. "I will not admit to something I did not do."

Says still-grieving father Paul Finney, "John Shelley is exactly where he deserves to be."

PART III

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

FEBRUARY 6, 2006

8:02 PM

Will Trent was brushing his dog when the doorbell rang. Betty started barking, her body nearly skittering off the table from the force. He shushed her and was rewarded with a curious look. Will had never told the dog no.

A full minute passed. Will and Betty waited, hoping whoever was at the door would go away, but the doorbell rang again, then three more times in rapid succession.

The dog started barking in earnest. Will sighed, put down the brush and rolled down his shirtsleeves. He scooped up the dog in his hand. The doorbell rang again—six times in a row—as he walked to the front door.

“What the fuck took you so long?”

He looked into the street to see if she was alone. “I’ve been plagued by Jehovah’s Witnesses lately.”

“Might be a good way for you to meet women.” Angie wrinkled her nose. “God, that is one ugly dog.”

Will followed Angie into his house, holding the dog close to his chest, feeling the slight even if the animal hadn’t. Angie was still dressed for work and he remarked, “You look like a prostitute.”

“You look like a corpse in a coffin.”

He pressed his hand to the tie. “You don’t like the suit?”

“What happened to those jeans I bought you?” She flopped onto his couch and let out a sigh of relief, not waiting for his answer. “These fucking shoes,” she complained, sliding out of the six-inch heels and letting them hit the rug. She unpinned her long brown hair and shook it out so it fell around her shoulders. “I am so sick of this fucking job.”

Will put Betty down on the floor. The Chihuahua’s nails clicked across the hardwood as she headed toward the kitchen. He heard her drink some water, then nibble on what was left of her supper. The dog was an unwelcome and, hopefully, temporary companion. Two weeks ago, Will had come back from his morning run to find his elderly neighbor being loaded into an ambulance. The woman had some sort of speech impediment and, judging from the timbre of her voice, a five-pack-a-day habit.

“Watch Betty!” she had screamed across the front lawn, though Will had heard it as *Wash Betty!*

“What do I do with her?” he had asked, somewhat horrified at the prospect. The woman just glared, so he pointed to the tiny Chihuahua standing on her front porch. “The dog. What about the dog?”

“Brush her!” the woman had screeched, and the ambulance doors had slammed shut.

Will didn’t know the neighbor’s name. Other than her love of listening to *The Price Is Right* at full volume, he knew little about her. He had no idea where the ambulance had taken her or if she had any family or, for that matter, if she was ever coming back. The only reason he knew the dog’s name was because the woman had a habit of yelling at it.

“Betty!” he would hear in the middle of the night, her voice a deeper baritone than any man’s. “Betty, I told you not to do that!”

Angie had her arms crossed over her chest as she stared up at Will. “You realize you look absolutely ridiculous carrying that little dog around.”

Will sat across from her, leaning back in his chair. He picked up the remote control for the stereo and stopped the audio book he had been listening to. Two very long years had passed since he had talked to Angie Polaski, and now here she was back in his living room like they hadn't missed a day. She had always been like that, ever since they were children. Pretend nothing was surprising and you would never be surprised.

He said, "Thanks for helping me with the vending machine this morning," leaving out that he'd almost had a heart attack when he saw her standing in the hallway at City Hall East today.

"What were you doing with Michael Ormewood, anyway?" Again, she didn't let him answer. "Jesus, I can't believe that about his neighbor. How weird is that?"

He tried to settle on one topic at a time. "He pulled a case that interested me. How do you know him?"

"Used to work Vice," she told him. "Do you have anything to snack on?"

Will got up to check the refrigerator, Betty close on his heels. He ate most of his meals out, but the dog liked cheese and he kept some on hand for her.

Angie had followed him into the kitchen. He asked, "When did Ormewood get transferred to Homicide?"

"About six months ago."

Will had been living in north Georgia six months ago, exiled to busting abandoned chicken farms that had been turned into methamphetamine labs while his boss decided what to do with him.

"Vice was his first big assignment when he got his gold shield," she said. "He worked it about ten years."

Will figured she was trying to tell him something. "Why did he leave?"

"Me." She pulled out a chair and sat at the table. "I told him he had to leave or I'd report him."

"For?"

"He was diddling some of the girls."

Will put the cheese down on the counter. "That's interesting."

"I thought it was pretty fucking disgusting, but to each his own."

Will mulled this over a moment, his picture of Michael Ormewood changing yet again. The man was certainly hard to pin down. "Was he doing this the whole ten years he worked Vice?"

"I only worked on his team for a few months. If I had to guess, I'd say yeah."

He asked, "Is that common?"

She shrugged. "Happens sometimes, especially with the married guys. Free pussy, who's gonna say no?"

Will turned to get a plate out of the cabinet so she couldn't read his expression, but Angie had known him since he was eight years old and she laughed anyway.

She said, "You're such a prude, William."

"Not much has changed in two years."

She didn't take the bait. Two years and a handful of months was more like it. They had been in this same kitchen, Angie screaming at him and Will looking down at his shoes while he waited for her to stop. She *had* stopped finally, only it was when she slammed the door on the way out.

He cubed the cheese with the knife, trying to ignore the expectant look Betty gave him. "What did you hear about what happened this afternoon?"

"Michael's neighbor?" Angie clarified. "Not much. Just that it's probably connected to the Monroe case."

"The neighbor's tongue was severed. They haven't found it yet."

"Why would someone go after Michael's neighbor?"

"That's what I was wondering."

"Do you think it's random?"

He leaned his back against the counter and looked at her. "Doesn't seem likely. Does Ormewood have many enemies?"

"I'm not his best friend, but from what I can tell, the guys like him. He hangs around with that asshole Leo Donnelly a lot, so there's no explaining his taste."

"Were there any cases you heard about where he might have angered somebody?"

"You mean pissed them off?" She shrugged again, a new habit she'd picked up since he had last seen her. "Nothing spectacular. You really think it's connected to Monroe?"

"The coroner's report on the girl will be ready tomorrow. From what I could see, there were some differences." He paused, recalling the scene in his head. "The top of her foot was scratched.

She had obviously tripped over the fence. There was a wound here.” He touched his temple. “She hit a rock when she fell, pretty hard from the look of it. And the blood.” He paused again. “There wasn’t enough blood. With Monroe, the mouth filled with blood pretty quickly, enough to choke her. This kid was facedown, of course, but there wasn’t much blood on the ground. If I had to guess, I’d say her heart had stopped beating before the tongue was removed.”

“Was she raped?”

“There was bruising on her thighs, but we won’t know for certain until they get her on the table.”

“Pete Hanson’s handling this?”

“Yeah. The murder was in DeKalb County, but I asked them to let him handle the body just for continuity.” He provided, “Hanson did Aleesha Monroe this morning. He seems like a good man.” Will thought of something the doctor had raised during autopsy. “Do condoms with spermicide and lubricant cost that much more than the ones without?”

She stared at him. “Do I look like an expert?”

He knew that she probably was but did not want to have that particular discussion right now. “Monroe’s killer used a condom that had lubricant and spermicide on it. I was just curious if they cost more.”

Angie made the obvious conclusion. “He didn’t want to leave his DNA.”

“Ormewood thinks it means he didn’t intend to kill her.”

“That’s bullshit,” Angie countered. “The johns don’t bring rubbers with them. They’re not exactly worried about the girls they’re banging. You know what they call all that extra skin around the vagina? A woman.” She added, “Michael Ormewood of all people should know that.”

“Then that brings me back to the original question. Are they more expensive?”

Angie studied him for a few seconds. She knew he had never bought a condom in his life. “The girls are just like everybody else in the world: they think if something costs a little bit more then it’s better. They’ll spend the extra thirty, forty cents if they think it’ll stop hep C.”

“They’re not more worried about AIDS?”

“AIDS you can usually hide. Hepatitis turns you yellow. Leesha was one of the smart ones. She took whatever precautions she could.”

Angie looked at her hands as if she was checking her nail polish. She seldom let the job get to her—she would probably end up an alcoholic in the street if she did—but Will could see that she was struggling with this one. As much as she hated working Vice, she had a sort of kinship with the girls. They shared similar backgrounds of abuse and abandonment. She could have just as easily been one of them.

“I liked her,” Angie finally said. “Monroe. We locked her up about six times in a row last year. She was sweet. Got into the game for the usual reasons, didn’t know how to get out. I tried to get her into treatment, but you know how it is. Can’t make someone do it unless they want to.”

He tried to think of something nice to say about the dead hooker, knowing it would comfort Angie in some way. He settled on, “She was pretty.”

“Yeah, she was.” Angie stood up and walked over to Will. He kept perfectly still, foolishly expecting her to do something, but she only took a few cubes of cheese and sat back down. “I asked Michael about her this morning. He didn’t even remember her.”

“Was Monroe one of the prostitutes he interfered with?”

“No idea,” Angie admitted. “It was mostly a rumor going around with the girls. ‘There’s some cop who’ll give you a slide for some action.’ That sort of thing. I didn’t really believe it but one of them told me his name. It’s not like Ormewood’s a common name, right? I asked him about it and he didn’t deny it, so I said, ‘Lookit, either transfer out or this goes to the lieutenant.’ He took door number one.”

Will turned back around, crossing his arms over his chest. “What kind of guy is he?”

“An okay cop.” She took a bite of cheese. “For what that’s worth anymore.” She chewed, obviously thinking through his question. “Truth is, I never liked him. He was always sniffing around me, offering to show me the ropes. I told him to fuck off.”

“In your usual ladylike manner.” He tossed Betty some cheese.

“You shouldn’t feed her that,” Angie warned. “She’ll get corked up and then you’ll be sorry.”

“Moderation.”

“Don’t come crying to me when the little rat starts farting the ‘Copacabana.’”

Will tossed Betty another piece of cheese, though he usually limited her to one a night. “Tell me more about Ormewood.”

Angie shrugged. "I didn't really see how much he annoyed me until he was gone. Always acting like he was the big man on campus, you know? He's a war veteran—"

"He told me."

"Yeah, he likes to make sure people know that about him." She looked down at Betty suspiciously, as if the dog had already started to ferment. "Even after he transferred, he kept coming back to Vice like it was old home week. Once a week at least he was down there sniffing around, telling us about the big cases he'd caught, like being on the murder squad made his dick bigger."

"He has a pretty good clearance rate."

"Better than yours?"

Will asked, "Do you think he kept poking around because he was worried you'd change your mind about his extracurricular activities?"

"I think he just couldn't let it go that I'd gotten the upper hand with him." She smiled that sweet smile that meant she was going to push him. "Come on, baby. Your clearance rate is bigger than his, right?"

"Let's talk about Ormewood."

She pretended to pout, but couldn't hold it for long. "I just told you—Michael likes to be in control."

"He seemed all right to me."

"Guys don't see it, but it's there, right under the surface. Trust me, ask any woman and she'll tell you after spending ten minutes with him that he's a control freak."

"All right." This wasn't an unusual trait for a policeman and Will ran into it often. "I did notice that he's pretty competitive."

"That's an understatement," she told him. "He took the transfer, but he just couldn't let go of it that I'd beat him. He'd always come around at the end of my shift, right after I'd typed all my DD-fives."

"Did he go through them?"

"I would've ripped his fucking cock off if he did." She tossed another cube of cheese into her mouth. "But I think if I'd left him alone for two seconds, he would've turned my desk upside down."

"He got a temper?"

"No more than the rest of us."

Will wondered what she meant by that, but didn't press it. "Sounds like he's making sure you're not banging him up."

"Could be." She chewed some more, keeping her thoughts to herself.

Will studied her for a moment, trying to guess what she was hiding. With Angie, there was always something she kept in reserve. Even after all these years, Will wasn't certain whether or not she did this on purpose or if it was just a protection mechanism. There was lying and then there was what he thought of as survival instinct. He was the last person on earth who could fault her for that.

Will said, "Ormewood seemed very upset about his neighbor this afternoon."

"He really likes kids," she told him. "His son's got some mental problem, but I met him once and he's super sweet. The wife is pretty cold, but I would be too if I had to bang that prick every night." She explained, "I met them at a retirement dinner for his partner. Ken Wozniak, black guy but another pollack. I thought I'd go and support the home team."

"Nice of you."

"I doubt he's long for this world. Had some kind of stroke right in the middle of the squad. Half his body's gone."

"He got any family?"

"Nope."

They were both quiet for a while.

Angie opened her mouth to speak, then changed her mind. Will knew better than to prompt her, and sure enough she finally told him, "The thing about Michael is, he's not his own person."

"Which means?"

"He's always trying to fit in, but it just doesn't work for him."

Will thought the same thing could be said about himself. "Is that a bad thing?"

She stopped a few seconds to think before explaining, "Like with Wozniak. We weren't close, but I'd seen him around. Big guy, has a gut out to here." She held out her hand several inches in

front of her stomach. "But he's a real lady's man, right? Always has a comment about what I'm wearing, 'Can I have some fries with that shake,' and that kind of bullshit, but he's an older guy, a real teddy bear, so it's funny and maybe kind of flattering instead of being creepy."

"Okay," Will said, not really understanding the line but knowing the important part was that the man hadn't crossed it.

She continued, "Ken has these sayings. Like, he hands a civilian his card and says, 'Something to wipe your ass on,' and it's kind of disarming, and they laugh, but they keep the card, you know? He may be a freaking cop, but they know he's a cool guy."

"Right," Will agreed. Cops had all kinds of tricks they used to connect with potential witnesses. Everybody had a different bag they pulled from, but they all needed the same magic if they were going to get anything done on the street.

"So, Ken's in the hospital, right? Laid out on his ass. I mean, frankly, the guy's not gonna make it."

"That's too bad."

"Yeah," she waved her hand, dismissing his words. "The point is, a couple of weeks later, I'm on my strip with the girls and Michael drops by. The girls know he's a cop because ... well, fuck, he's a cop. They can smell it, right?" She sat back in the chair, and Will could see she was getting angry at the memory. "So Michael goes up and down the line, cock-of-the-walk, gives me a fucking wink like what he's doing is funny and not stupid and risking my fucking cover, and he asks the girls if they've seen this guy hanging around, says he's one bad motherfucker and to stay clear of him. Then he hands out his card and says ...?"

Will guessed, "Something to wipe your ass on?"

"Right," she said. "He's always like that, always trying so hard to be the cool guy, to fit in, but the thing is, he doesn't know how so he has to mimic other people."

"Like guys who copy lines from movies."

She did a perfect Austin Powers, "*Yeah, baby.*"

Will thought it through, considered the brief time he had spent with Michael Ormewood before they had found the dead girl in the detective's backyard. Angie had obviously given a lot of thought to the man's personality, but Will wasn't totally buying her conclusion. "I didn't pick up on that."

"No," she said. "But you think there's something off about him. Your radar went up."

Her words cut straight to the core of their relationship. Twenty-five years ago, they had met each other in a state children's home. Will was eight, Angie was eleven. They had both already spent a lifetime honing their instincts; both learned the hard way to listen to their gut when it said that just because someone was wearing a white hat, that didn't make them one of the good guys.

"Yeah," Will admitted. "I didn't get a good read on him. I assumed that was because he was irritated with me. Nobody likes to be forced to play well with others."

"There's more to it than that," she insisted. "And you know it just as well as I do."

"Maybe." He picked up Betty to give her a scratch behind her ears.

Angie stood up. "I need you to look up a name for me."

"What name?"

She walked back into the living room to get her purse. Will followed, holding Betty to his chest. The dog's tiny frame was so fragile that sometimes he felt as if he was holding a bird.

"Here." Angie held up a pink Post-it note with block letters neatly printed across the middle. "He said he was mixed up in something. It sounded bad, but I just got this feeling ..." She shrugged off the rest of the sentence. "I think he's in trouble."

Will hadn't taken the note. He tried to sound like he was kidding. "Since when do you save people?"

"You wanna help me with this or you wanna stand there with your ass clenched, petting your little dog?"

"Can I do both?"

Her lips twisted in a smile. "His parole sheet only listed the highlights and the complete file is too old to be on the computer. You think you can work your GBI magic and get me a copy out of archives?"

He realized this was why she had really come tonight, and tried not to show his disappointment. He took the note, glancing at the words, which were little more than a blur across the page. Will had never been able to see his letters right, especially when he was upset or

frustrated.

“Will?”

He warned, “It might take a while to find it if it’s archived.”

“No rush,” she said. “I’ll probably never see him again.”

He felt relieved, which must have meant he had felt jealous before.

She was already opening the door to leave. “It’s got two *e*’s. Can you read that okay?”

“What?”

She sounded annoyed, as if he hadn’t been listening. “The name, Will. The one on the note. It’s Shelley with two *e*’s.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Angie lived less than five miles from Will's house. She drove away with the radio down low, letting her mind wander as she turned down familiar roads. He looked the same as always, maybe a little thinner, and God knows what he had done to his hair. Angie had always cut it for him, and she assumed he'd gotten an electric shaver to avoid going to a hairdresser who might see the scar on the back of his head and ask him who had tried to kill him.

She knew that Will had been living in the north Georgia mountains for the last two years. Maybe he hadn't gotten out much while he was up there. Will had always let his dyslexia limit his life. He didn't like going to new restaurants because he couldn't understand the menus. He bought food at the grocery store based on the familiar colors of the labels or the identifiable photographs on the packages. He would rather starve than ask for help. Angie vividly recalled the first time he had gone shopping on his own. He had returned with a can of Crisco shortening, thinking the fried chicken on the label indicated the contents.

Turning into her driveway, Angie tried to remember how many times she had left Will Trent. She counted them off by the names of the men she had left with. George was the first one, way back in the mid-eighties. He'd been a punk rock enthusiast with a closet heroin addiction. Number two and number eight were Rogers, different men, but both with the same shitty character flaws; as Will often pointed out, Angie was only attracted to guys who were going to hurt her.

Mark was number six. He was a real winner. It had taken Angie five months to figure out he was running up debt on her credit cards. The idiot had been so shocked when she'd called a buddy from Fraud and had him arrested that she still laughed when she thought about the stupid expression on his face. Paul, Nick, Danny, Julian, Darren ... there had even been a Horatio, though that one only lasted a week. All told, none of them had ever lasted, and she always found herself back on Will's doorstep, ruining his life again until she found another man who might take her away from him.

Angie parked the car in the driveway. The engine kept knocking even after she'd taken out the key and she thought for the millionth time that she should have the poor thing serviced. The car was leaking like an old lady and the muffler was hanging on by a thread, but she couldn't bring herself to let some strange man work on the engine that Will had restored with his own two hands. It took him about six hours to read the morning newspaper, but he could take apart an engine and put it back together blindfolded. Whether it was a pocket watch or a piano, he could repair just about anything that had moving pieces. He looked at cases the same way—how the pieces were put together to make a crime work—and he was one of the best agents the bureau had. If only he could turn that razor-sharp mind on his own life.

The security lights came on as she walked to the back door and slid her key into the lock. Rob. How had she forgotten about Rob, with his carrot-colored hair and sweet smile and gambling addiction? That made eleven men, eleven times she had left Will and eleven times he had taken her back.

Shit, that didn't even include the women.

Angie turned on the kitchen lights and pressed the keys on the alarm pad. Will did love her. She was certain of that. Even when they fought, they were careful not to go too far, not to say that one thing that would cut too deep, hurt too much, and make it all final. They knew everything about each other—or everything that mattered. If someone held a gun to her head and asked her to explain why she and Will always ended up together again, Angie would have died not knowing the answer. Not being one for introspection, Will would probably suffer the

same fate.

She took a bottle of water out of the refrigerator and walked to the back of the house, trying unsuccessfully not to think about Will anymore. Angie checked the machine for messages as she started to undress. Half of her had been expecting him to call, but the other half knew he wouldn't. Calling her would have been impulsive, and Will was not impulsive. He liked routine. Spontaneity was something for people in movies.

Angie turned on the shower, staring at her reflection in the mirror as she took off her clothes. She could not look at her body without thinking of Will's. She'd had her share of abuse at the hands of various foster parents and stepfathers, but all of her scars were on the inside. Unlike Will, she did not have the scar down her face, the cigarette burns and gashes where drunken bullies had decided to take out their anger on a defenseless child. She didn't have a jagged scar ripping up her leg where an open fracture had led to six operations. Neither did she have the still-pink line slicing up her forearm where a razor blade had opened the flesh, draining her blood and nearly costing her life.

The first time they had met was at the Atlanta Children's Home, which for all intents and purposes was an orphanage. The state tried to place the kids with foster families, but more often than not they came back with new bruises, new stories to tell. Ms. Flannery ran the home, and there were three assistants who took care of the hundred or so children who lived there at any given time. Unlike the Dickensian image this conjured up, the staff were as devoted to their charges as they could be considering the fact that they were understaffed and underpaid. There was never any abuse there that Angie knew of, and for the most part, her happiest childhood memories were from her time spent under Ms. Flannery's care. Not that the woman was particularly maternal or caring, but she made sure that there were clean sheets on the beds, meals on the table and clothes on their backs. For most of the children living at ACH, this was the only stability any of them had ever known.

Angie always told people that her parents had died when she was a child, but the truth was she had no idea who her father was and her mother, Deidre Polaski, was currently a vegetable living in a state home. Speed had been Deidre's drug of choice, and an overdose had finally put her into an irreversible coma. Angie had been eleven when she found Deidre in the bathroom, slumped over the toilet, the needle still in her arm. She had stayed with her mother for two days, not eating, barely sleeping. Sometime around midnight on the second day, one of her mother's suppliers had come by. He had raped Angie before calling an ambulance to come get her mother.

She got into the shower, let the water cascade down on her and wash off some of the day's grime.

Rusty.

That was his name.

"I'll kill you if you tell anyone," he had warned, his hand wrapped around her throat so tight that she could barely breathe. His pants were still down at his knees, and she remembered looking at his flaccid penis, the curly, dark hairs sprouting along his thighs. "I'll find you and kill you."

He wasn't the first. By that time, Angie was already sexually experienced thanks to a never-ending line of her mother's boyfriends. Some had been nice, but others had been cruel, menacing animals who had doped up Angie's mother just so they could get at her girl. In all honesty, by the time Angie reached Ms. Flannery and the children's home, she could feel only relief.

Will's story wasn't exactly the same but it was close enough. His body served as a map to pain, whether it was the long, thin scars on his back where the skin had been rent by a whip or the rough patch of flesh on his thigh where they had made a graft to close the electrical burns. His right hand had been crushed twice, his left leg broken in three places. He had once been punched in the face so hard and so repeatedly that his upper lip had split open like a peeled banana. Every time Angie kissed him, she felt the scar against her lips and was reminded of what he'd been through.

That was the one thing about the older kids at the orphanage: they all had a similar history. They were all unwanted. They had all been damaged. The younger ones never stayed for long, but by around the age of six or seven, there was basically no hope that you'd ever be part of a family. For most of them, that was a good thing. They had seen what families were like and preferred the alternative. At least, most of them did.

Will never gave up, though. On visiting day, he'd stand at the mirror, carefully combing his hair, smoothing down his cowlick, trying to make himself look like the kind of kid you'd want to

take home with you. She'd wanted to kick him in the teeth, to shake him hard and explain that he wasn't ever going to be adopted, that no one would want him. One time, she had actually started to do this, but there was something in his expression, a kind of hopefulness mixed with the expectation of failure, that stopped her. Instead of punching him, she had guided him back to the mirror and helped him comb his hair.

Angie turned off the shower and wrapped herself in a towel. She smiled, letting herself remember the first time she had seen Will in the common area. He was eight years old with curly blond hair and a little cupid's bow of a mouth. He'd always had his nose in a book. At first, Angie had assumed he was a nerd but she later figured out that Will was staring at the words, trying to get them to make sense. The irony was that he loved words, adored books and stories and anything else that might take him out of his surroundings. In a rare moment of candor, he had once told her that being in a library was like sitting down at a table laid with all his favorite foods but not being able to eat any of them. And he hated himself for it.

Even now, he would not accept that his dyslexia was anything but his own personal failure. No matter how much Angie prodded and even begged, he would not get help. By the time she met him, Will had learned all kinds of tricks to hide his problem and Angie doubted his teachers thought of him as anything but slow. His current job was no different. He used colored folders so that he could find cases by sight, and different types of paper so that he could locate them by texture.

In school, Angie was the one who wrote out his term papers, taking dictation on subjects she had no desire to understand. She was the one who had to hear his tape recorder going night after night as he listened to books, memorizing whole passages so that he could contribute in class the next day. By graduation, he had worked ten times as hard as anyone else and still barely passed by the skin of his teeth. And then he went to college.

Angie had never understood why all of this mattered so much to him. With his height and good looks, Will should have grown into the kind of heartbreaker that Angie was always running off with. Instead, he was quiet, shy, the sort of man who would fall in love with the first girl who let him fuck her. Not that Will was in love with Angie; sure, he loved her, but being *in* love and loving someone were two different things. He wanted her for her familiarity in the same way that he wanted to go to the same restaurants and buy the same groceries. She was a known quantity, a safe bet. Their relationship was more along the lines of an overprotective brother and sister who happened to be having sex with each other.

Not that sex had ever been an easy thing between them. God knew Will had the equipment—before she had gone on the pill, Angie's diaphragm had been the size of a dinner plate—but there was a big difference between holding a hammer and knowing how to hit the nail on the head every time. Over the years, they had gone backward from that first awkward time in the upstairs janitor's closet at the children's home, so that now when they had sex, it was like a couple of bumbling kids sneaking around behind their parents' backs instead of two grown adults making love. They always had the lights off and most of their clothes on, as if sex was a shameful secret between them. The three-piece suit Will was wearing this afternoon shouldn't have surprised her a bit. The more clothes he could wear to cover his body, the happier Will was.

This was some kind of cosmic joke, because Angie knew that underneath his clothes, he had a beautiful body. She could feel the muscles in his back when he tensed, her hands wrapped around the curve of his ass, her feet cupping his strong calves as she pushed up to meet him.

Yet, he was ashamed of his body, as if the scars said something bad about him instead of the people who had caused them. She hadn't seen him fully undressed in at least twelve years. That was what their last fight was about. They had been in his kitchen just as they were tonight. Will was leaning against the counter and Angie was sitting at the table, yelling at him.

"Do you realize," she had said, "that I have no idea what you look like?"

He'd tried to act confused. "You see me every day."

Angie had slammed her fist on the table and he'd jumped. Will hated loud noises, took them as a signal that he was about to get hurt despite the fact that he was more than capable of defending himself.

The clock in the living room had ticked audibly in the ensuing silence. Finally, he'd started nodding, then said, "Okay," as he unbuttoned his shirt. He was wearing an undershirt, of course, and she had stepped forward, put her hands over his, as he started to pull it off.

It was her. She was the one who couldn't look at him, who couldn't bear to see the reminders of what he had been through. His scars were not his own, they were souvenirs from their

childhood, symbols of the men who had abused her, the mother who had chosen a needle over her own daughter. Angie could writhe naked in the backseat of a car with a total stranger but she could not bring herself to look at the body of the man she loved.

"No," she had told him. "I can't do this anymore."

"Who's the guy?" he had asked. There was always a guy.

The next day, she had called his boss, Amanda Wagner, and told the woman to look for the tape recorder Will kept in his pocket so he could record all of their conversations.

"And here I was thinking you were his friend," Amanda had said. Angie had given some crass response, but she knew in her heart that this was the right thing to do, the right thing for Will. The only way he would ever have a chance at a real life, at any kind of happiness, would be on his own. Still, she had burst into tears the moment she put down the phone. Maybe he had been fine up in his mountain enclave, but Angie had missed him like hell. The truth was that she had longed for him like a stupid schoolgirl.

And then the bitch had transferred him back to Atlanta. He was too good at his job to waste away in the hills, Amanda claimed. Besides, she liked Will too much to keep him away. For his part, she was the closest thing to a mother that Will had ever had. They pretended to hate each other, two tomcats sizing up each other for a fight, but Angie knew that in their own dysfunctional way they were a team. She recognized the signs.

To her credit, Amanda had given Angie a courtesy call to let her know about the transfer. "Your boyfriend's back."

Angie had finished the song, her smart-ass on autopilot. "Hey-la, hey-la."

Even though Angie had known for weeks that Will's new office was in the building, had prepared herself for running into him, she had felt blindsided when Will had gotten off the elevator this morning. Seeing him with that prick Michael Ormewood had been like a punch in the stomach. After that, Angie had spent most of the day trying to think of a reason to go see him. She knew he would go straight home after work. He didn't date and as far as Angie knew, except for a hand job from another little slut at the children's home, he had never been with another woman.

As the day wore on, she'd felt almost sick from wanting to see him. After arresting three johns who had the bad fortune of choosing "Robin" from the line of working girls in front of the liquor store, Angie had swiped a pad of pink notepaper from the fruit who worked across from her, knowing the bright background somehow helped Will read words more easily. In careful block letters, she had written out John Shelley's name, then driven straight to Will's house before she could think about it too much and stop herself. His face was so easy for her to read, and she had known from his expression exactly what he was thinking when she handed him the note: *so this is the guy, the next one you're going to leave me for.*

Angie wiped the steam off the bathroom mirror, caught her reflection and did not like what she saw. John had said she was pretty, but he was only looking at the surface. Underneath, she was a hag, a miserable old witch who brought misery to everyone she met.

Will was worried about John Shelley, but he could not have been more wrong if he'd tried. It was only a matter of time before Will figured out the truth. He could barely read a book, but he could read the signs clearly enough. One of the biggest regrets in Angie's life wasn't the eleven men or her comatose mother or even the hell she routinely put Will through. Her biggest regret was that she had slept with that asshole Michael Ormewood.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

FEBRUARY 7, 2006

7:36 AM

Will looked at his cell phone, the digital numbers telling him the time. He always took lateness as being rude. It said to the other person that their time was more valuable than yours. Amanda Wagner was totally aware of this. She had never been on time for an appointment in her life.

"Get you anything?" Caroline asked. Amanda's secretary was a pretty young woman, ultraefficient and seemingly impervious to her boss's sharp tongue. As far as Will knew, Caroline was the only woman who had ever worked with Amanda Wagner for more than an hour.

He said, "I'm fine, thank you, but—" Caroline waited as Will pulled the pink Post-it note from his pocket. "Could you run down this man's record for me? Under the radar, if that's okay."

She understood instantly he meant for her to keep the trace from Amanda. Caroline's eyes lit up at the prospect. "When do you need it?"

"Sooner rather than later."

She saluted him, returning to her desk. Will looked at the empty doorway. He wanted to call back Caroline, tell her to forget about it. Angie was right about gut feelings, and even though Will had never met Jonathan Shelley in his life, just the sight of the man's name sent up an alarm. Maybe Will was being jealous. Maybe he was just tired. Angie had been right again, this time about the perils of giving a dog too much cheese. Will had found out the hard way that it's nearly impossible to go to sleep with a flatulent Chihuahua sharing your pillow.

Will sat in one of the two chairs across from Amanda's desk. Like its usual occupant, the desk was uncluttered. Stacks of papers were neatly filed in the in-and out-boxes. Phone messages were stuck to the blotter in a straight line.

The office walls had framed news clippings of Amanda's exploits: Atlanta's mayor giving her a medal. Bill Clinton shaking her hand. Some south Georgia chief of police she had saved during a hostage situation. There were various plaques for faithful service as well as a shelf devoted to her shooting trophies.

After twenty years at the GBI working with tactical negotiations, Amanda Wagner had wanted a change. The brass had given her her choice of assignments. Typically, she had taken it into her head that she wanted to shake things up and in a year, she was heading up a new division of her own making, the criminal apprehension team. Special Criminal Apprehension Team. Never was an acronym more appropriate for the group she put together.

For the most part, the ten men Amanda had chosen to work under her were all like Will: young agents who had been on the job awhile and proven that they didn't exactly get along with others. Their superiors had rated them as difficult, but there was never anything they did that merited a formal warning, let alone firing. They were good cops, though, the kinds of men who as adults tried to correct the wrongs they could not control as children. Amanda had an uncanny eye for broken people, the ones who had something in their past that made them fall easy prey to her pseudo-mothering. Will could imagine Amanda presenting her carefully culled list of potential recruits to Susan Richardson, her chief at headquarters. Susan must have looked at the list the way you look at a cat when it brings you a dead bird. "Yes, thank you, please excuse my dry heaves."

Will shifted in his chair, looking at his phone again for the time. He wore a watch on his wrist, but only as a cheat to help him differentiate between left and right. Growing up, he had learned

all kinds of tricks to hide his problem. Angie gave him constant grief about it, saying he shouldn't be ashamed. Will wasn't ashamed. He just didn't want to have one more thing that made him different from everybody else. He sure as hell didn't want to give Amanda Wagner more ammunition. She had been trying to get into his head as long as he had known her and this particular bit of information was tantamount to baring your neck to a hungry wolf.

He looked out the window, watching birds gliding along with the wind. Amanda had been working out of the Marietta building when Will had been thrown to the meth freaks up in the mountains. She had moved to City Hall East a little over a year ago, her corner office affording her a panoramic view of downtown Atlanta. She was right by the elevator, which let her keep a finger in every pie the building cooked up. Caroline was in the outer office, but Amanda never closed the door between them. He could hear the secretary typing on her computer now. If she had any self-respect, she was working on her résumé.

"Hello, Will." Amanda had sneaked up on him while he was staring out the window. She pressed her hand to his shoulder as she walked past him.

"Dr. Wagner."

She sat behind her desk, saying, "Sorry I'm late," the same automatic and meaningless way people say, "excuse me" when they bump into you.

He watched as she reviewed her phone messages, showing him the top of her carefully coiffed salt-and-pepper hair. Amanda was probably in her mid-fifties, a small woman, maybe five-three on a good day. Her attitude filled the room, and she walked with a swagger that rivaled a bullfighter's. She wore a simple diamond ring on her wedding finger, though Will knew she wasn't currently married. She had no children, or perhaps she had eaten them when they were young. Amanda was extremely private with her personal life—a luxury she didn't afford others. Will thought of her time away from work the way he used to think of his schoolteachers crawling into their caves under the school building at night, lulling themselves to sleep with dreams of torturing their students the next day. Will imagined Amanda getting ready for work in the mornings; shaving her chest, tucking her tail, slipping her cloven hooves into her dainty size-six pumps.

"I suppose I should call you Dr. Trent now?" she said, not looking up from her messages.

Will had made himself busy during his mountain exile, knowing without a doubt that Amanda would eventually pull him from the Ep-worth office and put him back under her thumb. The correspondence school in Florida let him do the work online at his own pace, and the state recognized the criminology degree despite its dubious origins.

He told her the truth. "I was trying to make my pay grade too rich for your budget."

"You don't say," she said, taking out a gold fountain pen and making a note on one of the messages.

Will glanced at the scar on his hand where Amanda had shot him with a nail gun. He told her, "Nice pen."

She raised an eyebrow, sitting back in her chair. Almost a full minute passed before she asked, "Where is Two Egg, Florida, exactly?"

He fought a smile. He had chosen the school primarily for its ridiculous location. "I believe it's near the picturesque Withlacoochee River, ma'am."

She obviously didn't believe a word he was saying. "Of course it is."

Will was silent, a lobster being appraised in the tank.

She capped the gold fountain pen and placed it perpendicular to the blotter. "You're not taping this, are you?"

"Not today, ma'am." Will had a hard enough time reading typewritten documents, but his own handwriting was the kind of backward scrawl you'd find on the walls at the local kindergarten. Amanda was prone to giving out long lists of tasks. The only way Will could keep up with them was to record her so that he could take his time transcribing her words onto the computer. Two years ago, she had caught him red-handed in a meeting. Amanda hadn't liked being taped without her permission and of course she had assumed Will was doing it for nefarious reasons. He would be damned if he told her about his reading problem, and even if he'd been inclined, Amanda had transferred him to the North Pole before he could get his snowshoes on.

"All right," she said. "Tell me about your case."

Will gave her a briefing on what little he had. He ran through the case files of the three girls he had found, said he believed two of them were connected. He told her he had read about Aleesha Monroe, the slain prostitute, on the GBIs daily report that highlighted crimes around the

state. Following protocol, he had asked Lieutenant Ted Greer to be let in on the case and been assigned to Michael Ormewood, the lead detective. When he got to the part about Ormewood's dead neighbor, Amanda stopped him.

"The tongue was bitten off?"

"I'm not certain how it was removed," Will told her. "Perhaps if I had known you were going to be late this morning, I could have taken the time to discuss this with the coroner so that I would be better informed for this briefing."

"Don't whine, Dr. Trent. It doesn't suit you." Her tone was soft, conciliatory, but he could tell from her smile that he had been given a point in her scorebook. That he was even playing the game meant she had already won.

Amanda went back to the case. "The tongues weren't taken from the scene in the previous crimes?"

"No, ma'am," Will told her. "The first girl's tongue wasn't completely severed. The second was holding it in her hand when they found her, but it was too late to do anything about it. Monroe's tongue was left on the stairs. Spit out, most likely. Cynthia Barrett's tongue was not found at the scene."

"Did you search the Barrett house?"

"The DeKalb PD did," Will told her. "From what I gathered, they didn't find anything unusual."

"From what you gathered?" she echoed.

"I didn't want to step on their toes."

"Probably wise," Amanda admitted. DeKalb County was still tightly controlled by a handful of men who didn't like the state—or anyone, for that matter—messing in their business. Six years ago, DeKalb sheriff-elect Derwin Brown had been assassinated in his own driveway while he was carrying in some Christmas packages from his car. He was three days away from being sworn into office, and Sidney Dorsey, the outgoing sheriff, hadn't taken the defeat well.

Amanda took a file out of the top drawer of her desk and opened it to the first page. "What do you think of this Michael Timothy Ormewood?"

"I haven't yet formed an opinion," Will answered, thinking that if she had pulled Ormewood's personnel file, she already knew more than Will did.

She read aloud as she traced down the page with her finger. "Army man. Sixteen years Atlanta PD. Worked his way up from foot beat to his gold shield. Accused in ninety-eight of excessive use of force." She made a jerking-off motion with her fist, dismissing the complaint. "He moved up pretty quickly. Narcotics—not for long, probably got bored—Vice, and now Homicide. No college education." She glanced up at Will. "Do try not to lord your fancy Two Egg degree over him, Dr. Trent."

"Yes, ma'am."

She turned the page. "Commendation for saving a civilian. Even you have one of those. They hand them out like candy." She closed the file. "Nothing to shout home about. Wears beige and keeps quiet." This was a general phrase she used for cops who did their jobs and waited out their pensions. It was not a compliment.

"Anything else?" Will asked, knowing full well there was.

She smiled. "I put in a call to a friend in uniform." Amanda always had friends. Considering her personality, Will wondered about the nature of these relationships, and if by friend she meant someone she gripped by the short hairs. "Ormewood worked in supply when he was over in Kuwait. Never made it past the rank of private."

Will was mildly surprised. "Is that so?"

"He was honorably discharged, which is all the Atlanta PD would have known—or cared—about. My guy says he was wounded his second week overseas, and that they never did find out who shot him."

"The wound was self-inflicted?"

She shrugged. "Wouldn't you shoot yourself in the leg to get out of that hellhole?"

Will would have shot himself in the leg to get out of Amanda's office.

"So." Amanda pressed her palms together as she leaned back in the chair. "Plan of action?"

"I need to talk to Ormewood. It can't be a fluke that this has happened in his own backyard."

"Do you think he might have gotten too close to the doer in the Monroe case?"

"Cynthia Barrett's body was fresh when we got there, probably no more than an hour old. I was with Ormewood the whole morning and I didn't see that we made any great strides toward breaking the case, let alone pushed someone so hard that they jumped in their car, went to his

house and mutilated his next-door neighbor.”

Amanda nodded for him to continue.

“We talked to Monroe’s pimp. He didn’t strike me as the type to cut off a good source of income, but obviously I’ll go back at him today.”

“And?”

“And as I said, I’ll talk to Ormewood about this, ask if he saw or did anything unusual the night of the Monroe murder.”

“Is he in today or did he take compassionate leave?”

“I have no idea,” Will answered. “Wherever he is, I’ll find him.”

She picked up one of her messages. “A Leo Donnelly was trying to get your personnel file.”

“I’m not surprised.”

“I sealed it,” she said. “No one needs to smell your dirty laundry.”

“No one but you,” Will corrected. He looked at his watch as he stood. “If that’s all, Dr. Wagner?”

She held her hands out in an open gesture. “By all means, Dr. Trent. Go forth and conquer.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

8:56 AM

John had been forced to get rid of his shoes. He wasn't sure if he had left any footprints at the scene, but he wasn't taking any chances. When he got back to the flophouse, he had cut at the soles with a kitchen knife, altering the waffle pattern. Not trusting his luck, he had then gotten on the bus, paying cash so his Trans Card wouldn't track him, and ridden to Cobb Parkway all the way up in Marietta. There he had walked around for an hour, dragging his feet on the hot asphalt, scoring the soles some more.

At the Target, he'd bought a new pair of sneakers—twenty-six dollars he could ill-afford—then tossed his old shoes into a Dumpster behind a shady-looking Chinese restaurant. His stomach had rumbled at the smells coming from the kitchen. Twenty-six dollars. He could have bought a nice meal, had a waitress bring him food, keep his glass filled with iced tea, talked to her about the crazy weather.

All the tea in the world wasn't worth going back to prison.

God, he was in such a fucking mess. He shuddered, thinking how that girl's tongue had felt when he'd pinched it between his thumb and forefinger. Even through the latex glove, he could feel the texture of the thing, the warmth to it from being in her mouth. John put his hand to his own mouth, trying not to vomit. She'd been an innocent, just a little girl who had been too curious, too easily swayed.

John's only consolation was the thought of Michael Ormewood's face when he went into his garage in search of the porn he kept in the bottom of his toolbox and found his trusty knife sitting beside his teenage victim's tongue.

"Shelley!" Art yelled. John bolted up. He had been kneeling beside a sedan, rubbing bug guts off the front bumper.

"Sir?"

"Visitor." Art jerked his head toward the back of the building. "Make sure you're off the clock."

John stood frozen in place. A visitor. No one visited him. He didn't know anybody.

"Yo, yo," Ray-Ray mumbled. They had worked out an uneasy peace since the hooker incident.

"Yeah?"

"It's a girl." Not a cop, was what he meant.

A girl, John thought, his mind reeling. The only girl he knew was Robin.

He told Ray-Ray, "Thanks, man," tucking in his shirt as he headed to the back of the car wash. As John punched out, he caught his reflection in the mirror over the clock. Despite the chill in the air, sweat had plastered his hair to his head. Jesus, he probably smelled, too.

John ran his fingers through his hair as he opened the back door. His first thought was that the girl who stood there wasn't Robin, then that the girl wasn't really a girl. It was a woman. It was Joyce.

He felt more nervous than if it had actually been the prostitute come to see him, and ashamed by the cheap clothes he was wearing. Joyce was in a nice suit jacket with matching slacks that she sure as shit hadn't bought at a discount store. The sun was picking out auburn highlights in her hair and he wondered if it was streaked or something she'd always had. He remembered the way Joyce's face used to twist up when she got angry with him, the smile on her mouth when she gave him an Indian burn and the sneer she'd give when she slapped him for pulling one of her braids. He didn't, however, remember the color of her hair when they were children.

She greeted him with a demand. "What are you mixed up in, John?"

"When did you start back smoking?"

She took a long drag on the cigarette in her hand and tossed it to the ground. He watched her press the toe of her shoe into it, grinding the butt, probably wishing she was grinding his head in its place.

She let out a stream of smoke. "Answer my question."

He looked back over his shoulder, though he knew they were alone. "You shouldn't be here, Joyce."

"Why won't you answer my question?"

"Because I don't want you involved."

"You don't want me *involved*?" she repeated, incredulous. "My *life* is involved, John. Whether I like it or not, you *are* my brother."

He could feel her anger like a heat radiating from her body. Part of him wished she would just haul off and hit him, beat him to a bloody pulp until her fists were broken and her rage was spent.

She said, "How can you have credit cards when you're in prison?"

"I don't know."

"Is it allowed?"

"I ..." He hadn't even considered the question, though it was a good one. "I suppose. You can't have cash, but ..." He tried to think it through. You could get a warning or even thrown into solitary for having cash in prison. Everything you bought at the canteen was debited through your account and you weren't allowed to order anything through the mail.

"I don't know."

"You realize if Paul Finney finds out any of this, he'll sue you in civil court for every dime you have."

"There's nothing to get," John said. His mother's will had left everything to Joyce for this very reason. Under the victim's compensation act, if John ever had more than two pennies to rub together, Mary Alice's family could get it. Mr. Finney was like a circling shark waiting for a drop of John's blood in the water.

Joyce said, "You own a house in Tennessee."

He could only stare.

She took a folded sheet of paper out of her coat pocket. "Twenty-nine Elton Road in Ducktown, Tennessee."

He took the page, which was a Xerox of an original. Across the top were the words, "Official Certificate of Title." His name was listed above the property address as the owner. "I don't understand."

"You own this house free and clear," she told him. "You paid it off in five years."

He had never owned anything in his life except a bicycle, and Richard had taken that away from him after his first arrest. "How much did it cost?"

"Thirty-two thousand dollars."

John choked on the amount. "Where would I get that kind of money?"

"How the hell do I know?" She yelled this so loudly that he stepped back.

"Joyce—"

She jabbed her finger in his face, saying, "I'm only going to ask you this one more time, and I swear to God, John, I swear on Mama's grave, if you lie to me I will cut you out of my life so quick you won't know what hit you."

"You sound just like Dad."

"That's it." She started to walk away.

"Wait," he said, and she stopped but didn't turn around. "Joyce—someone's stolen my identity."

Her shoulders sagged. When she finally looked at him, he could read every horrible thing he was ever involved in etched into the lines of her face. She was quiet now, anger spent. "Why would someone steal your identity?"

"To cover himself. Cover his tracks."

"For what reason? And why you?"

"Because he didn't think I would get out. He thought I'd be in prison for the rest of my life, that he could use my identity to keep from getting caught."

"Who thought this? Who's doing this to you?"

John felt the name stick like a piece of glass in his throat. "The same guy who hurt Mary Alice."

Joyce visibly flinched at the girl's name. They were both quiet, nothing but the swish of water through the car wash and the buzz of the vacuums interrupting the silence.

John forced himself to close some of the space between them. "The person who framed me for killing Mary Alice is trying to do it again."

She had tears in her eyes.

"I didn't do it, Joyce. I didn't hurt her."

Her chin trembled as she struggled to contain her emotions.

"It wasn't me."

Her throat worked as she swallowed. "Okay," she said. "Okay." She sniffled, taking a deep breath. "I need to get back to work."

"Joyce—"

"Take care of yourself, John."

"Joyce, please—"

"Good-bye."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

9:30 AM

Will watched Pete Hanson's hands as the medical examiner deftly sewed together Cynthia Barrett's abdomen and chest. Her skin tugged up as the doctor pulled the baseball stitch through the Y-incision he'd made at the beginning of the autopsy. During the procedure, Will had concentrated on the parts of the body rather than the whole, but now there was no avoiding the fact that Cynthia Barrett was a human being, little more than a child. With her slim build and delicate features, she had an almost elfin quality about her. How a man could hurt this girl was beyond him.

"It's a sad thing," Pete said, as if he could read Will's mind.

"Yes," Will had been gritting his teeth from the moment he entered the morgue. In his law-enforcement career, Will had seen all kinds of damage done to people, but he still found himself shocked when he saw a child victimized. He always thought about Angie, the horrible things that had been done to her when she was just a little girl. It made his stomach hurt.

The doors opened and Michael Ormewood walked in. There were dark circles under his eyes and he still had a piece of tissue stuck to his chin where he had apparently cut himself shaving.

"Sorry I'm late," Michael apologized.

Will looked at his watch; the movement was reflexive, but when he looked back up, he could see Michael's irritation.

"That's fine," Will said, realizing too late that he had said the wrong thing. He tried, "Dr. Hanson was just finishing up. You didn't miss anything."

Michael kept silent, and Pete broke the tension, saying, "I'm so sorry for your loss, Detective."

After a few seconds, Michael nodded his head. He wiped his mouth, rolling the tissue off his chin. He looked surprised at the bloody paper between his fingers and threw it in the trashcan. "It's been a little hard at home."

"I can imagine." Pete patted him on the shoulder. "My condolences."

"Yes," Will agreed, not knowing what else to say.

"She was just a neighbor, but still ..." The smile on Michael's face seemed forced, as if he was having trouble keeping his emotions in. "It eats you up when something bad happens to an innocent kid like that." Will saw his gaze settle onto the body, noticed the flash of despair in the other man's eyes. Michael reached out as if to touch the blonde hair, then pulled his hand back. Will remembered how Michael had acted this same way the day before when they had first seen the body. It was as if Cynthia was the man's own child instead of a neighbor's.

"Poor baby," Michael whispered.

"Yes," Pete concurred.

"I'm sorry, guys," Michael apologized. He cleared his throat a few times, seemed to try to get himself together. "What have you got, Pete?"

"I was just about to do my summary report with Agent Trent." Pete started to roll back the sheet covering the lower half of the body.

Michael flinched visibly. "Just give me the highlights, okay?"

Pete rolled the sheet back up, stopping just under the girl's neck, telling them, "I believe she tripped and hit her head. The force from the fall shattered her skull above the left temporal lobe. Her neck twisted on impact, snapping the spinal cord at C-2. Death was instantaneous. An unfortunate accident, but for the missing tongue."

Michael asked, "Did they locate it yet?"

"No," Will answered, then asked Pete, "Could you go over the differences between the two murders?"

"Of course," Pete replied. "Unlike your prostitute, this girl's tongue was not bitten off, but cut. Most likely a serrated knife was used. A lesser man might not notice, but I'm certain it's different."

Michael asked, "How can you tell?"

"The cut is not clean, like your biter." The doctor snapped his teeth together to illustrate, the sound echoing in the tiled room. "What's more, I would expect a crescent pattern, because the teeth are not in a straight line in the mouth, but curved. If you look ..." He had been about to open the girl's mouth, but seemed to change his mind. "There are several test marks where whoever removed her tongue obviously had difficulty getting a grip on it. The tongue slid and the blade caught. Your guy was determined, though. He accomplished the task on the third or fourth try."

"It was slick?" Will asked. "From blood? Saliva?"

"There would have been little blood because she was already dead by the time the mutilation occurred. I would assume his grip was compromised because the tongue is so small. Further, a grown man would have difficulty reaching his hand into her mouth. It's very narrow."

Michael was nodding, but he didn't seem to be listening to Pete. His eyes were still locked on the girl and a single tear rolled down his cheek. He looked away for just a second, using the back of his hand to wipe the tear, pretending to be rubbing his nose.

"And of course the missing tongue is interesting," Pete opined. "In the other cases, the tongue was always left with the victim. Perhaps your perpetrator has graduated to taking souvenirs?"

"That's common with serial killers," Will told them, trying to draw Michael out. Maybe the man was back too soon. Angie had said that he loved children. Perhaps, like Will, this was harder on him because of the girl's age. And, Barrett was his neighbor, so Michael had probably watched her grow up. That kind of thing would be hard on anyone, even without a trip to the morgue to see her cut open.

Michael cleared his throat twice, finally asking, "Was she raped?"

Pete equivocated, and Will waited to see how he would answer, and how that answer would affect Michael. "There are definitely signs of forcible entry, but it's difficult to say whether the act was consensual or not." Pete shrugged. "Of course, if the rape was post mortem, then there wouldn't be signs of vaginal trauma because the force reflex would be gone."

There was a tight smile on Michael's face, the kind you gave when you were anything but pleased.

Will reminded, "You said that she's sexually experienced. Maybe we should find out if there's a boyfriend in her life."

"I asked Gina about that last night," Michael offered, explaining, "Gina's my wife." Will nodded and he continued, "Cynthia wasn't dating anybody. She was a really good kid. Phil never had a moment's trouble with her."

Will knew the father was a traveling salesman who had been on the other side of the country when his daughter was murdered. "When will he be back?"

"This afternoon at the latest," Michael answered. "I'd like to knock off early so I can go check on him." He turned to Will. "I'll let you know if he has anything useful."

Will nodded, understanding the message: Michael would talk to the father alone. Part of Will was glad he was being spared the task.

Michael asked Pete, "Did you get any DNA?"

"Some."

"I'll run it upstairs for you."

"Thank you," Pete said, walking over to the counter by the door. He handed Michael a sealed paper bag containing Cynthia Barrett's rape kit.

Will asked Michael, "Do you think there's a connection between these cases and the ones I showed you yesterday?"

The other man's gaze was back on Cynthia's face. "No question about it," he answered. "He's obviously escalating."

Will asked, "Is there anyone you've come across since the Monroe murder who might look good for this?"

The detective shook his head. "That's all I thought about last night. There's nobody I can think

of who would do this.” He paused a second before suggesting, “I figure it’s somebody who was watching the Monroe crime scene when I showed up. I went straight home after. They probably followed me. Jesus!” He put his hand to his forehead. “They could have gotten Tim. My wife ...” He dropped his hand. “I’ve moved my family out of the house. They’re not safe with this maniac out there.”

“That’s probably best,” Pete said. He put his hand on Michael’s arm. “I’m so sorry, Detective. I’m so sorry that this has happened to you.”

Michael nodded, and Will saw that he had tears in his eyes again. “She was a good kid,” Michael managed. “Nobody deserves this kind of thing, but Cynthia ...” He shook his head. “We’ve got to catch this guy. I won’t feel safe until the warden’s putting the needle in this fucker’s arm.” He looked right at Will, repeating himself. “I won’t feel safe.”

Will leaned against Michael Ormewood’s car, waiting for the detective to join him. He flipped open his cell phone and stared at the screen, wanting to call Angie. There was something she was not telling him. He had known her long enough to figure out when she was hiding something. Maybe he could ring her up and ask if she’d remembered anything else about Michael. Angie had worked with the detective. She knew about his extracurricular activities. She had to know more than she was letting on.

“Shit,” Will whispered, snapping the phone closed. What an idiot. She had probably slept with the man. He was just her type: a married, unavailable asshole who was bound to use her, then walk away.

Will inhaled and let out a long sigh of breath, feeling his own stupidity overwhelm him. He had been worried about John Shelley when Michael Ormewood was the latest jerk in her life. Will wondered if she was still seeing him. They had been standing pretty close together when he’d found them in the hallway yesterday. Though, last night, Angie had been brutal about Ormewood when Will had asked her about him. If she was still sleeping with him, Will was certain she would have said so then. Or maybe not. Two years had passed. This was the longest he and Angie had ever gone without talking to each other. Things might have changed.

No, nothing ever changed.

“Shit,” Will repeated. He put his hands on the roof of the car and pressed his forehead against them. What could he do? Go confront her? Demand she tell him what she’d been doing for the last two years?

Will dropped his hands and turned as the stair door banged open. Ormewood was walking across the parking lot, one hand in his pocket, a half-smile on his face. He didn’t look tired anymore. The man actually looked pleased. He’d probably dropped by Angie’s desk on his way to delivering the rape kit to the lab. He might have even grabbed a quickie in the supply closet for all Will knew.

“Sorry I took so long,” Michael said as he unlocked the car doors. “Had to see a man about a dog.”

“Right,” Will mumbled, sliding into the passenger’s seat. He looked out the window, waiting for Michael to get in and start the car. If he clenched his jaw any harder, his back teeth were going to break.

Michael put his arm along the back of Will’s seat as he reversed out of the parking space. He shifted into drive and headed out of the garage, saluting the guard at the gate as they passed.

“What a shitty day,” he said, slipping on a pair of dark sunglasses. “You got kids?”

“No,” Will said, thinking this was the second time Michael Ormewood had asked him that question. Maybe Angie had told him Will wouldn’t have kids. He had a mental image of her and Ormewood played out in bed, postcoital bliss turning into a game of telling secrets. Would Angie do that? Would she betray Will like that?

“I can’t imagine what Phil’s thinking right now,” Michael said. “If something ever happened to Tim, I’d feel like my heart had been ripped out of my chest. He’s a part of me, you know?”

“I can see that.”

“What about a wife?” Michael asked. “You married?”

Will turned to look at him, trying to figure out where he was going with these questions. “No,” he said.

“Seeing somebody?”

Will bristled, but he tried to control it. “No.”

"Gina," Michael said, oblivious. "She works at Piedmont in the ER. What's that they always say about cops? They either marry nurses or hookers?"

Considering Michael had left his last assignment under such a dark cloud, Will thought it was pretty dangerous for him to be joking about prostitutes.

Will began, "That Polaski woman ..." He tried to think of something an asshole would say about a woman. All he could come up with was, "She's pretty attractive."

Michael looked surprised, like he might not have considered Will had a penis. "Yeah," he said. "Listen—man to man—I'd stay away from that one."

"Why's that?"

"She's got a temper. Know what I mean? She looks real sweet, but inside, she's a class-A ball-breaker."

Will leaned his elbow on the door, stared out the side window.

So, he *had* slept with her.

Michael changed the subject. "I'm sorry I kind of lost my shit yesterday when I saw Cynthia. I've been doing Homicide for a while now, but you never expect something like that to happen, to actually know the person."

Will counted the telephone poles, saw the billboards and street signs in a blur of letters that would never make sense at this speed. "Yeah."

"I've gotta tell you, I'll never be able to do this job the same way again. Notify people, I mean. Puts it in a whole new light when you know the person involved, know the victim and the parent and all."

"I imagine so."

"Did you get a chance to look at that Monroe file?"

"I skimmed through it," Will lied, relying on what Angie had told him about the prostitute. "You arrested her a few times when you were in Vice."

Michael finally seemed to feel the tension in the air. He gave Will a sideways glance. "Yeah," he admitted. "Polaski told me that yesterday. I'd forgotten all about it. Those sweeps. You ever work Vice?" Will managed to shake his head. "You can go through a hundred of 'em in a week. It's all chasing your tail, no pun intended. You lock 'em up and they're out on the street an hour later."

"You never dealt with her pimp before? Baby G?"

Michael shrugged. "Not that I remember. These guys grow up so fast. One minute they're a little kid skipping school, the next they're toting a nine-mil and running everything from pussy to meth." He shrugged again. Maybe that was where Angie picked up the gesture. "Baby G might know me from before, but he didn't let on if he did. You think he's got something to do with the murders? I never checked his alibi for Sunday night."

"He was with us when Cynthia was killed," Will reminded him.

"I'm sure he's got plenty of soldiers to do his dirty work."

Will nodded.

"I need to look through my Vice files. I'll take them home tonight."

Will felt the need to offer, "I can help, if you like."

"No." His tone had been sharp, but he softened it with an explanation. "You know how it is. You only put down half the information in the reports. The rest you keep in your head so they can't trap you when you're on the stand, say you wrote one thing when you meant another."

"Right." Will stole another glance at Michael Ormewood. He was not as tall as Will but he had the usual dark good looks and a solid build Angie was always attracted to. He obviously didn't work out as much as Will, but he hadn't gone to seed, either. Maybe he had played football in high school. Will had loved football, but he'd been too ashamed to join any team sports that would require him to strip down in the locker room. Ormewood had probably been some kind of all-star, the captain of the team, the one all the other guys looked up to.

Will took another deep breath and let it out slowly.

This was really great. One stray thought about Angie sleeping with Ormewood and suddenly Will was reliving his failed high school sports dreams. Will knew that Angie would never tell any man much about anything. Meeting new conquests was a game she played, a game where she got to reinvent herself. Telling them the truth about her past would spoil her fun. If she wanted to be with someone serious, someone who knew her inside and out, she would stay with Will.

Michael tapped his fingers on the steering wheel. "Greer told me I could take some personal time. I don't know. Sitting on my hands isn't something I'm good at. I'd never forgive myself if I

missed something and this guy took another life. He could be out there right now looking for a new victim."

"Yeah," Will agreed, realizing that in his personal quest to emasculate himself he'd failed to notice that Michael was talking to him as an equal rather than an adversary.

Michael drove through the Homes, passing the same teenagers on their bikes that Will had noticed the day before.

"We should bust them up," Michael said. "They should be in school."

"Why wasn't Cynthia in school?" Will questioned.

"I dunno. Maybe she wasn't feeling well."

"What's her attendance record like?"

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"Her father was out of town most of the time. She was alone a lot without parental supervision."

"Gina and I did the best we could looking out for her." He had taken Will's words as a condemnation.

"Did your mother-in-law often see her at home during the day?"

"You'd have to ask Barbara that," Michael said, parking the car in front of building nine.

"Do you mind if I do?"

"Barbara and I are pretty close, and she never mentioned anything to me about Cynthia being home. I'll ask her, okay? But I think that's a dead end. Cyn was a good kid. She got great grades in school, never got in trouble. Phil always said she was an angel."

"You seem to know a lot about her."

Michael looked at his hands on the steering wheel. When he spoke, it seemed he was confiding in Will. "We tried to look out for her. Phil was never home. His wife ran off with some loser about six years ago, never looked back. He did his best, but I dunno ..." He turned to Will. "Your best isn't good enough when you have a kid—you have to do better. You change your priorities, don't drive a new car every two years, don't wear expensive suits and go out to dinner and movies all the time. You sacrifice."

"Phil didn't do that?"

"I think I've said enough," Michael told him, taking the key out of the ignition. "He's got enough in his life right now without his friends talking about him behind his back."

Michael opened the car door. He said, "The BMW's gone," meaning the pimp was probably not home.

Will followed him to the grandmother's flat, which was on the bottom floor. They knocked several times but even though they could hear a television blaring inside and the old woman laughing along with the studio audience, no one answered.

Will asked, "Monroe's apartment is on the top floor?"

"Yeah," Michael said. "I wouldn't take the elevator if I were you."

Will followed Michael up the stairs. Except for the grandmother's apartment, the building was quiet. People were either at work or sleeping off last night, and the only sound was their footsteps making scuffing noises against the stairs.

Toward the top, Will slowed his pace, stopping where Aleesha Monroe's body had been found. Blood stained the stairs, despite the fact that someone had obviously tried to clean up the marks.

"She died here," Michael told him, stopping on the landing to catch his breath.

Will knelt to look at the pattern, the bloody ghost of the handprint climbing the stairs. The crime scene photos were bad enough, but there was something eerie about being in this place where the woman had died.

"I don't think he meant for her to die," Michael said.

Will looked up, thinking the man had said this at least twice before. "Why is that?"

"She rolled onto her back." He indicated the outline where Monroe had lain. "The blood must have pooled and she choked to death." He waited a second, looking down at the bloody stairs. "It's sad, but it happens."

Will didn't think he'd ever had a case where this had happened before, but he nodded as if people accidentally died this way all of the time. He asked, "What do you think happened?"

Michael squinted up the stairs as if he could see it all unfolding. "I'm guessing they were in the apartment when some kind of dispute broke out. The John left and maybe she didn't want him to. They scuffled here," he indicated the steps, "then it went bad."

"Was the door locked or unlocked when the first cop got here?"

"Unlocked."

Will played the scene in his mind, thinking Michael's scenario was as likely as any. "Do you have the key?"

"Yep." Michael took a plastic bag out of his pocket. He unrolled it and showed Will a key with a red tag. "It was in her purse."

"Did you find anything else?"

"Makeup, couple of dollars and some lint."

"Let's go," Will said, continuing up the stairs. He could feel the hair on the back of his neck standing up as they got closer to the top. Will had never been one to believe in ghosts and goblins, but there was no denying that a murder scene had a certain feel to it, an energy that told you violent death had occurred.

"Here we go," Michael said, slicing the yellow police tape with the edge of the key. He unlocked the door. "After you."

Aleesha Monroe had obviously not been rich, but from the looks of her apartment, she had taken great care of her few nice things. Besides the small bathroom, there were only two rooms in the apartment, a bedroom in one and a kitchen/living room space in the other. What struck Will was that the place was surprisingly clean. No dirty dishes were decaying in the sink and the same stink that hung out in the hall didn't seem to permeate the walls.

Will asked Michael, "This is how it looked when you got here?"

"Yep."

Michael's team had already tossed the place two nights ago. The fact that he now stood back by the door, leaning against the frame, indicated clearly that he thought this was a waste of time.

Will ignored this message as he walked carefully around the room, looking for anything unusual. The kitchen was an efficiency with a single cabinet and only two drawers for storage. One was used for silverware, the other contained the usual household items that found their way into the junk drawer: a couple of pens, an array of receipts and a ring of keys that probably had outlived the doors they opened.

He stopped at a plant by the window. The soil was bone dry; the plant was dead. The glass table by the couch was sparkling clean, the matching coffee table just as pristine. There was a neat stack of magazines beside an ashtray that had obviously been wiped out. There didn't seem to be any dust on the floor or for that matter any indication that an addict had lived here. Will had been into many a junkie's home and knew how they lived. Heroin was especially bad. Smack heads were like sick animals who had stopped grooming, and their surroundings generally reflected this.

Will saw telltale signs of black dusting powder on the doorjamb and windowsills, but he still asked, "Did you find many fingerprints?"

"About sixty thousand," Michael said.

"Not on the glass tables?"

Michael was looking out into the hall as if he'd heard a noise. "She must'a brought her johns up here. There was enough DNA on the sheets to clone an entire village."

Will walked into the bedroom, making a mental note to follow up on the question. He checked the drawers, noting that the clothes hadn't been rifled through. The closet was packed with clothes, an old Hoover tucked in between boxes of shoes. The vacuum's bag was empty. The scene-of-crime techs had removed it for closer examination. They had probably taken the sheets off the bed, too. Monroe's mattress was bare, a bloodstain flowering out from the center.

Michael stood in the bedroom door. He obviously thought he could anticipate Will's next question. "Menstrual blood, Pete says. She must have been on the rag."

Will was silent, continuing his search in the bedroom, still thinking about the clean glass tables. He could hear Michael walking around in the other room, impatient. Will followed the black dusting powder where the crime scene techs had looked for fingerprints on all the usual surfaces: the edge of the nightstand, the doorknobs, the small chest that held mostly T-shirts and jeans. They must have checked the tables in the other room. The absence of dust indicated that the glass had been clean of prints.

Michael asked, "Did you see the story in the paper this morning?"

"No," Will admitted. For obvious reasons, he got most of his news from the television.

"Monroe was the second story after some scandal over at the hospital."

Will got on his hands and knees, checking under the bed. "Did you release her name yet?"

"Can't until we find next of kin." Michael added, "We're holding back on the tongue thing,

too.”

Will sat back on his heels, looking around the room. “She didn’t list her parents on any of her arrests?”

“Just Baby G.”

He opened the drawer in the bedside table. Empty. “No address book?”

“She didn’t have a telephone—no land line, no cell.”

“That’s odd.”

“Everything costs money. Either you got it or you don’t.” Michael was still watching Will. “Mind if I ask you what you think you’re gonna find?”

“I just want a feel of the place,” Will answered, though he was getting plenty more than that. Either Aleesha Monroe was the Mr. Clean of hookers or someone had taken great care to scrub down her apartment.

Will stood and walked back into the main room. Michael was at the front door again, arms folded across his chest. Why hadn’t he noticed that the apartment had been cleaned? Even an armchair detective with nothing but television cop shows for training would have picked up on this detail.

Will said, “Sink’s been scrubbed clean.” The sponge was still damp and when he held it to his nose, he caught the strong odor of bleach.

“You sniffing that for a reason?” Michael asked. He was watching Will carefully, no longer casually leaning against the doorjamb.

Will dropped the sponge back in the sink. “She have any money stashed in here?” he asked, purposefully avoiding Michael’s question.

“It’s in the log.”

Will hadn’t had time to decipher the scene-of-crime log, so he said, “Run it down for me.”

Michael was obviously irritated by the request, but he still provided, “She had some cash in a sock shoved down the back of the couch. There was about eight bucks in it. Her kit was in a metal box on the kitchen counter. Syringes, foil, a lighter, the usual.”

“No drugs?”

“Residue in the bottom of the tin, but nothing we found.”

“So, she had to work.”

“Yeah,” Michael said. “She didn’t have a choice.”

Will turned back to the bathroom. The shower curtain was a spotless dark blue, as were the matching rug on the floor and cover on the toilet seat. He lifted the rug, noting that the linoleum floor had been swept.

Thirty-two minutes for a cruiser to show up. The killer had counted on the slow response time, taken advantage of it so he could clean up after himself. There was no sign of panic here, no rush to cover his tracks and get out. The guy knew what he was doing.

“Well?” Michael asked. He was standing outside the bathroom, watching Will.

“She kept a clean house,” Will said, opening the medicine cabinet. Besides the usual Tylenol and toothpaste, it was pretty much as he would have expected. He said, “No condoms here.”

“I thought we’d established that the perp brought them.”

“Maybe,” Will answered, thinking that he trusted Angie more on the matter. He stopped in the doorway because the detective was blocking his way. “Is something wrong?”

“No,” Michael took a step back. “I just get the feeling you’re checking my work.”

“I told you I’m not,” Will said, though being honest, he was beginning to question Michael’s skills as a detective. A blind man could see the apartment had been scrubbed top to bottom.

Will asked, “Did you already call in the cleaners?”

“What?”

“I saw the stairs had been scrubbed,” Will told him. “I assumed you called in a crew to clean up.”

“Must have been one of the tenants,” Michael answered, walking toward the door. “Tape wasn’t cut and I didn’t call anybody. I can ask Leo.”

“That’s fine. I was just curious.” Will pulled the door closed. He was twisting the key in the lock just as a loud bang rang through the stairwell, followed by a child’s scream.

Will passed Michael on the stairs, grabbing the banister as he swung across the landing. He could hear more screaming, a second child yelling, “Help!” as he bolted down the last set of stairs and threw open the door.

“Help!” a small boy screamed as he ran across the parking lot, a girl chasing him.

"Oh, fer fuck ..." Michael breathed. He was panting from the run. "Jesus Christ," he exhaled, bending at the waist.

The boy darted onto a small patch of grass that had the mailboxes for the building. He circled once before the girl caught up with him. She was sitting on his back by the time Will reached them.

"You give that back!" she demanded, delivering a sharp kidney punch to her captive.

"Jazz!" the boy screamed.

"Hold up," Will said. "Come on." Gently, he took the girl's arm.

She jerked away from him, snapping, "This ain't none of your business, fool."

"All right," Will said, kneeling down to talk to the boy. "You all right?"

The boy rolled onto his back. Will guessed the wind had been knocked out of him. He helped the boy sit up, knowing that would help. The kid was probably nine or ten, but the clothes he was wearing seemed better suited for a grown man. Even his shoes were too large for his feet.

Will asked the girl, "Tell me what happened here."

"He took my—" She stopped as Michael joined them, her mouth open, eyes wide with fear as she stared at Michael.

"It's all right," Michael told her, holding out his hands. The girl hadn't pegged Will but Michael might as well have worn a sign around his neck that read "cop." She had probably been taught at her mother's knee that you don't talk to the police.

She stepped back, reaching for her brother and yanking him up by one arm. "You get away from us. We ain't got nothing to say to you."

Michael indicated the boy. "This your brother?" He smiled at the boy. "What's your name, buddy? I've got a son about your age."

"Don't talk to him," the girl cautioned.

"We're not here to bang you up," Will assured her. She looked about thirteen or fourteen, but the way her little fists were balled up told him he didn't want to be sitting on the ground if she got angry enough to start swinging.

He told her, "We're looking into something bad that happened here Sunday night."

"Leesha," the boy said, just as the girl clamped her hand around his mouth. He squirmed impatiently. Obviously, the boy had something to say that his sister did not want them to hear.

"What's your name?" Michael asked.

"We ain't got nothing to say," the girl repeated. "We didn't see nothing on Sunday night. We didn't see nothing. Ain't that right, Cedric?"

"You said—" the boy tried, but his mouth was covered again before he could get anything else out.

Michael lowered his voice, asking Will, "Which one do you want?"

Will offered, "Your choice."

"You sure?"

Will nodded.

"All right." Michael raised his voice. "Girl, this is the last time I'm going to ask this. What's your name?"

She stood defiant, but answered, "Jasmine."

"That's a pretty name," Michael tried. When she didn't soften, his voice became authoritative again. "Come with me."

"The fuck you say."

Michael exchanged a look with Will. "That's quite a mouth you've got on you, little girl."

"I ain't your little girl!"

"Sweetheart, do you really want to make this hard?" Michael put his hands on his hips. The gesture would have been almost feminine if not for the fact that his jacket swung open, revealing his holstered nine-millimeter. Typical cop move: scare them early and scare them often. It worked. Fear flashed in her eyes, and she looked down at the ground, all of the fight gone out of her.

Michael actually winked at Will, as if to say, "That's how you do it." He asked Jasmine, "Is your mother inside?"

"She at work."

"Who's watching you?"

She mumbled something.

"What's that?"

She glanced at the boy. "I asked if Cedric gonna be okay."

"He's your brother?" Michael asked.

She hesitated, then nodded.

"He's going to be fine once you and I figure out who's supposed to be watching you and why you aren't in school." He put his hand on the girl's shoulder and led her back toward the building. "You shouldn't be running around screaming like that."

She mumbled something again that Will couldn't hear. Michael laughed, then told her, "We'll see about that."

Will watched them go into the building, then turned back to the boy. "Cedric?" he asked. "That's your name, right?"

The boy nodded.

"Come with me." He held out his hand but the child gave an ugly frown.

"I ain't no kid, bitch."

Will sighed. He leaned against the mailboxes, tried to make this go a little easier. "I just need to ask you some questions."

Cedric echoed his sister. "I ain't got nothing to say to you." His lower lip went out in an exaggerated pout and he crossed his stick-thin arms over his chest in an imitation of a gangster. Will would have laughed but for the fact that the kid probably had more access to weapons than most cops did.

"Hey," Will began, trying another tactic. "What did the number zero say to the number eight?"

Cedric shrugged, but Will could tell he was curious.

"Nice belt."

Cedric's mouth went up in a smile before he caught himself. "That was lame, man."

"I know," Will admitted. "I'm just trying to get you to talk to me."

"Nothin' to talk about."

"Did you know Aleesha?"

His bony shoulders went up in another shrug, but he was still a child and hadn't yet mastered the ability to hide his emotions.

"Aleesha was a friend of yours?" Will guessed. "Maybe she looked out for you?"

Again, the shoulders went up.

"I asked around about her, you know? Asked some friends about her. Seemed to me that she was a really nice lady."

Cedric stubbed his toe against the concrete. "Maybe."

"Did she look out for you?"

"My granny told me to keep away because of what Leesha did."

"Yeah," Will said. "I guess Aleesha didn't have a very good job. But she was nice to you, wasn't she?"

This time, he nodded.

"It's hard to lose a friend."

"My cousin Ali died last year. Got shot in his bed."

Will knelt down in front of the boy. "Did you see something that night, Cedric?"

His eyes were red with tears he obviously didn't want to fall.

"You can tell me, Cedric. I'm not going to hurt you. I'm not going to get you into any trouble downtown. All I care about is finding out who killed Aleesha, because she was a good lady. You know she was a good lady. She looked out for you and now it's time you looked out for her."

"I can't tell you nothing."

Will parsed the sentence. "Can't or won't?" He thought of something. "Did somebody threaten you? Maybe Baby G?"

Cedric shook his head.

"I'm just trying to find out who hurt your friend." Will tried, "You can trust me."

The child's gaze turned hard, and the gangster face came back. "Trust ain't a word I know."

Will hadn't grown up in the Homes, but as a kid, he had confided in plenty of adults who wouldn't—or couldn't—help him. There was no telling who was good or bad. A shiny badge did not necessarily help point the way.

"You see this?" Will asked, putting his finger to the side of his face, touching the scar that twisted its way down his neck. "This is what I got once for telling on somebody. I wasn't that much older than you."

Cedric tilted his head, looked at the scar. "Did it hurt?"

"At first," Will admitted. "But then I couldn't feel it anymore, and when I woke up, I was in a hospital."

"Were you sick?"

"I lost a lot of blood."

"Were you going to die?"

Will had wanted to, but he had told the story to draw out Cedric, not confess his darkest secrets. "The doctors took care of me."

The boy stared at the scar a moment longer before he nodded his approval. On the streets, a near-death experience was a badge of honor, especially if it came by dangerous means.

Will reached into his pocket and took out a business card. "This is my cell phone number, okay? You think of anything, or just need to talk, you call me. All right? It doesn't even have to be about Aleesha."

Cedric glanced at Will's scar again, then quickly palmed the card in case anyone was watching. "Can I go now?"

"Yeah," Will said. "But you call me, okay? Call me day or night."

"Right." He darted off, his hand trailing down the row of mailboxes as he headed for the street.

Will straightened, turning around to see Michael walking across the parking lot again, this time without Jasmine. As the other man got closer, Will saw that he had a scratch down the side of his face. Blood was trickling into his collar.

Will looked back at the building, then at Michael. "You okay?"

"She hit me. Can you believe that? What is she, twelve?" He shook his head, more shocked than angry. "I was following her up the stairs and before I knew it, she bolted. I went after her, grabbed her leg, and the little thing turned around and whapped me across the face with her fist." He slung out his own fist to illustrate. "Good thing she punched me like a girl, huh?" Will had never understood that phrase. He'd only ever had one woman punch him, and Angie always put her shoulder into it.

Michael was staring back up at the building. A curtain twitched, and he said, "That's her place. Third floor up."

"Is her mother home?"

"Shit," he said, his tone asking if Will was actually that stupid. Michael touched the gash on his cheek then looked at the blood on the tips of his fingers. "I guess her fingernail caught me or something. Does it look bad?"

"Not too bad," Will lied. He took out his handkerchief and offered it to Michael. "Do you want to go get her or something?"

"What? Throw the cuffs on her and get my picture on the nightly news for roughing up a child? No thank you. Besides, she wouldn't talk to us now if her hair was on fire." He sat on the curb with a groan. Will didn't know what else to do but join him.

Michael laughed again. "Christ, she got me." He looked at the dots of blood on the handkerchief. "I should've let you handle her. Maybe she would have responded to a softer touch." He realized what he'd said. "Hey, no offense—"

"Don't worry about it."

"Still," Michael said, folding the handkerchief in two, then pressing it to his cheek again. He said, "I didn't know people still carried these."

"Old habit," Will admitted. Ms. Flannery had made all the boys in the state home carry handkerchiefs in their pockets. Will had never questioned the practice, just assumed that it was something normal boys did.

Michael asked, "You get anything from her brother?"

"Cedric's not talking."

"You think he knows anything?"

Will did, but for some reason he felt the need to lie. "No. He doesn't know anything."

"You sure?"

"Positive," Will said. "He's got a big mouth. He would've talked."

"You're lucky he didn't kick you in the balls or something." Michael folded the handkerchief again and started to hand it back to Will. "Sorry," he said, taking it back. "I'll get my wife to clean this for you."

"That's okay." Will took the cloth, feeling uncomfortable at the prospect of Michael Ormewood's wife doing his laundry.

"Man," Michael said, resting his elbows on his knees, dropping his head. "I gotta say, the girl

reminds me a lot of Cynthia. Got that same fire in her eyes, you know?"

"That so?" Will asked, thinking Michael was painting a very different picture of the neighbor than the one he had offered before.

"Cyn was a good kid, don't get me wrong about that. It's just she had that rebellious streak, too. Your parents divorced?"

Will was caught off-guard by the question. His face must have shown it.

"None of my business, right?" Michael rubbed the back of his neck, looking up at the building again. "My father died when I was about her age. Maybe that's why I kind of took care of her."

Will wasn't sure which girl the man was talking about now.

"I was just thinking that you get a little rebellious streak when you're a teenager and that it gets worse if your parents split up at the same time. You start to push things, right? Trying to test the limits, see how far you can go before they pull you back. My mom yanked me back by the collar—we're talking Wile E. Coyote yanked. She was always looking out for me, always using the heavy hand. Kids today, their parents don't do that. They don't want to be the bad guy."

Will guessed, "Cynthia was a little wilder than Phil knew?"

"Maybe a little wilder than I knew," he admitted. "Or than I wanted to know."

"That sounds like an honest mistake."

Michael smiled at Will. "There was this girl I knew back in high school. God, she was gorgeous. Wouldn't give me the time of day. My cousin hooked her. He was just this scrawny-ass kid, didn't have a hair anywhere on his body except for his head." Michael glanced at him. "You know the type I'm talking about?"

Will nodded because it seemed expected of him.

"Total pud puller," Michael continued. "And he ends up with this beautiful girl. Not just that, but she's letting him touch her, going to let him do her." His laugh was different this time. "I was usually the one who scored, you know? Not him." He turned, facing Will. "I'm thinking I shouldn't have chased her."

Will was confused. "Jasmine?"

Michael turned back, looking at the building. "I should've just let her go, but there was this second where ... you know how when your brain thinks of about a billion things at the same time? I kept thinking about Cynthia running, and how she tripped over that fence. I should've fixed that fence last year. I should have fucking fixed that fence." He put his fists to his eyes. "Oh, God."

Will was at a loss. An hour ago, he had wanted to pummel this man to the ground for sleeping with Angie. Now he just felt sorry for him.

Michael continued, "That's what I was thinking about when Jasmine ran—Cynthia running across our yard. And without even thinking, I grabbed her foot to stop her. You know—so she wouldn't get hurt like Cynthia did." He turned to Will. "I think I need that time off Greer was talking about. This is hitting me harder than I thought it would. Do you mind?"

Will was surprised by the question, but readily agreed. "It's fine."

"I'm sorry to let you down like this. I sound like a freaking woman. Hell, I'm acting like one, too. All this crazy talk; you must think I'm some kind of psycho or something." He shook his head again. "I think a couple of days is what I need. Just some time to get over this, come to terms with what happened."

"It's okay," Will said, thinking he was glad that Michael had come to this conclusion on his own. It was clear now that the other man had been fighting to hold it together all morning. "You do what you need to do."

"I just need to be kept in the loop. I need to know what's going on. Would you mind that? I don't want to step on your toes, buddy. I just can't be out there cut off from everything. I know you're gonna catch this fucker, but I need to know what's going on with the case."

Will wasn't happy about it, but he offered, "Call whenever you want."

"Thank you," Michael said. Will heard the relief in the other man's voice, read the gratitude in his eyes. "Thank you."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

7:22 PM

John was so exhausted that he almost missed his bus stop. He bolted up from the seat, calling, "Wait!" as the driver started to close the door.

He practically fell onto the sidewalk, his body feeling as if his muscles had been jackhammered. Art had asked for a volunteer to work late and John had gladly raised his hand, thinking he'd be better off having something to occupy his mind other than Joyce and the mess he had gotten himself caught up in. He couldn't even close his eyes without thinking about that little blonde girl in Michael's backyard. Last night, he had been shivering so hard that he woke himself up. Sweat covered his body and he had started keening like a child, rocking himself back and forth until he fell back into a fitful sleep.

Art's overtime job was the kind of shitwork you wouldn't ask your worst enemy to do: cleaning out a clog in the main canister of the vacuum system. The tank was buried underground and designed to hold what seemed like a million gallons of carpet fuzz, Cheerios and what smelled like sour candy gone bad—all the debris they vacuumed out of cars before sending them through the washer. John had barely fit through the opening, and when he had gotten inside, he'd guessed the tank was maybe ten feet wide and eight feet round, more like a coffin than he wanted to think about.

Art had given him a flashlight and a pair of rubber gloves. The battery in the light had lasted about thirty minutes. The gloves had stuck together before he uncovered the intake. John had stuck his bare hand up into the grimy pipe and pulled out a chunk of what felt like human hair. He thought about the flecks of skin and snot that the average body sloughed off on a daily basis and gagged up his banana sandwich before he could make it back to fresh air.

"You are some kind of trooper," Art had told him. The man had looked at John's ashen face, seen the vomit on his shirt and shoved a fifty in his hand. Fifty dollars for less than two hours' work. John would have jumped back into his own vomit if Art had offered to double it.

The fresh air felt good as he walked back to his room at the flophouse. There was always a smell on the street, no matter the weather or the time of day. John had come to associate the odor with poverty. His lungs were probably absorbing it, carcinogens clinging to the insides like the hair clinging to a vacuum tank.

"Hey, cowboy."

John looked up to find Martha Lam sitting on the front stoop of the house. She was in head-to-toe black leather and her makeup was heavier than usual. He wanted to ask the parole officer something flip, like if a date had stood her up, but he said instead, "Hello, Ms. Lam."

She stood, holding her arms out at her sides as she did a little turn. "I'm all dressed up for your random inspection."

He didn't know what to say. "You look nice," seemed forward, something that might be construed as flirting.

He settled on, "Yes, ma'am," opening the door and standing aside so she could go in first.

"Got Mr. George back in Bosticks this morning," she told him.

"Who?"

"Your buddy from upstairs."

John didn't know who she was talking about. Then he did. "He's not my buddy," he told her, and she gave him a look that said he had better check his tone. "I'm sorry," he apologized. "It's

been a long day. I didn't expect you to be here."

"That's why they call them random."

There were thirteen stairs up to his floor, and John felt like he had to practically drag himself up each one. The truth was that he hadn't really slept since he had followed Michael to Grady Homes two days ago and found out what his cousin was doing. The black woman's terrified screams still echoed in his head. John was reminded of his own screams when Zebra started going at him that first night at Coastal. They were almost exactly the same.

John unlocked the dead bolt and pushed open his door. The first thing he noticed was that the window was cracked open about six inches, the construction-paper shade ripped at the bottom. The other thing he noticed was the smell. It took him a couple of seconds to realize the odor was coming off of his own body. It was fear.

"You've changed the place around." Ms. Lam looped her purse around the doorknob so she could free her hands. "Like what you've done with it." She started going through his clothes, but John could only stare at his bed, the way it had been angled out from the corner instead of left flat against the wall like he always had it.

Whoever had broken in wanted John to know he'd been here.

Ms. Lam was lifting up the cooler, checking inside. She said, "Your urine test came back okay."

John could not answer. The photograph of his mother was altered. Someone had ripped it down the center, taken John out of the picture.

"John?"

His head snapped around to look at her.

"It was clean," she said, then pointed to the bed. "Want to lift that for me?"

He leaned down to lift his mattress. His fingertips made contact with something solid, something cold.

John froze, one hand under the mattress, the other on top.

"John?" Ms. Lam asked. She clapped her hands together to spur him on. "Let's go, sweetheart. I don't have all night."

Saliva fell out of his open mouth. His chest constricted. He started to shake.

"John?" Ms. Lam was beside him, her hand on his back. "Come on, cowboy. What's going on?"

"S-s-sick," he stuttered, tremors wracking his body. He felt his bowels loosen and was terrified they would let go.

"Let's just sit you down," she soothed, guiding him to sit down on the bed. She pressed the back of her hand to his forehead. "You feel real clammy. You're not getting sick on me, are you, boy?"

"I'm ..." John couldn't form a sentence. "I'm ..." He looked at the open window, the six inches of space.

"You want some water?"

He nodded, quick up and down jerks of his head.

"I've got some bottled water in my purse."

She turned her back to him to get her purse off the door and in one desperate motion he pulled the knife out from under the mattress and tossed it toward the six inches of open space.

Ms. Lam turned back toward him as if in slow motion. He held his breath, his peripheral vision catching a glint of metal as the folding knife sailed toward the window.

Instinctively, he coughed, leaning over, hoping to muffle the sound when the knife hit the window sash and fell back into the room.

"Here you go," Ms. Lam said, twisting the bottle open. "Take a couple of drinks."

John did as he was told, then chanced a look down as he wiped his brow, scanning the carpet below the window. Empty. The space was empty.

"That's good, now," Ms. Lam said, patting his back. "You just had a bad spell, didn't you?"

He nodded, unable to answer.

"Let's look under the mattress now." She shook her head when he offered her the water. "You keep that. I've got plenty more in my car."

John stood up, his legs still shaky. He looked again at the window, the empty space on the carpet beneath it. The knife had to have gone out the window. There was no other explanation.

When John had propped the mattress against the wall, Ms. Lam requested, "Box spring, too."

There was no roach under the bed this time, but the carpet was still caked with grime. John was so nervous about the knife that he could have fallen to the floor.

"Go on and put it back." She thumbed through the books on the table beside his bed. If she

saw the torn photograph of his mother, she didn't say. "You finish your book? *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*?"

"Uh," John said, surprised by the question. "Yes, ma'am."

"Tell me, John, who christened Tess's baby?"

He stared at her expertly made-up eyes. She blinked. "John?"

It was a trick question. She was trying to trick him. "Tess did," he finally said, and even though he knew he was right, he was terrified of being wrong. "The priest wouldn't do it, so she did it herself."

"Good." She smiled, then looked around the room again. "No luck finding another place?"

She had asked this once before. "Should I be looking?"

Ms. Lam tucked her hands into her narrow hips. "I don't know, John. Looks like you've outgrown this place."

"Well, I—"

"There's a house over on Dugdale. A Mr. Applebaum runs it. I'll put in a call for you tonight if you like."

"Yeah," he said. She hadn't offered to help him before and he was worried that she was now. Still, he said, "Thank you," and, "that'd be nice."

"You move real soon now, hear? As in tomorrow."

He didn't understand the rush, but he said, "Okay."

She pulled her purse over her shoulder, digging inside for her keys. "And John?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Whatever you just threw out the window when my back was turned?" She looked up from her purse, flashing him a cat's smile. "Make sure it doesn't follow you to your new place."

He opened his mouth but she shook her head to stop him.

"I don't like it when somebody tries to set up one of my charges," she told him. "When you go back in—and trust me, sixty-five percent of your fellow parolees tell me that you will—it's gonna be because *you* screwed it up, not because some dipshit, Barney Fife, Atlanta cop has a hard-on for you."

His heart was in his throat. Michael had called her. He had found what John had left in the bottom of his toolbox and decided to do something about it. The only reason John wasn't in jail right now was because Ms. Lam played by the rules.

"Watch yourself, John." She pointed at him with her car keys. "And remember, hon, I'll be watching you, too."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

8:48 PM

Betty's toenails clicked along the road as Will took her for her evening walk. He had tried to take the dog running their first day together, but ended up having to carry her most of the way. It had unnerved him the way she had adapted to the up and down jogging of her body, tongue lolling out, back legs tucked neatly into the palm of Will's hand, body pressed close to his chest as he tried to ignore the strange looks people were giving him.

Poncey-Highlands was a middle-of-the-road kind of neighborhood with its mixture of struggling artists, gay men and the occasional homeless person. From his back porch, Will could see the Carter Center, which housed President Carter's library, and Piedmont Park was a short jog away. On the weekends, Ponce de Leon took him straight up to Stone Mountain Park, where he rode his bike, hiked the trails or just sat back and enjoyed the sunrise as it peered over the largest chunk of exposed granite in North America.

As beautiful as the north Georgia mountains had been, Will had missed the familiarity of home, knowing instinctively where everything was, the areas that were safe, the restaurants that looked shady on the outside but had the best food and service in the city. He loved the diversity, the fact that there was a Mennonite church across from a rainbow-colored hippie commune at the end of his street. The way the homeless people went through your trash and yelled at you if there wasn't anything good inside. Atlanta had always been his town, and if Amanda Wagner knew how happy he was to be back, she would have jerked him up to the hills faster than he could say, "chicken-fried steak."

"Hiya." A passing jogger flirted, his cut chest glistening in the evening moonlight. Having lived in a city with a large gay population for his entire life, Will had learned to take these casual passes as flattering rather than a challenge to his manhood. Of course, walking a six-pound dog on a hot pink leash (it was the only one he could find that was long enough) was asking for attention no matter where you lived.

Will smiled to himself at the thought of how ridiculous he must look, but his smile didn't last long as his brain returned to the topic that had been plaguing his thoughts for most of the day.

He was stalled in the case and the more he thought about it, the more his initial bad feelings about Michael Ormewood were amplified. The detective came off as an okay guy when he was right in front of you, but closer examination showed some flaws, the biggest being that he had used his job to force women to have sex with him. That was the one detail Will could not get past. Prostitutes weren't walking the streets for the great sex and stimulating conversation. They took money, and Will guessed you could construe that as consent, but there hadn't been any money exchanged when Michael had done it. He had used the power the badge gave him to control the women. That was rape in Will's mind.

Yet Will was having a hard time thinking of the guy he'd spent most of the last two days with as a rapist. Father, husband, seemingly a well-respected cop, sure. But rapist? There were definitely two sides to the man, and the more Will thought about it, the less he was certain about either one of them.

Working with the GBI, most of Will's time was consumed with chasing down horrendous criminals, but if his stint in the mountains had taught him one thing, it was that people were very seldom either really good or really bad. In Blue Ridge, where poverty and plant closings and a strike at the local mine had practically crippled the small mountain community, the line

between right and wrong had been blurred. Will had learned a lot up there, not just about human nature but about himself.

Region eight of the Georgia Bureau of Investigation was the largest district in the state, serving fourteen counties and stretching all the way to the Tennessee as well as North Carolina state line. The men Will met at the northwest Georgia field office were pretty callous about the locals, as if they were above the people they were meant to be serving. Will's chief was called "Yip" Gomez for reasons Will had never been able to determine, and the man had jokingly told Will the first time they met to give up on trying to enjoy any of the local talent. "I've already had all the ladies who still have their own teeth," he had laughed. "Slim pickin's, my boy. Slim pickin's."

Will's face must have betrayed his thoughts—Angie always said he had more estrogen than was good for him—because Yip had given Will every crap assignment in the district after that. He'd been totally excluded from the sting operation that resulted in the biggest bust in the office's history. Working with the locals, Yip had helped break up a cockfighting enterprise that reached into three different states and twelve counties. The case had implicated a neighboring town's mayor, who'd had his own La-Z-Boy ringside so he wouldn't miss any of the action. Even though the tip-off had come from a bunch of angry wives who were pissed off at their husbands for gambling away their paychecks, that still did not take away from the glory of the sting operation. Yip and the boys had celebrated at the Blue Havana on 515 that night while Will had been stuck in his car, casing an abandoned chicken farm that had reportedly been turned into a meth lab. Not that he wanted to drink with these men, but the point was he hadn't been invited.

Though he was always left out of the more glamorous busts, Will liked to think that what he did up in the mountains was important work. Meth was a nasty drug. It turned people into subhumans, made them leave their kids on the side of the road, open their legs for anything that would get them high. Will had seen plenty of lives ruined by meth well before he got to Blue Ridge. He didn't need a primer to help him want to break apart every lab in his jurisdiction. The work was dangerous. The so-called chemists who made the compound were taking their lives into their own hands. A single spark could ignite the whole building. Dust from the manufacturing process could clog up your lungs like Play-Doh. Haz Mat had to be called in to clear the area before Will could go in and collect any evidence. The cleanup on these labs alone was bankrupting the local police and sheriff's departments and the state wasn't about to lend a helping hand.

Will sometimes thought that for a certain type of mountain dweller, meth was the new moonshine, a product they trafficked in to keep their kids clothed and fed. He had a hard time reconciling the junkies he saw on the streets of Atlanta with some of the everyday people brewing meth up in the hills. Not that Will was saying they were angels. Some of them were awful, just plain trash doing whatever they could to finance their habit. Others weren't so black and white. Will would see them in the grocery store or at the local pizza place or coming out of church with their kids on Sundays. They generally didn't partake of the product. It was a job for them, a way—to some, the only way they saw—to make money. People were dying, lives were being ruined, but that wasn't their business.

Will didn't know how they could section things off so neatly, but in Michael Ormewood, he saw the same tendency. The detective did his job—by all accounts he did it well—but then there was this other part of him that made him hurt the very people he was supposed to be helping.

Betty made some business under a bush and Will leaned down, using a baggie to scoop it up. He dropped the bag into a trashcan as he made his way back toward the house. Will caught himself glancing into his neighbor's windows as he passed, wondering when the old woman would be back. As if she sensed his thoughts, Betty pulled at her leash, tugging him toward the driveway.

"All right," he soothed, using his key to open the front door. He knelt to unsnap her leash, and she skittered across the room, jumping onto the couch and ensconcing herself on the pillows. Every morning before he left for work, he propped the pillows up on the back of the couch and every evening Betty had managed to push them down to make herself a bed. He could have called it a throne, but that was an embarrassing thought for a grown man to have about a little dog.

Will went to his room and took off his jacket. He was unbuttoning his vest when the phone rang. At first, he didn't recognize the high-pitched voice on the phone.

"Slow down," Will said. "Who is this?"

"It's Cedric," the boy cried. "Jasmine's gone."

Cedric must have been waiting for Will, because the front door opened and the boy ran out of building nine as soon as Will pulled his car into the lot.

"You gotta do something," the boy demanded. His face was puffy from crying. Gone was the wannabe gangster from that morning. He was a scared little kid who was worried about his sister.

"It's going to be okay," Will told him, knowing the words meant nothing but feeling compelled to say them.

"Come on." Cedric took his hand and dragged him toward the building.

Will followed the boy up the three flights of stairs. On the landing, he was about to ask Cedric what was going on, but then he saw the old woman standing in the doorway.

She was in a faded purple housedress with matching socks that slouched down around her thick ankles. A cane was in one hand, a cordless telephone in the other. She wore glasses with black plastic rims and her hair stood out in disarray. A frown creased her face.

"Cedric," she said, her deep tone resonating through the long hallway. "What are you doing with that man?"

"He a cop, Granny. He gonna help."

"He is a cop," the old woman corrected, sounding like a schoolteacher. "And I doubt that very seriously."

Will was still holding Cedric's hand, but he used his other one to find the badge in his pocket. He took a step forward to show it to the woman. "Cedric told me that your granddaughter is missing."

She scrutinized the badge and the identification underneath. "You don't look much like a cop."

"No," Will admitted, tucking his ID back into his pocket. "I'm trying to learn to take that as a compliment."

"Cedric," the woman snapped. "Go clean your room."

"But, Gran—" She stopped him with a sharp look that sent him running.

The old woman opened the door wider and Will saw that her apartment was an exact duplicate of Alesha Monroe's. The couch obviously served as a bed; a pillow, sheets and a blanket were neatly folded on the end. Two wingback chairs flanked the couch, slipcovers hiding obvious flaws underneath. The kitchen was clean but cluttered, dishes drying on a rack. Several pairs of underclothes hung from a laundry stand that was tucked into the corner. The bathroom door was open but the bedroom door was closed, a large poster of SpongeBob SquarePants taped to the outside.

"I'm Eleanor Allison," she informed him, hobbling toward the chair by the window. "I suppose you want to sit down?"

Will realized that his mouth had dropped open. Books were everywhere—some packed into flimsy-looking cases that looked ready to fall over, more stacked around the floor in neat piles.

"Are you surprised that a black woman can read?"

"No, I just—"

"You like to read yourself?"

"Yes," Will answered, thinking he was only telling a partial lie. For every three audiobooks he listened to, he made himself read at least one complete book. It was a miserable task that took weeks, but he made himself do it to prove that he could.

Eleanor was watching him, and Will tried to mend things. He guessed. "You were a teacher?"

"History," she told him. She rested her cane beside her leg and propped her foot on a small stool in front of the chair. He saw that her ankles were wrapped in bandages.

She explained, "Arthritis. Had it since I was eighteen years old."

"I'm sorry."

"Not your fault, is it?" She motioned him toward the chair opposite but he did not take a seat. "Tell me something, Mr. Trent. Since when does a special agent from the Georgia Bureau of Investigation give a hill of beans about a missing black girl?"

He was getting annoyed with her assumptions. "There weren't any white ones missing today, so we drew straws."

She gave him a sharp look. "You're not funny, young man."

"I'm not a racist pig, either."

She locked eyes with him for a moment, then nodded as if she'd made up her mind about him. "For goodness' sake, sit."

Will finally did as he was told, sinking so low into the old chair that his knees were practically around his ears.

He tried to get to the point. "Cedric called me."

"And how do you know Cedric?"

"I met him this morning. I was out here with a detective from the Atlanta Police Department investigating the death of the young woman who lived upstairs."

"Young woman?" she echoed. "She was forty if she was a day."

Will had heard Pete Hanson say as much during the autopsy, but hearing the old woman say it now somehow gave it more resonance. Aleesha Monroe had been at least twenty-five years older than the other victims. What had made the killer break from his usual target group?

Eleanor asked, "Why is the GBI mixed up in the death of a drug-addicted prostitute?"

"I'm with a division that reaches out to local law enforcement when help is needed."

"That's a very fine response, young man, but you've not really answered my question."

"You're right," he admitted. "Tell me when you realized that Jasmine was missing."

She studied him, her gaze steely, lips pursed. He forced himself not to look away, wondering how she had been in the classroom, if she was one of the types who let the dumb kids sit in the back or if she would have dragged him by the ear to the front row, yelling at him for not knowing the answer to the question on the board.

"All right," Eleanor decided. "I assumed Jasmine was in her room doing homework. When I called her for supper, she didn't come. I looked in the room and she wasn't there."

"What time was this?"

"Around five o'clock."

Will glanced at his watch, but the digital clock on the TV told him the actual time. "So, to your knowledge, she's been gone about five hours?"

"Are you going to tell me I need to wait another day before it matters?"

"I wouldn't drive all the way down here to tell you that, Ms. Allison. I would just call you on the phone."

"You think she's just another black girl run off with a man, but I'm telling you, I know that girl."

"She wasn't in school today," Will reminded her.

The old woman looked down. Will saw that her hands were like claws in her lap, arthritis twisting them into unusable lumps. "She was suspended for back-talking a teacher."

"Cedric, too?"

"This is turning adversarial," she noted, but she still kept talking. "I don't get around very easily, especially since they took my Vioxx away. Their mother has been incarcerated for more than half of Cedric's life. She's a heroin addict, just like Aleesha Monroe. The only difference is that my Glory got caught."

Will knew better than to interrupt.

"I laid down the law with Glory. Stayed up nights, followed her whenever she left the house. I was that child's *skin*, I was so close to her. She hated every minute of it—still hates me now—but I was her mother and that's what I was going to do. Same with them." With difficulty, she lifted a hand, indicating the closed bedroom door. Will saw a shadow move underneath and guessed that Cedric was listening.

Eleanor continued, "Glory pretty much let those two run wild. She didn't care what they did so long as she didn't get into trouble and could still keep putting that needle in her veins." The woman sighed, lost in her own memories. "Jasmine's as wild as Glory was, and I can't keep up with her. It took me five minutes to walk to that doorway tonight to see what Cedric was running on about."

Will wanted to say that he was sorry, but knew she would only correct him, remind him that her condition, the miserable way she must have spent her life trying to do the right thing while the walls fell in around her, was not his fault.

Eleanor told him, "Cedric was a baby when Glory lost custody." She managed to lean forward. "He's a smart boy, Mr. Trent. A smart boy with a future if I can keep him out of this mess long enough for him to grow." She pressed her lips together. "There's something he's not telling me. He loves his sister and she loves him—loves him like a mother because that's what she had to be

when Glory was busy shooting that trash into her system.” She paused. “I think I have more influence on him. And there’s no denying Jasmine loves him. She doesn’t want him mixed up in the life around here, the thugs and the gang bangers and the hoodlums. She embraces it, but she knows her baby brother can do better.”

Will asked, “Has Jasmine run away before?”

“Twice, but always because there was a fight. We didn’t fight yesterday. We haven’t fought all week, for a change. Jasmine wasn’t angry with me, or at least no more angry than any teenager is at the person in charge.”

“Does she have a boyfriend?”

“Boy? He’s fifteen years older than she is.”

“What’s his name?”

“Luther Morrison. He lives on Basil Avenue, about three miles from here, in the Manderley Arms. I already called him. He says she’s not there.” She explained, “Each time she ran away before, I called him. Both times he told me she was there. Luther pretends that he believes Jasmine is seventeen, but he knows that child’s age just as sure as I’m sitting here and he’ll do anything I say to keep me from calling the cops on him.”

Will had to ask, “Why haven’t you called the police on him? She’s thirteen, he’s almost thirty. That’s statutory rape.”

“Because I learned with her mother that a girl who’s set on destroying herself will not be stopped. If I get this one arrested, she’ll just go to the next one, and he’ll be even worse than this Morrison, if that’s possible.”

“Gran?” Cedric asked. He was still in the bedroom, peeking around the edge of the door. “I finished cleaning the room.”

“Come here, child.” She reached out her arm for him and he came. She told Will, “I called the police as soon as I realized Jasmine was missing. I’m sure you can guess their response.”

“They told you to give it twenty-four hours, maybe forty-eight if they know she’s run away before.”

“Correct.”

Will addressed his words to Cedric. “You sounded pretty upset when you called me. Can you tell me why?”

Cedric looked at his grandmother, then back at Will. His shoulders went up into a shrug.

The old woman stirred, reaching into the front pocket of her housedress. “Walk Mr. Trent out and check the mail for me, baby. Mr. Trent?” Will struggled to get out of the chair. “Thank you for your concern.”

“Please don’t bother,” he said, noticing that she was trying to stand. “I’ll let you know what I find out.” He reached out to shake her hand, remembering at the last moment that the arthritis would make it too painful. She grabbed his hand before he could stop her, and he was surprised by the intensity of her grip. “Please,” she begged. “Please find her, Mr. Trent.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, knowing that she was proud and that it took everything she had to ask him for help.

He followed Cedric down the stairs and out into the parking lot. The overhead lights cast a strange glow over everything and Will realized that it was only a few hours past the time that Aleesha Monroe had been murdered on Sunday night. Cedric walked to the grassy area by the mailboxes where Jasmine had jumped him this morning.

Will watched the boy slip his key into the lock, waiting until he’d retrieved the mail to tell him, “This is serious, Cedric.”

“I know.”

“You’ve got to tell me what you know about Jasmine. Why did she tell you not to talk to the cops?”

“She said y’all are bad.”

That was a sentiment shared by pretty much everyone within a five-mile radius. “Tell me what happened on Sunday.”

“Nothing.”

“That’s not going to work this time, Cedric. Jasmine’s gone, and you heard your granny in there. I know you were listening at the door. I saw your shadow underneath.”

Cedric licked his lips, sorting through the mail.

Will knelt down in front of him, put both his hands on Cedric’s shoulders. “Tell me.”

“There was a man,” Cedric finally admitted his grammar improved now that his guard was

down. "He paid Jazz some money to make a phone call. That's all."

"What kind of phone call?"

"To the police. To say Leesha was being hurt."

Will looked over his shoulder at the pay phone. The booth was dark, the overhead light busted out. "He told her to call from the pay phone?"

Cedric nodded. "Didn't make no sense. She could'a used her cell. Everybody knows y'all can't trace a cell."

"Did he pay her?" Will guessed.

"Twenty bucks," Cedric admitted. "And then he gave her a dime for the phone."

Will dropped his hands and sat back on his heels. "What's that phone cost, about fifty cents?"

"Yeah," Cedric answered. "Jazz told him that a dime don't buy shit, and then he got all nervous and gave her two quarters."

Will wondered what the odds were that they'd find two quarters in the coin box that had the murderer's fingerprints on them. Then he wondered if it was Aleesha's murderer who had paid the girl to make the call. Why would the killer pay someone to report his own crime?

Will asked, "Did you recognize the man?"

The boy went back to shuffling the mail in his hands.

"Do you think you'd remember him if you saw a picture of him?"

"He was white," Cedric said. "I didn't see him too good. I was over here."

Will turned back to the phone booth. The lights around the parking lot and the mailboxes were strong enough to blind a grown man, but none of them would have illuminated the pay phone.

He asked Cedric, "What do you think happened?"

He didn't answer right away. Instead, he started shuffling the mail again. "She always told me before," he said. "When she was going off with Luther, she always told me so I wouldn't worry."

"After Jasmine made the call, which way did the man go when he left?"

Cedric pointed up the street toward the exit.

"He didn't have a car?"

"Don't know," the boy admitted. "We was out here on our way to Freddy's, and then he hollered us over. Jazz told me to go on see Freddy, but I stayed around to make sure she was okay."

Will wondered at the girl going up to a strange man in the dark. Maybe she was heading down that wrong path faster than her grandmother thought.

He asked, "Where's Freddy's?"

Cedric pointed across the street to another building.

"Did Jasmine go with you after she made the call?"

"After, yeah."

"And the man left up the street, toward the main road?"

Cedric nodded, chewing his bottom lip like he had more to say. Will gave him some time, and eventually, the boy said, "Jazz say she heard screaming in the stairs. Leesha was yelling."

"What was she yelling?"

"Jazz don't know. She was just yelling like she was being hurt, but she done that before, you know? Leesha takes up men sometimes and they kind of mean, but she say she don't mind."

"Cedric," Will said, putting his hands back on the boy's shoulders. "I need you to be straight with me now. Did Jasmine see who was hurting Aleesha? Did anyone talk to her, say anything to her?"

Cedric shook his head. "She told me she didn't see nothing, didn't hear nothing."

"Was she saying it like she did today, where if you thought about it awhile, you might think that what she was really saying was that maybe she *did* hear something, but she just wasn't going to tell anybody?"

"No," Cedric insisted. "She would'a told me."

Will didn't know if that was true or not. Jasmine wanted to protect her brother. She wouldn't have told him something that might put him in danger.

Cedric reached into his pocket and took out a twenty-dollar bill. "This is what she wanted," he told Will. "I took the money he gave her for making the phone call. That's why she was chasing me." He was trying to give Will the money.

"Hold on to it for me," Will said, knowing he couldn't do anything with the bill. "Jasmine didn't leave because you took the money, Cedric. You know that, right?"

The boy shrugged, and the bill slipped from his hands. Will bent down to help pick it up.

From the colors, he gathered they were mostly bills with about ten pieces of junk mail thrown in. Will probably had the same limited-time offers waiting for him back home.

He looked up at the mailboxes. "Cedric?"

"Yeah?"

"Did Aleesha have a mailbox here?"

"Yeah," Cedric answered, pointing to one of the higher boxes.

Will stood, making note of the number. "Let's get you back inside, okay?"

"I'm all right."

"I need to check something in Aleesha's apartment. Let me walk you up."

Cedric was slow going up the stairs. He used his key to get into his grandmother's apartment, but didn't go inside. Instead, he watched Will continue up to Aleesha Monroe's place. Will felt the boy's silent disapproval burning into his back: *Where are you going? You promised you'd help.*

Will still had the key in his vest pocket from earlier. He slipped it into the lock and turned it to the side, hearing the bolt engage. He tried the knob but the door did not open. Will was the first person to admit—at least to himself—that he had trouble with left and right, and God knows it got worse when he was tired, but even he had opened enough locks to know which direction to turn a key in order to open it. He slid the key back into the lock and tried the other way, hearing the bolt click again. This time, the door opened.

The apartment still had that same feel to it, like something bad had happened. He stood in the doorway with only the light from the hall illuminating the room. Will saw a drop of blood on the floor and knelt beside it. Without thinking, he put his fingers to the drop to check whether or not it was dry.

His fingers came back clean, but Will hadn't noticed the drop the first time he had come into the apartment. He flipped on the lights, thinking about the lock. This morning, Jasmine and Cedric had been making a racket when Will was locking the door. Michael and Will had run down the stairs at full speed. Maybe Will hadn't locked the door all the way. He'd certainly been in a hurry.

But Will remembered locking that door, hearing the bolt catch.

He checked the apartment, making sure nothing was missing. Because of his reading problem, Will doubted he had a photographic memory, but he could memorize scenes. He remembered where things went and he knew when they were out of place.

Still, something was off. The room just *felt* different.

The junk drawer looked the same, the ring of keys still tucked into the corner under a couple of store receipts. Will checked through them until he found a smaller key like the one Cedric had. Every cop who came into this building had to pass those mailboxes. Will had, too, though, and he hadn't asked if Monroe had any mail. Then again, Will wasn't the lead detective on the case. With Michael on leave, the inimitable Leo Donnelly was now in charge.

Will made sure to lock the door, checking it twice before heading back down the stairs. As with every other surface in the Homes, the mailboxes were sprayed with graffiti, and Will identified Aleesha's by the obscene drawing that pointed up to it. He slid in the key and turned the lock with some difficulty. He found the problem when the door swung open. The small compartment was packed with mail. Will took out the envelopes in clumps, noting the colors and the bright logos adorning the outsides. There was a plain white envelope in with the rest. A bulge was in the bottom corner, and he felt it with his fingers, guessing something metal was inside. From the shape, he thought it might be a cross. Someone had addressed the envelope by hand in a looping cursive that Will could not begin to decipher.

He looked at his watch, really looked at it like he never did, until he could make out the time. It was almost midnight. Angie would probably be getting home from work soon.

Will sat on Angie's front porch, the hard concrete making his bottom numb. He had no idea where she was and his cell phone battery had finally died, so he wasn't even sure of the time.

He had put the phone to good use before it had quit on him, calling a contact at the Atlanta police, making sure the report on Jasmine Allison wasn't filed away like the thousands of other missing persons reports the city collected each year. They had put out an APB on Jasmine, and Luther Morrison had found a highly annoyed cop knocking at his front door. The patrolman had searched the house and discovered an underage girl there, but it wasn't the underage girl they were looking for.

Will had a bad feeling about Jasmine's disappearance. According to Cedric, Jasmine had seen something, talked to someone who was connected to the murder. That made her either valuable or expendable, depending on who you talked to, but as far as the city of Atlanta was concerned, Will's bad feeling didn't warrant an all-out manhunt.

This train of thought had persuaded Will to break down and call Michael Ormewood to find out if the girl had said anything to him before she'd escaped up the stairs. Michael could have been the last person to see her. Unfortunately, the detective either wasn't home or wasn't picking up the phone.

Angie's black Monte Carlo SS pulled into her driveway. The engine sounded like it was running on gravel, and he couldn't help but wince at the knocking that continued when she turned off the ignition. Will had spent a year restoring that car for her. Nights, weekends, a whole vacation. He had been on a mission to give her something nice, prove that he could build something with his hands without being told by a stupid manual that bolt A matches with nut C. The fresh oil stains on the driveway were like a kick in the face.

Angie threw open the car door and demanded, "What the fuck are you doing here?"

He couldn't help but notice that she was dressed for work. The way she sat in the car gave him and everyone else on this side of the street a clear view right up her short skirt.

Will asked, "What did you do to the car?"

"Drove it." She got out and slammed the door so hard the car shook.

"There's oil all over the driveway."

"You don't say."

"Did you even get it serviced?"

"Where would I do that?"

"There are ten billion garages around here. You can't throw a rock without hitting one."

"If I was going to throw a rock, it'd be at your head, you stupid shit." She pushed him away from the front door so that she could open it. "I'm tired and I'm pissed off and I just want to get to bed." She tossed him a look over her shoulder, like she was just waiting for him to say something about joining her.

He said, "I need to talk to you."

"Will, why didn't you use your key?" She didn't have to crane her neck to look at him and he realized she was still wearing her high heels. She said, "You still have your key. Why did you sit out here in the cold?"

He smelled alcohol on her breath. "Have you been drinking?"

She sighed, giving him another whiff of what had to be whiskey. "Come in," she said, shoving her key into the lock. "My neighbors get enough of a show with me flashing my cootch every time I get out of the fucking car."

Will followed her inside and closed the door behind him.

She kicked off the stilettos by the couch and slid into a pair of pink flip-flops. Angie hated going barefoot.

"You don't need to be here." She flipped on the hall lights, talking and undressing as she walked toward the bedroom. "I've had the shittiest day of my life. All the girls are freaked out about Aleesha and they just kept fucking crying all night, as if my day wasn't bad enough already." He saw her naked back, the slope down her spine that disappeared into her pink panties, right before she slammed her bedroom door. "Three o'clock, I got a call from Lieutenant Canton," she continued, her voice muffled through the door. "He made me come in early and work with that fucker Ormewood all afternoon to find some stupid files from back when he was in Vice."

Will remembered that Michael had said he'd go through the files, but he was surprised the man had followed through, considering the state he was in the last time Will had seen him.

"I had to spend two hours sitting in this God damn skirt"—he heard something thump against the wall and assumed it was the skirt—"with that asshole breathing down my neck, joking with me like he was my best fucking friend."

Will had used his key about an hour earlier to put Aleesha Monroe's mail on the coffee table so he didn't have to hold it all night. He sat down on the couch now and went through it, stacking the letters into neat piles for Angie.

"I swear to God, Will," Angie began, coming back up the hallway. "Some days I look at those girls and think they get better treatment from their pimps than I do from these cocksuckers I have to work with."

The flip-flops slapped against her heels as she walked into the kitchen. He heard the refrigerator door open, then ice hitting a glass. She opened a bottle and poured something, then slammed the refrigerator again. Seconds later, she sat on the couch beside him, kicked off the shoes, and took a healthy swig from the glass.

Will couldn't help it. His spine straightened like a Catholic schoolgirl's. "Are you going to drink that in front of me?"

She pushed her bare foot against his leg, saying, "Just until you start to look pretty."

"Don't do that."

"Don't do what?" she teased, nudging him again.

He turned to look at her, which was exactly what she had been waiting for. Angie was lying back on the couch, her foot still pressed against his leg. She had put on a short black robe and nothing else. The belt was tied loosely around her waist and he could see a tuft of hair between the folds.

Will felt his throat tighten. His mouth was so full of saliva that he pressed his lips together to keep from drooling.

She said, "I guess you found out my guy's a pedophile."

Will stood up so quickly he got a head rush. "What?"

"Shelley," she said matter-of-factly. "I'm assuming you pulled his sheet?"

Will put his hand to his eyes, like taking away his ability to see her would change what he had just heard. "He's a pedophile?"

She gave him a funny smile. "You realize you're yelling?"

Will lowered his voice. "You asked me to check up on a *pedophile* for you?" He walked to the fireplace, wanting to punch his fist through the brick. "What the hell are you thinking? Is that who you're seeing now? Jesus, I was worried about Ormewood and now you're—"

"What did he say?"

Her tone had changed, and the air in the room seemed to turn cold along with it.

He asked, "What did who say?"

She sat up on the couch, crossing her legs, covering herself with the robe. "You know damn well what I'm talking about."

"No," he countered. "I don't."

She put her glass on the table by the mail. "What's this?"

"I know you slept with him."

"Real gentleman, that Michael Ormewood. Told you all the details, did he?" She gave a dry laugh as she thumbed through one of the stacks of mail he'd brought. "What fun it must have been for y'all to compare notes. No wonder the fucker was so happy this afternoon."

"He didn't tell me anything," Will said. "I figured it out on my own."

"Give the detective a gold star." She lifted her glass as if to toast him, then took a long drink. He watched her throat work as she swallowed and swallowed until the glass was empty.

Will turned his back to her, looking at the painting over the mantel. It was a triptych, three canvases hinged together to make one image when it was open, another image when it was closed. He had always assumed she liked the duplicity of the piece. It was just like Angie, one thing inside, another out. Just like Michael Ormewood, come to think of it. What a perfect pair.

"Aleesha's mail," Angie finally noticed. "Did you just find this?"

He nodded.

"Why didn't Michael's team check for it before?"

Will cleared his throat. "I don't know."

"Junk, junk, bill, bill." He heard the envelopes slapping the table as she rifled through them one by one. "What's this?"

Will didn't answer, but then she wasn't really asking him.

He heard her open the envelope, take out the letter. "Nice cross," she said. "I remember seeing Aleesha wear it sometimes."

He looked up at the painting, wishing it was a mirror that would show him what was inside of her. Maybe it was. Two abstract images, neither one of them making a bit of sense.

Will felt her behind him, her hand snaking into his jacket pocket. She took out his digital recorder. "This is new." She was standing so close that he could feel the heat from her body.

He heard her fiddling with the machine and turned around. "It's the orange button."

She held out the recorder. Will saw that her finger was already on the button. He gently pressed his thumb against her index finger and the recorder came on.

"Thanks."

Will couldn't look at her. He turned back around, leaning on the mantel again. She returned to the couch and sat down. The ice in the glass made a noise. She'd probably forgotten it was empty.

"Dear Mama,' " Angie finally read. " 'I know you think that I am writing to ask for money, but I just want to tell you that I don't want anything from you anymore. You always blamed me for leaving but you were the one who left us. You were the one who made me the pariah. The Bible tells us that the sins of the parent are visited on the child. I am the outcast, the untouchable who can only live with the other pariah, because of your sins.' " Angie told him, "She spells her name differently when she signs it: A-L-I-C-I-A instead of A-L-E-E-S-H-A."

Will made a disgusted sound in the back of his throat. She had to know that she might as well be speaking Chinese to him.

"She spells her name correctly—the more common way—when she signs it. She probably changed the spelling when she hit the streets." Angie kept talking and he couldn't stop listening. "Postmark says she mailed it two weeks ago. There's a stamp that says they returned the letter because she didn't put enough postage on it. I guess the cross probably put it over the weight limit or maybe it got caught in one of the machines." She paused. "Are you going to talk to the mother? This zip code isn't far from here, probably about ten miles. I wonder if she even knows her daughter is dead."

Will turned around. Angie held the envelope in her hand, flipped it over to make sure she didn't miss anything on the back. She looked up, saw him staring at her, and asked, "Will?"

He told her, "If I could snap my fingers and make it like I'd never even met you, I'd do it."

She put down the envelope. "I wish you could, too."

"What are you doing with a guy like that?"

"He can be charming when he wants to."

She meant Michael. "Was it before or after you found out he was using the girls?"

"Before, you asshole."

He gave her a sharp look. "I don't think you've got a right to be angry at me right now."

She gave in. "Yeah, you're right."

"So Shelley's a pedophile?"

She smiled, like it was funny. "And a murderer."

"You think this is some kind of joke?"

She leaned her elbows on her knees, giving that coy smile that said she was open to anything. "Don't be mad at me, baby."

"Don't put sex in the way of this."

"It's the only way I know how to communicate with people," she joked, something a psychiatrist had once told her. Will wasn't sure whether or not Angie had slept with the woman, but the observation was dead-on.

"Angie, please."

"I told you this was a bad night for you to be here." She stood up and put the envelope in his hand. "Come on, Willy," she said, pulling him toward the door. "You need to go home."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

FEBRUARY 8, 2006

9:24 AM

Angie remembered Gina Ormewood from Ken's retirement party. She was a mousy woman who seemed oblivious to the fact that heavy makeup made acne worse and a hair stylist who charged less than ten dollars wasn't exactly doing you a favor. If Angie hadn't fucked the woman's husband the same night, she probably wouldn't remember a thing about her. As it was, she knew that Gina worked at Piedmont Hospital, which in a roundabout kind of way you could say was on the way to Angie's work—if that was what you could call the strip in front of the liquor store on Cheshire Bridge Road.

She had called the hospital to make sure Gina Ormewood would be there. The woman's shift started in twenty minutes, but Angie didn't have anything better to do than wait. When she got to the hospital, she was glad she'd come early. Cars were backed up into the street and parking space on the deck seemed to be unavailable. After a while, Angie gave up. She flashed her badge to the rent-a-cop standing outside the ER and parked in a handicapped space.

There were a dozen people standing around the entrance of the ER, all with cigarettes dangling out of their mouths. Angie held her breath as she passed through the smoke. She hated cigarettes because they always reminded her of the burns on Will's body. Someone had spent hours searing the flesh around the angles of his shoulder blades, creating obscene patterns along the lines of his ribs.

She shuddered at the thought.

The man behind the counter didn't even look up when Angie stood in front of him. "Sign in, take a seat."

She slid her badge under his nose and he still didn't give her the courtesy of making eye contact. "You need to talk to the hospital administrator if you want records."

She looked at his name badge. "No records, Tank. I'm here for Gina Ormewood."

He looked up then. "What do you want Gina for?"

"It's about her husband."

"I hope the bastard's dead."

"Get in line." Her words were automatic, but she didn't lose sight of the fact that the man obviously hated Michael.

Tank stood, taking her in with his eyes. Angie was dressed for work, which meant she looked like a whore. She was still a cop, though, and this guy wasn't an idiot.

She asked, "When do you think Gina will be in?"

"You're not going to mess with her." He wasn't asking a question.

"I'm going to talk to her," Angie told him.

He kept his eyes locked on hers, as if he could tell just by looking at her whether she was going to be trouble. Working at a place like this, he probably had the instincts. "Give her another ten minutes," he said. "She's always early."

"Thank you." Angie dropped her badge back into her purse and took the only seat available in the crowded waiting room.

There was an older man and woman across from her who had probably been Angie's age when they came in. The woman gave Angie a look of disgust. The man gave Angie one of interest. Jesus, the guy had to be eighty and he was probably wondering how much money he had in his

wallet. His wife blew her nose into a well-worn tissue. She looked ready to fall over. Angie spread her legs wide and the man blanched. The wife looked like she was about to have a heart attack.

Before they could move away, Angie stood up and went to the magazine rack. God, this place was depressing. The waiting room was a cesspit of germs and disease. Anybody who thought America didn't have socialized medicine should spend a couple of hours in their local ER. Someone was paying for the uninsured and indigent to see a doctor, and it sure as shit wasn't the uninsured and indigent. Hell, you were better off without insurance these days. You got the same crappy care but you paid less.

She skimmed a *Field & Stream* then a *Ladies Home Journal* from the Christmas before last as she waited for Gina Ormewood to show up. Michael had gone too far yesterday. He'd grinned at her like a monkey while they worked through his Vice records and now she knew why. It was one thing to fuck with Angie—hell, she probably deserved it—but the fact that he'd gotten Will upset was unforgivable. Michael must have said something, let a few words slip that told Will he'd banged Angie. She worked with men all day, arrested the fuckers, even, and she knew how their little minds worked. A second couldn't go by without them either thinking about sex or talking about it, and the fact that Michael had fucked Angie was very good gossip. He'd probably even told that turdball Leo Donnelly. The whole squad must know by now. No wonder Will felt humiliated.

God, she had to stop listening to the girls so much. No one hated men as much as a prostitute. They spent hours talking about what lowlife scum men were, and then they had to go off with the first asshole who flashed a little green in their face. Angie had enough issues with men without starting to think about them like a whore.

The doors opened and she glanced up as a couple of guys came in. She looked back at the magazine, not really seeing the fruitcake recipe. Her head hurt with thoughts of Ormewood, the disappointment on Will's face, the way he had looked at her the night before when she'd gently pushed him out the front door. He must have been seething when Michael started bragging about it, telling the intimate details of his conquest.

Angie flipped to a different page, a different recipe. If Michael was going to screw around with the one person Angie cared about, then she was going to give it right back to him. Nothing distracted a man more than trouble at home.

"Robin?"

Angie turned to the next page. Mother and daughter sweaters. How fucking adorable.

"Robin? Is that you?"

Shit. She looked up. John Shelley stood in front of her. He was beside a black guy whose hand was wrapped in a bloody bandage.

Tank called, "Sign in, please."

"I'll be back," John told her. He took the black guy to the counter. Obviously, profuse bleeding moved you up the list because Tank took the guy right back.

John was staring at Angie. "What are you doing here?"

"Routine maintenance," she said, indicating her lower half. "What's up with that guy?"

"Ray-Ray," John told her, the asshole who wanted one on credit. "He cut his hand on a piece of metal sticking out of a car. Art asked me to bring him up."

"He gonna be okay?"

"If Art doesn't kill him first," John said. He seemed at a loss for words, and blurted out, "You look nice."

She looked like a whore, but a compliment was a compliment. "I thought you were gonna stay away from me."

"Oh." His face fell, and for a split second, she was reminded of Will—the way he could never hide his emotions from her, the way he sometimes wore his shame and disappointment on his sleeve.

"Come here," she said, taking John's arm and leading him out into the hall. They stood just inside the front door. Angie could see the smokers on the other side.

She asked John, "You doing okay?"

He was smiling now, almost hopeful. "Yeah. How about you?"

"No," she insisted. "Last time I saw you, you were in some trouble."

He nodded, looked down at his feet. Why did she always end up talking to men who looked at their feet?

"It's good to see you," he said. "I know I said I was going to stay away, but it's really nice seeing you."

"You hardly know me."

He smiled again. God, he had such a sweet smile. "I know about Stewie."

He knew lies, she thought. The first of many, if history told her anything.

"You really look nice."

"You already said that."

John laughed. "I'm trying to think of something else to say." He laughed again, not so much uncomfortable as really enjoying himself and her company. He looked down at his shoes again, and she saw that he had the prettiest eyelashes she had ever seen on a man. They were a soft, delicate brown. John was a big guy, almost as tall as Will, with a broader chest and a hell of a lot more self-confidence. Despite the cold weather, his face was tanned and there were golden streaks in his hair from working outside all day.

She said, "You look nice, too."

He smiled, and again she got the feeling that there was nothing more he wanted to do than stand there and talk to her all day.

What lies would she tell him? How long before she ended up taking John to a broom closet or a bathroom and screwing him, then hating him because he had fucked her? How long before she messed up his life, too?

She asked, "What were you in for, John?"

His smile dropped. His shoulders dropped, too.

Angie had already read his parole sheet, but that had only told her the charges, not the details of the crime. "Tell me what you did."

"You don't want to know."

"I had an aluminum siding salesman last night who wanted me to suck his toes and call him daddy," she said. "You think you're going to come up with something that shocks me?"

"I made some mistakes."

"We've all made mistakes."

He shook his head. "I don't want to talk about this."

"You were in a long time," she noted. "Did you kill somebody?"

He licked his lips, nervous. He was so much like Will that they could have been brothers. Hell, considering Will's slutty mother, maybe they *were* brothers.

John told her, "I should get back with Ray-Ray, make sure he's not talking himself into any trouble."

Angie looked out the glass doors. Gina Ormewood was standing with the smokers, her blue nurse's scrubs a stark contrast to the cigarette she was sucking on.

John said, "It was real good seeing you."

"Take care of yourself."

He started to walk away, then stopped. "When this is over," he said, spreading his hands out like there was a tangible thing between them. "When what's going on is over," he said, still being obtuse, "maybe we can go out to dinner or something? See a movie?"

"John," she began. "Do you think that's really gonna happen?"

He shook his head, but he still told her, "I'm going to hope it does, Robin. That's what's going to keep me going. I'm going to think about seeing a movie with you, buying you some popcorn, maybe holding your hand during the scary parts."

"It'd be cheaper if you just gave me the money to hold your scary parts."

He took her hand in his. She stood dumbstruck as he brought his lips to the back of her hand and gently kissed it. "Think about a movie you want to see," he told her. "Something really scary."

Then he was gone.

Angie leaned against the wall. She let out a stream of breath. Here was another perfectly sweet man she was ruining. Okay, he was a perfectly sweet pedophile and murderer, but glass houses and all that.

Gina Ormewood passed through the sliding doors. She did a double take when she saw Angie, but kept walking toward the ER.

"Hey," Angie said. "Wait up."

Gina stopped but didn't turn around. She said, "I just want to be left alone."

Angie walked around the woman to get a good look at her. Gina's lip was split. Her left eye

had a bruise that was painful to look at. No wonder the guy at the desk hated Michael.

Angie asked, "What the hell happened to you?"

"I fell down," Gina told her. She tried to walk away, but Angie blocked her path.

"Did he hit you?"

"What do you think?"

"Christ."

Gina narrowed her eyes, finally recognizing Angie. "You fucked my husband."

"Yeah, well." Angie knew better than to lie. "If it's any consolation, I've had much better."

Gina laughed, then winced as her lip split open again. She put her hand to her mouth and looked at the blood on her fingers. "God," she groaned. "Let's go in here."

She pushed open the door to the women's restroom and Angie followed. Gina was petite, maybe five-three in her sneakers and around a hundred pounds. Michael had at least eighty pounds on her. This was like kicking a puppy.

"I met him when I was fifteen," Gina said. She was leaning over the sink basin, looking at her split lip in the mirror. "He was interested in my cousin. She was a year younger than me. I thought I was protecting her."

Angie knew to let her talk.

"He was so sweet," Gina said. "I'd get these letters from him when he was in the Gulf, talking about how much he loved me, that he wanted to take care of me." Her eyes met Angie's in the mirror. "This is how he takes care of me now."

Angie rummaged in her purse. "They're all sweet at first."

"You know that for a fact?"

"Even got the blood-stained T-shirt."

Gina took a tissue from the dispenser and wet it under the faucet. "After Tim was born," she began, "things changed. He started getting angry about everything. He didn't want to touch me anymore. He'd leave the house at night, stay out for hours at a time." She dabbed the tissue at her bloody lip. "Sometimes, he'd go away for the whole weekend. I'd check the odometer and he'd put five, sometimes six hundred miles on the car."

Angie found what she was looking for in her purse. "Where was he going?"

"You get punched in the face enough times, you stop asking questions."

Angie told her, "Turn around." She dabbed some foundation onto the sponge and patted it around Gina's black eye. "This is Clinique," she said. "If you go a little lighter than your usual shade, do a little blending with your finger, it helps soften the bruise."

"Did he hit you, too?"

"No," Angie answered, concentrating on hiding the bruise. The truth was, Angie had been too drunk to remember exactly what Michael had done. All she knew was that she had woken up the next morning in the backseat of her car with a deep bite mark on her breast and a pain between her legs that took a couple of weeks to go away.

It wasn't like this was the first time something bad like that had happened, but it was the first time it had happened with a guy from work.

Gina said, "He told me he was with Ken."

"Wozniak?" Angie asked. Michael's partner in Homicide. "What was he doing with Ken?"

"He said they went fishing up in the mountains together."

Angie pressed her lips together, holding back comment. She couldn't picture Ken with a fishing pole, and even if she could, Ken wasn't exactly Michael's kind of guy.

Gina's voice dropped to almost a whisper. "Was he rough with you?"

Angie nodded. She used her fingers to tilt up Gina's chin so she could check her handiwork in the light.

"He's a bastard," Gina said, still whispering. "I just want to get away."

Angie added some more foundation. "You left him?"

"Two days ago."

"Where are you staying now?"

"With my mother," she answered. "He told me he'd come get me."

Angie checked her again. Perfect. "Did you file a report?"

She laughed. "You're a cop. You know how useless that would be."

"That's bullshit," Angie told her. "You go to DeKalb County and file a report. They don't give a shit if he's a cop. They'll take one look at you and run him in."

"And then what?" Gina asked. "What happens when he gets out?"

"File a restraining order."

"Look at my face," the woman said. "Do you think a restraining order is going to stop him?"

She had a point. Angie remembered her days in uniform, recalled vividly how she had once peeled a bloody restraining order from the hand of a woman who had been beaten to death by her husband. He had used a hammer. Their kids were watching.

Gina washed her hands at the sink. "Why are you here?"

"I wanted you to send Michael a message."

She turned off the faucet and grabbed a towel to wipe her hands. "You think he'll listen to me?"

"No," Angie admitted. She took one of her cards out of her purse. "I want to give you my phone number. Call me if he does anything to you."

Gina didn't take the card. "He's going to do whatever he wants. A phone call isn't going to save me." She checked herself in the mirror, smoothed her hair. "Thanks for the makeup. Clinique?" Angie nodded. "I'll get some at lunch today. If Michael finds out I talked to you, I'm probably going to need it."

"I won't tell him."

Gina leaned against the door, propping it open. "He'll find out," she said. "He always finds out about everything."

Angie stayed in the bathroom a few minutes, trying to regain her composure. She wanted to talk to Will, but what could she say? I went to the hospital to threaten Michael's wife? He beats the crap out of her and, oh, by the way, he was so rough with me that one night we spent together that I couldn't pee straight for a month? Like every other emotion in his life, Will had learned to control his sharp temper. Angie knew it was still there, though, right at the surface waiting for something to set it off. If Angie ever told him what had really happened with Michael Ormewood, Will would kill him.

A young girl came into the bathroom, saw Angie and quickly left. Well, that was a real spirit booster. Angie looked at her reflection, the heavy makeup, the white vinyl crotch-dusting skirt and the hot pink halter-top that barely hid her breasts. No wonder people were scared of her.

She went into the hallway, glancing back toward the doors of the emergency room. Tank held both Gina's hands in his as he talked to her. Angie couldn't hear what he was saying, but she could guess. Suddenly, Gina started crying, and the man wrapped his arms around her. Angie watched them for a moment, feeling like an intruder but unable to look away.

A therapist had once told Angie that she looked for men who would abuse her because that was all she had ever known. This same therapist had also suggested that the reason Angie kept hurting Will was because she wanted to make him angry, to bring him to the point where he finally hauled off and hit her; then, Angie could finally open herself up to him. Then, she could really love him.

Of course, Angie had lied to the therapist about her relationships, about Will. She wasn't about to tell a complete stranger the truth. Hell, she had told so many lies by now that she wouldn't know the truth if it bit her on the ass.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

11:31 AM

Will sat at his desk, listening to his recording of Angie reading the letter Monroe had written to her mother. He'd heard it enough times by now that he knew it by heart, but he wanted to hear her voice, catch her inflections. Sometimes, he'd look at the letter while he listened to the words, trying to follow along. Angie hated reading aloud and her tone showed it. Will thought if he could read as well as she could he would read out loud all of the time.

He slipped the headphones out of his ears and went back to the diagram he had been drawing in his mind. Will saw things in images, like a storyboard for a movie. Jasmine Allison's face came to mind. She was still missing. The Atlanta PD was looking, but Will wasn't certain they were taking this as seriously as he needed them to. Even if they did, where would they look? There were a million places you could stash a little girl—a million more if she didn't need to breathe while you were doing it.

Aleesha Monroe's mother wasn't home; he had called several times that morning until the maid had finally picked up and told him Ms. Monroe wasn't expected back until noon. Will had put in a call to DeKalb and found out that there was nothing new on the Cynthia Barrett case. He had even sent a forensic team back to the Homes to go over the pay phone. There were only seven quarters in the coin box, and none of them had usable prints.

No leads, no clues to follow up on. All he had was the letter and the slim hope that Miriam Monroe would know something.

Leo Donnelly knocked on Will's office door as he opened it. "Hey, man."

Will slid the recorder and headphones into his desk drawer. "What's going on?"

"You got a minute?"

"Sure."

Leo closed the door and sat in the chair beside Will's desk. He looked around the room, obviously nervous. "Nice place you got here."

Will glanced around, wondering if the detective was being sarcastic. The office was so small that Will had pushed one side of the desk up against the wall so that he didn't have to climb over it to get out.

Leo rubbed his palms on his cheap trousers as he stared out the window. The man seemed to be in a state of shock.

Will repeated, "What's going on?"

"I just talked with Greer. He's my lou, right?"

"Yeah." Will had met the lieutenant on Monday when he'd asked to be let in on the Monroe case.

Leo's tone was still incredulous. "He just got a courtesy call from DeKalb PD. Gina filed a restraining order on Mike."

"Gina Ormewood?" Will sat up in his chair. "What did she list as cause?"

"Her broken face." Leo propped his elbow on the desk and leaned his head in his hand. "Greer didn't see the pictures or nothing, but the cop who took the report said she was pretty banged up."

The detective was obviously shaken. Will had guessed that except for Michael, Leo didn't have many friends in the squad. Even if he was close to some of them, you didn't rat out your friends. That still did not explain why he'd come to Will.

Leo rubbed his chin with his thumb. "My old man used to haul off on my ma. Used to watch it when I was a kid."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"I thought I knew the guy," Leo said, meaning Ormewood. "This is out of left field, you know? At first, I thought maybe the bitch was making it up, but then I called Michael and ..." His voice trailed off. "He tried to laugh it off, said it was a big misunderstanding, that she was withdrawing the order, had just made it up to get back at him for working so much." Leo's mouth twisted to the side, like the explanation still didn't sit right with him. The man had been a cop for much longer than Will and he had probably heard that same excuse from many an abusive husband.

Leo continued, "Then I started pushing him about it, asking what was going on. Gina's a good girl, you know? Smart as a whip. I don't see her putting his nuts in a vice just for shits and giggles." Leo glanced at Will, then back out the window. "He told me to mind my own fucking business."

Leo had obviously taken that as an admission of guilt. Will took it as proof that Michael was answering his phone only when the caller ID told him it was somebody he wanted to talk to.

"Anyway," Leo turned back to Will, his knees banging the desk. He cursed a few times before saying, "I thought I'd come in and catch you up on the Monroe case."

"Anything new?"

"Her pimp was shot this morning."

"Baby G?"

"Two in the gut, one in the head. Doctors say it's just a matter of time before he's gone. No brain activity."

"They catch the doer?"

"Two of his cousins, both of them fifteen. G's grandmother saw the whole thing from her front window." Leo gave a half-shrug of his shoulder. "Not that she's saying shit. Both of 'em confessed, though, so it's not like we need her. Still, you'd think she'd be a little more upset that her grandson is dead."

Will thought of Cedric. "Did anyone else get hurt?"

"No, this was a gang thing. They said G dissed 'em the other day, didn't give them respect." Leo rubbed his chin again. "Shit, since when did they start handing out respect without you having to do anything to earn it?"

"You're sure this isn't related to Monroe?"

"Doesn't seem to be," Leo said. "They're sharing a lawyer, some probono fucker from Buckhead who gets his jollies helping the poor. Both of 'em will be out in ten years, tops."

"Maybe," Will said, thinking Leo was more than likely right. "Did you get that memo I sent around about Jasmine Allison?"

"Missing black girl?" he confirmed. "Stick a blonde wig on her, maybe she'll get in the papers."

Will didn't acknowledge the sarcasm. He had thought of something else. "Can you pull the list of recently released sex offenders for me?"

"How recent?"

Four months ago, fifteen-year-old Julie Cooper had been brutally raped, her tongue bitten in two. There was no telling how long her attacker had been operating under the radar. He told Leo, "Let's go back at least eight months."

"Just Atlanta or metro area, too?"

"Metro," Will said, knowing that he'd just tripled the work.

"They don't exactly keep that list up-to-date," Leo pointed out. "I'll have to do some cross-checking, mark off the ones that went back in, moved away, whatever."

"I appreciate it." Will felt the need to add, "I know this is a needle in a haystack, but we don't have much more to go on."

"I'm with you, man." Leo stood up. "Shouldn't take more than a day or so to get them together. You want me to leave them on your desk?"

"That'd be great."

"I'll take the first half," Leo offered. "We're working this together, right?"

"Right," Will echoed, though he didn't exactly count Donnelly as an ally.

Will took out his cell phone as Leo shut the door. He dialed Angie's number, listened to the rings as he waited for her to answer.

She must have recognized his number on the caller ID. "What's up?"

"Why would Michael's wife file a restraining order against him?"

She exhaled slowly, taking her time with the answer. "Because he beats her."

Will felt as if he had been beaten himself.

She asked, "You there?"

He didn't think he could form the words. "Did he hit you, Angie?"

"What you should be asking is how long they've been married."

"Did he ever hit you?"

"No, Will. He never hit me."

"Are you lying to me?"

Her laugh was that strange, disaffected laugh she gave when she needed to distance herself from something. "Why would I lie to you, baby?"

"Aleesha's pimp got shot this morning."

"It wasn't me."

"Can you be serious for just one minute?"

"What do you want me to say, Will?"

"There's a missing girl," he told her. "Her name is Jasmine Allison. She lives three floors down from Aleesha's place. Sunday night, somebody paid her twenty bucks to make a phone call to the police to report that Aleesha was being attacked. Now, she's missing."

Angie's tone changed. "When was she last seen?"

"Yesterday afternoon."

"Do you have any leads?"

"None."

"How old is she?"

"Fourteen."

Angie let out a soft breath. "Is anyone downtown taking this seriously?"

"Yeah, they're bending over backward to help the GBI."

She tried to take up for them. "They've got a lot of work to do down there."

"I'm not saying they don't."

"Has she run away before?"

"Twice."

"It's not something I'd put at the top of my roster if I was working in missing persons. Teenage girls run away all the time. We both know that. They've probably got hotter cases right now."

"Her home situation's not that bad."

"People run away for other reasons." Angie would know. She'd run away so many times that even Will had lost count.

He looked at the copy he'd made of the letter Aleesha had written to her mother. She'd used pencil on lined paper, so the reproduction wasn't that good. He tried to pick out some words but his eyes couldn't focus. Aleesha had probably run away from home, too.

Angie offered, "I'll talk to some people I know downtown and see if I can light a fire under them. They might take it better from me than some cocksucker from the GBI."

"Thank you."

Will closed the phone and looked at the display.

It was time to pay Aleesha Monroe's mother a visit.

Will seldom drove his car to work unless he knew that he would be on his own that day. Most of the time, he took his motorcycle in so that whoever he was partnered with had to drive. Unless he was going to one of his usual haunts—the grocery store, the local Cuban restaurant, the movies—putting him behind the wheel of a car was an invitation to get lost. He could read street signs eventually, but only at the expense of the other cars behind him. Maps, with their tiny print that skipped across the page, might as well have been written in Swahili and when he got frustrated, which tended to happen when the horns started blaring, Will quickly forgot how to tell left from right.

Driving to Miriam Monroe's house was an exercise in patience. Will ignored the angry stares and nasty shouts as he slowly made his way up DeKalb Avenue. The Monroes lived in Decatur near Agnes Scott College, a pricey little area with old Victorians and the sorts of houses most people could only dream about. Fortunately, the neighborhood wasn't large and with a little trial and error, he would find her house before the sun went down.

Will tapped his foot on the brake as he followed the fork across the railroad tracks and onto

College Avenue. He tried not to take it personally when a skinny old woman in a powder blue Cadillac sped past him, her fist shaking in the air.

With great effort, Will had managed to push Angie from his mind. He needed to work the case from the beginning to see if there was anything he had missed. There had to be some detail, some clue, that he just wasn't picking up on.

Thirty-two Paisley Avenue was a grand old home with a wraparound porch and a massive weeping willow draping its branches across the front yard. The house was sandblasted brick on the bottom and darkly painted shingles along the top. The tile roof was covered with pine needles, and Will imagined with the large number of trees in the yard, the Monroes had a constant battle on their hands just keeping the gutters clean.

He parked his car on the street and double-checked the mailbox, making out the name MONROE in bold black letters. Still, he checked the street number against the address from the envelope.

The doorbell was the old-fashioned kind that was an actual bell mounted to the center of the heavy front door. Will twisted the bow-tie piece of metal and could hear the shrill ring echoing in the house.

Footsteps clicked on tile; a woman's as well as a dog's.

"Hello?"

Will assumed a wary eye was pressed to the peephole in the door. This was a nice neighborhood, but they were still close enough to Atlanta to make the residents careful about opening their doors to strangers.

"I'm Agent Will Trent with the Georgia Bureau of Investigation," Will said, holding up his identification. "I'm looking for Miriam Monroe."

There was a hesitation, maybe a sigh, then the bolt was turned and the door opened.

Miriam Monroe looked just like her daughter. At least, her daughter would have looked like this had she lived a different life. Where Aleesha had been malnourished, almost skeletal, her mother was a robust woman, with long curly hair and an open way about her that seemed to invite people in. There was a glow in her cheeks, a sparkle in her eyes, and even though her mouth was pursed as she stared at Will, her expression guarded as she waited for him to speak, he could tell that she was the sort of woman who sought out the positive in life.

He looked down at the black poodle standing at her feet, then back up at the woman. "I've come about your daughter."

Her hand went to her chest. She grabbed the door to steady herself. "Ashley ...?"

"No," he assured her, reaching out to hold the woman up. He'd never considered she had more than one daughter. "Aleesha," he told her. "I've come about Aleesha."

She blinked several times, looking confused. "What?"

Will had a confused feeling himself. Had he read the mailbox wrong? Was he on the wrong street? "You're Miriam Monroe?"

She nodded. The dog barked, sensing trouble.

"I'm sorry," Will apologized to the woman. "I was told you had a daughter named Aleesha."

"I did have a daughter," she agreed. Her voice was faraway, as if she had lost her child long ago, which by her next words was exactly how she felt. "Aleesha left us when she was a teenager, Officer. We haven't seen her in nearly twenty years."

Will wasn't sure what to say. "May I come in?"

She smiled, stepping back from the door, gently moving the dog with her foot. "I've forgotten my manners."

"It's fine," Will assured her, thinking that no matter how many times he did this, he would never be able to predict how a parent would react to news of their child being lost.

She suggested, "Shall we go into the parlor?"

Will was trying not to gawk at the foyer, which was the largest he had ever seen in a private home. A huge staircase spiraled up to the top floor and a chandelier that looked as if it belonged in an opera house dangled above his head.

"We got it in Bologna," Miriam explained, leading him into the adjoining room. "My husband, Tobias, is an amateur collector."

"Oh," Will said, as if that made perfect sense. He thought about the homes he had visited over the last few days, Aleesha's shabby two rooms, the cramped apartment where Eleanor Allison raised her grandchildren. This was a mansion, plain and simple. From the thick rugs on the floors to the colorful African folk art on the walls, this was the type of place you lived in when money

wasn't a concern.

Miriam sat back in a comfortable-looking chair as the dog settled at her feet. "Would you like some lemonade?"

"No, thank you," Will told her, sitting on the couch. The cushions were hard and he guessed they didn't use this room much. He wondered if the grand piano tucked under the bay window was just for show. He also wondered what the hell he was doing. Will had learned a long time ago that giving a parent the news that their child was dead should be done quickly. Dragging it out only made it harder when the information finally came. Will wasn't Miriam Monroe's best friend; his job was simply to tell her the truth, then leave.

So, why wasn't he?

Maybe it was because there was something soothing about the woman's voice, her presence. Her face could have been the illustration dictionaries used for "mother." When Will was a kid, he had assumed that black kids were more loved than whites for the simple reason that of the hundred or so kids at the Atlanta Children's Home, there were only ever two African-Americans. Funny how stereotypes got stuck in your head when you were little.

"How can I help you?" she prompted. Her voice was very cultured, and she managed to glance at her watch without looking impatient.

"I'm sorry I frightened you. I assumed the woman I talked to on the phone earlier told you that I called."

"She mentioned someone called, but I wasn't expecting a policeman on my doorstep."

"I'm sorry," Will repeated, taking out a spiral notebook and a pen. He used this for show, mostly to let people know he was paying attention. He had clicked on his recorder when he'd taken the pen out of his breast pocket.

He said, "You don't seem surprised that I'm here about Aleesha."

"I suppose I'm not. Aleesha chose a life for herself that her father and I did not agree with. I'm sure you won't be surprised to know that you're not the first police officer to knock on our door." She smiled, but there was something more guarded about her manner. "If you think we can lead you to her, I'm sorry to say that we cannot."

Despite, or maybe because of, the woman's poise, Will knew that this was not going to be easy. "Where is your husband now?"

"He's giving a lecture in New York," she explained. "He specializes in health issues affecting women."

Will scribbled something in his notebook. "I see."

"You think it's ironic that a man who has devoted his life to helping women has a daughter who is a prostitute and a drug addict."

"Yes," Will admitted. "I do."

She sat back in the chair, seemingly relieved that they had gotten that out of the way. "We did everything we could to try to help our daughter."

"I'm sure you did."

"Are you really?" she asked, as if she wanted to catch him off guard. "We spent thousands of dollars on treatments, family therapy, individual therapy. Anything we thought would help her, we did." She clasped her hands in her lap. "The simple fact was that Aleesha did not want help. She started running away before she turned thirteen."

Will echoed something that Angie had said about the girl. "You can't help somebody who doesn't want to be helped."

"That's true," the mother agreed. "Do you have children?"

"No, ma'am. I don't have any children."

"It's the most wonderful blessing God has given us, our ability to bring a child into the world." She held out her hands, cradling an imaginary infant. "You hold them in your arms that first time, and they are more precious than gold. Every breath you take after that is only for your child. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Will nodded, his chest feeling as empty as her arms. He figured even if his own mother had held him, she obviously had no problem handing him off to somebody else shortly after.

Miriam continued, "Aleesha got mixed up with this boy." He could see tears wetting her eyelashes. "I grew up poor, as did Dr. Monroe. We both knew the value of a good education, though, and we worked very hard to take advantage of the opportunities that other folks had fought, even died, for."

He tried to compliment her. "Obviously, you've succeeded."

She gave him a glance that said they both knew that material things were hardly a measure of success. "We thought raising our children here in this neighborhood would protect them. Decatur has always been a little oasis."

"Drugs have a way of getting into any community."

"I suppose that's true," she allowed. "We wanted so much more for her. You live through your children. You ache for them, hurt for them, breathe for them when you can." She told Will, "She ran off with some man she met at the treatment facility. She was arrested a few weeks later on a drug charge. Aleesha went to jail and the man disappeared, probably found himself another silly girl."

When Will started with the GBI, he had been amazed to find how many women ended up in jail because their boyfriends had sent them out on a deal, convincing the women that cops were more lenient with the fairer sex. Prison was full of young girls who thought they were in love.

Miriam interrupted his thoughts. "Dr. Monroe and I realized very gradually that drug addiction is a terminal disease. It is a cancer that eats families alive." She stood up and walked across the room to the grand piano, saying, "You get to a point where you look around and you ask yourself, 'What is this doing to the rest of my family? What harm am I doing to my *other* children by concentrating all of my energy on rescuing this one child who will not be saved?'"

Framed photographs lined the piano, and she held her hand over each of them in turn. "Aleesha was the last girl. We called her our middle child because she was such a handful." She went to another frame, another child. "Ashley is the oldest. She's a gynecologist, like her father." She indicated yet another photograph. "Clinton is an orthopedist. Gerald is a psychiatrist. Harley is a classical pianist. Mason ..." She picked up a small frame shaped like a dog and laughed. "He's a dog groomer, God love him." She was extra careful as she put the frame back in place and Will wondered if Mason was his mother's favorite.

Six children. A comfortable house. Plenty of clothes and food and parents who took care of you. What would it be like to grow up in a family like that? Why had Aleesha turned her back on all of this?

Of course, Will had been in law enforcement too long to take all of this on face value. He knew from experience that drug addicts didn't generally start out as the happiest people on earth. They turned to drugs for a reason, whether it was the desire to fit in or the need to tune out. The absent father could be some kind of sadist. The brothers could have looked no farther than the hallway for their first sexual forays. The older sister could have been an overachiever who cast the kind of shadow in which nothing could grow.

But Will was not here to rattle the skeletons in the Monroe family closet. He was here to tell this woman that her daughter, lost so long ago, was finally lost forever.

He asked, "You haven't seen your daughter in twenty years?"

"At least."

"No phone calls? No cards or letters?"

Miriam recalled, "A few years ago we got a call. She was in jail. She wanted money."

Michael had said that Aleesha listed only Baby G as a contact when she'd been arrested, but the duty officer would have made a notation of who she called while she was inside, who visited her if she was kept more than a day.

He asked, "Were you the one who spoke to her?"

"Yes," she answered. "The conversation didn't last more than a minute. I told my daughter that I was not going to give her any money and she slammed the phone down on me." Miriam explained, "That was the last time we heard from her. I don't even know where she lives now."

"Do you have any idea who she associated with? Who her friends were?"

She shook her head. "I'm sorry, Officer. I warned you I would be little help in finding her." She looked down at her hand, which was still resting on the piano. "Could you tell me what she's done? She hasn't ..." She glanced up at Will, then back down again. "She hasn't harmed someone, has she?"

Will felt a lump rise in his throat. "Do your other children live close by?"

"Not close enough," she told him, a smile playing at her lips. "Mason is just down the street, but that's never close enough when you're a grandmother with three grandbabies to spoil."

"Maybe you should give him a call."

Her smile faltered. "Why would I need to do that?"

"Mrs. Monroe, I really wish you would call your son, or somebody who could maybe come and sit with you."

She sagged against the piano much as she had done at the front door. The dog gave a low growl as Will stood up.

Miriam's throat worked. "I suppose you're going to tell me that she finally took too much."

"No, ma'am." Again, he indicated the couch. "Would you please sit down?"

"I'm not going to faint," she told him, though her chocolate complexion was a marked shade lighter. "Tell me what happened to my daughter."

Will should have just told her and left her with her grief, but he couldn't. To his surprise, when he spoke, he sounded as if he was begging. "Mrs. Monroe, please, sit down."

She let him lead her over to the couch and sit beside her. He should take her hand, do something to soothe her, but Will didn't feel equipped to comfort her. He did know that prolonging the inevitable was one of the most selfish things he had ever done in his life.

He said, "Aleesha was murdered Sunday night in the stairway to her apartment."

Miriam's mouth opened as she gasped for air. "Murdered?"

"Someone killed her," Will provided. "I think she probably knew her attacker. I think that she prolonged him out into the stairway and he injured her ..." He faltered. "He injured her in such a way that it led to her death."

"Such a way," Miriam echoed. "What does that mean? Did she suffer?"

He was supposed to lie—it did no harm telling a mother her child had died quickly—but he could not. "I don't think there's any way to know if she was aware of what was happening to her. I hope she wasn't—" He stopped. "I hope there were enough drugs in her body so that she had no idea what was going on."

She gasped suddenly. "I saw it in the paper. A woman was murdered at Grady Homes. They didn't list her name, but ... I never thought, I just assumed ..."

"I'm sorry," Will told the poor woman, thinking he'd said that phrase more times in the last few days than he had in his entire life. He took out the photocopy of Aleesha's letter. "We found this in her mailbox. It was returned because there wasn't enough postage."

The mother grabbed the letter like it was a lifeline. Tears fell down her cheeks as she stared at the words. She must have read it a dozen times before she murmured, "The pariah."

"Can you tell me what she was talking about?"

Miriam held the letter in her lap, her hands trembling. "There was this house across the street—three doors down and a world away." She stared out the window as if she could see it. "We were the only black family in the neighborhood back then. Tobias and I laughed about people saying, 'There goes the neighborhood' when they already had the devil living in their own backyard."

"Does the family still live there?"

She shook her head. "There's been about ten different families in that house since the Carsons moved out. It's been added onto, turned into some kind of palace, but back then, it was just this little house where bad things happened. Every neighborhood has that, don't they? That one bad house with that one bad kid?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She looked back out the window. "Parties every weekend. Cars racing up and down the road. That boy was poison to everybody he came into contact with. We called him the Pariah of Paisley Street."

Will thought of the letter, the way Aleesha had referred to herself as a pariah.

Miriam continued, "His mother was never home. She was a lawyer, if you can believe that." She turned back to Will. "I suppose I could blame her until I was blue in the face, but the fact was that she was just as incapable of controlling her child as we were."

"Aleesha ran off with this boy?"

"No," the woman said. "She ran off with a thirty-nine-year-old man named Marcus Keith. He was one of the advisors in her treatment program. We found out later he had already served time for interfering with a minor." She gave a humorless laugh. "They might as well put a revolving door on every prison in America."

Will tried to tread carefully. "In the letter, she seems to be blaming you for something."

Miriam gave a tight smile. "When Aleesha was eleven years old, I left my family. There was a man. Like mother, like child, I suppose." She held up the letter. "Or, 'the sins of the parent,' as my daughter so eloquently put it."

"Obviously, you came back."

"Tobias and I worked it out, but things were very rocky for a long while. Aleesha got lost in

the shuffle, and then she fell in with that boy up the street.” She put her hand to her collar, pulling at a small cross that hung from a gold chain around her neck.

Will reached into his pocket and took out the cross from Aleesha’s letter. “We found this, too.”

Miriam looked at the cross but did not take it. “All my children have one.”

He did not want to tell her that Aleesha had sent it back. The letter was bad enough. Still, he had to ask, “Is there any significance to the cross?”

“Tobias bought them when I returned home. We all gathered around the table and he passed them out one by one. It signified our unity, our faith that we could be a family again.”

Will put the cross in her hand and folded her fingers around it. “I’m sure she’d want you to have this.”

He left her alone in the room, walking down the hall, past the artwork, the photographs, everything Miriam and Tobias Monroe had accumulated over the years to turn their house into a home. There was a tall table by the door, and Will was leaving her one of his cards when he heard her speaking in the other room. Her tone was muffled by distance and grief. She was obviously on the telephone.

“It’s Mama,” she told one of her many children. “I need you.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

9:16 PM

Angie was dead tired by the time she finished her shift. Thanks to her hard work, a pair of visiting propane salesmen, a truck driver and an unemployed father of three were sitting in jail right now, trying to figure out how they were going to explain to their wives that they had been arrested for soliciting a prostitute. If their explanations were anything like the ones they gave Angie—*My wife doesn't understand me ... I get lonely on the road ... my kids hate me*—they were looking at a long night in a cold cell.

In the scheme of things, Angie figured what she did every day was a pointless endeavor. The johns still kept coming back, the girls still kept going out. No one was interested in getting to the root of the problem. Angie had spent the last six years getting to know these women. They all had the same stories of sexual abuse and neglect in their pasts; they all had run away from something. It didn't take a Harvard economist to figure out that it'd be a hell of a lot cheaper spending money on helping keep kids safe when they were younger than it was to put them in jail when they were older. That was the American way, though. Spend a million dollars rescuing some kid who's fallen down a well, but God forbid you spend a hundred bucks up front to cap the well so the kid never falls down it in the first place.

Jasmine Allison was probably one of those lost kids who would never be found. She'd end up on the street with a new name, new attitude, new addictions that a pimp could use to control her. Angie could tell from the way Will talked about the girl that he was worried. He had good reason, considering Jasmine had been paid to make that phone call the night Aleesha was murdered. Angie also knew that there could have been a million other little things that chased the girl from her home. Still, she'd called a couple of guys downtown and asked them to look into the case.

Angie looked at the directions she'd scrawled on the page she'd torn from the phone book. Ken Wozniak was living at a nursing home on Lawrenceville Highway. The charge nurse who had given Angie directions had sounded excited to hear the man was going to have a visitor. Angie had only met Ken a couple of times. She doubted he would even remember her.

Visiting hours were over at ten. Judging from the empty parking lot, Ken wasn't the only person who didn't get many guests. The lobby was sparse but clean, with the usual white tiles and fluorescent lights. Some fake flowers were on a table in the small waiting area and a water cooler burped as she walked to the receptionist's desk.

The man leaned back in his chair, a knowing smile on his face as he looked Angie up and down, taking in every inch of her whore's outfit with the kind of sneer that said he knew exactly what she was and how much she should cost. He laced his fingers behind his head, making his shirt ride up so that she could see his bloated, hairy belly.

He licked his lips, asked, "How much?"

Angie reached into her purse and pulled out her badge.

The guy literally fell out of his chair. He scrambled to stand back up, mumbling, "I was just—" "I'm here to see Ken Wozniak."

"Oh, God." His voice shook as he tried to right the chair. "I need this job."

She wondered if he needed it so he could diddle the old ladies while they slept in their beds. "Take a pill, Cletus, I'm not here to bang you up."

"I just—"

"Wozniak," she repeated. "Where is he?"

His hands trembled as he tapped something into the computer keyboard. "Up the hall and to the left. Room three-ten. Jesus, lady, I'm sorry, okay? I've never done this before."

"Yeah, right. Me, either."

Angie's spiked heels clicked as she walked up the hallway. She could still see the way the prick receptionist had leered at her when she walked in the front door. That knowing look on his face like she was just a hole he was going to fuck. By the time she got to room three-ten, she felt about two feet tall.

"Hello?" she called, knocking on the door. Over the blare of the television, she heard a pleasant kind of grunt that she took as an invitation to come in.

"Ehn," Ken said when he saw her, his mouth curved up on one side as he tried to smile. He had lost about sixty pounds sitting in his wheelchair, and she wondered how he managed to wake up every morning knowing this was the life he had to look forward to.

"Remember me?" Angie asked.

He gave a deep, knowing laugh, as if to say, "How could I forget?"

Angie pulled a chair over and sat across from him. Ken fumbled with the remote in his lap, trying to mute the television. She hated nursing homes almost as much as she hated hospitals, and here she was visiting both in the same day. The chemical stench of disinfectant, the white sheets and flickering lights, reminded her of the first time she had seen her mother after the overdose. Deidre had been lying in bed, her body completely still, her mouth hanging open as if she had been surprised to find herself here. Irreversible coma. Angie was only a kid, but between *General Hospital* and *Days of Our Lives*, she knew exactly what that meant: baby, you are fucked.

"Deh," Ken said. He had finally managed to mute the television.

Angie tried to sound cheerful. "How you been?"

One shoulder went up. He'd certainly been better.

"Stupid question, huh?"

Ken allowed a smile on the side of his face that he could control.

"You can't talk well?"

"S'bad," he admitted.

"I'm here about Michael Ormewood."

He looked at the silent television for a couple of minutes. Finally, he blew out a puff of air.

Angie cut to the chase. "I know he's an asshole, so you don't have to bother telling me that."

Ken nodded.

"Did you know he beats his wife?"

Shock flickered in his eyes.

"Guess not," Angie said. "I saw her this morning. She looks like he took a bat to her."

His jaw set and his good hand clenched in his lap. Still a cop, even though he probably couldn't go to the toilet without someone there to wipe his ass.

Angie leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees. "I know you didn't like him. Why? What was it about him that you didn't like?"

He blew out a noisy stream of air in answer.

Angie shook her head. "I'm not following."

He blew out some more air.

"Oh," she said, finally getting it. "Hot air. He's full of hot air."

Ken nodded, excited, and she felt like she was playing a painful game of charades.

Still, she couldn't stop now. "When Michael worked Vice," she confided, "he was taking advantage of the girls."

Ken shrugged.

"Is that a 'what do you expect' shrug or an 'I'm not surprised' shrug?"

He looked at his hand in his lap, the index and middle finger slowly pointing up to show it was the second choice. *I'm not surprised.*

"I told him to leave or I'd report him, so he left."

"An ah ga ..." His mouth closed. She could see he hated trying to talk. "Ah gah hih."

"Yeah," she said. Michael had been assigned as Ken's partner. "You got him."

They both sat there, Ken's mouth working but no noises coming out. Angie tried to keep her face blank, tried not to let on how hard it was seeing him like this.

Finally, he said, "You," clear enough for anyone to understand him.

"You what?"

He just stared, and Angie realized he was looking straight down her shirt. She straightened up, laughing. "Jesus, Wozniak. You old poon hound."

"Nah." He waved her off with his hand. "Nah dah." He glanced around the room as if he needed a prop. Finally, he looked back at his hands. She watched as he forced his right index finger straight out, then made a circle with his left thumb and index finger. He slid the circle up and down the finger.

Angie crossed her arms. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Nah," he insisted. *No.*

"Yeah," she snapped, duplicating the fucking gesture with her own hands. "I got you, Ken. I know exactly what you're saying and I gotta say I'm impressed you still got it, but no way in hell is it gonna happen."

"You!" he yelled back, jabbing an angry finger at her. "Ma-ahl." He made the sign again.

"Ohhhh." She drew out the word, his meaning finally sinking in. *You and Michael.*

She asked, "You knew about that?"

Ken raised his eyebrows. *Who doesn't?*

"Yeah," she admitted. "I fucked him."

"He ... old ... me."

"I bet he did." Jesus, they all knew.

"Eh," Ken said. *Hey.*

She looked up. He held out his hand in an open shrug, asking her what else.

"One of my girls was killed."

He pointed to the television. "Home." He had obviously seen the story on the news.

"Yeah, she lived at Grady Homes," Angie told him. "Her tongue was bitten off. She choked to death on her own blood."

"Ma-ahl?"

For a minute, Angie thought he was asking if Michael had killed her. Then, she realized what he was asking.

"I don't know if Aleesha was one of the girls who went with him to get out of a bust," Angie admitted. "I stopped working the Homes about the same time he partnered up with you. My cover was blown."

"Who?"

Angie laughed at herself. She'd never even considered the question, just assumed that there was only a certain number of times you could take a john out and not come back with him before people started realizing you were a cop.

"I guess Michael could have outted me," she allowed. "He might have thought he was getting me in trouble, but they just moved me to a different strip. New girls. New johns." She thought about one John in particular. "Michael came to my new drag a few months ago," she told Ken. "I thought he was just being an asshole, but he told us to look out for this guy who'd just been paroled, said he was a bad motherfucker."

Ken snorted. He had obviously had the pleasure of being on the receiving end of Michael's trash-talking.

"Yeah, I didn't think anything about it, either," she admitted. "Then I ran into the guy he'd warned us about. His name is John Shelley."

Ken shrugged. *Never heard of him.*

"Anyway," Angie said, knowing she was talking in circles. "The day after Aleesha Monroe died, Michael's next-door neighbor was found dead in her backyard."

"Huhn?"

"Yeah," Angie agreed. She told him the things he wouldn't have heard on the news. Angie herself would not have known the details but for Will. "The neighbor's tongue was cut out. Monroe's was bitten off, but still ..."

Ken sat there. Angie felt bad. The old fucker was confused enough without her pouring her heart out to him.

"I shouldn't be bugging you with this."

"Mo." Ken made a circling motion with his hand. He wanted to hear more.

"Michael's neighbor was just fifteen." Angie stopped. Hadn't Gina Ormewood said she was fifteen when Michael met her?

She asked, "When was the Gulf War? Ninety? Ninety-one?"

Ken held up one finger.

"How old do you think Michael is? He's forty, right? They had some kind of party for him last year. I remember there were black balloons everywhere."

Ken nodded.

Angie sucked at math. Will would have figured all of this in his head, but she needed something to write on. She found a scrap of paper in her purse and scribbled the numbers down with her eyeliner pencil, muttering, "Michael was born in sixty-six, minus two thousand six." She checked the numbers, making sure she had it right. Slowly, she looked up at Ken. "Gina was fifteen when she met him. She said at first he was interested in her cousin, who was a year younger."

She held up the sheet for Ken to see. "He was twenty-five. What's a twenty-five-year-old man doing with a fifteen-year-old girl?"

Ken made a suggestive sound, the meaning loud and clear.

"Tell me something," she began. "You ever go fishing with Michael up in the mountains?"

The expression on his face was as clear as if he had spoken the words. *Hell no.*

Angie drove right past her house, her mind still trying to grasp what she had figured out while she talked to Ken. The fact that Michael Ormewood had pursued and married a teenage girl almost fifteen years ago wasn't exactly evidence that he was involved in something now, but the coincidence was still there and Angie had been a cop too long to believe in coincidences.

She worked a scenario in her head as she made a U-turn at the end of her street, passing by her house again and heading down Piedmont. She took a left at the light, then another left onto Ponce de Leon, as she let the possibilities play out. Michael was still using the girls, pulling rank for freebies. Baby G had figured this out. Maybe Aleesha Monroe had been one of the girls Michael used and G hadn't liked the cut in his income. He had killed Monroe, then killed Michael's next-door neighbor as a lesson.

But why should Baby G kill Cynthia Barrett? Even if Michael did have a thing for teenage girls, that didn't mean he was screwing his neighbor. And it wasn't like that kind of lechery was unusual in a man of forty. All you had to do was look at a fashion magazine or go to the local cinema to find images of scantily clad girls hanging on to men who were old enough to be their fathers. Hell, you couldn't walk through the local shopping mall without seeing a bunch of twelve-year-olds wearing T-shirts up to their nipples and jeans down to their hooches. And their mothers were usually wearing the same thing.

Angie passed City Hall East, then took a right into Poncey-Highlands. She slowed the car, checking to make sure Will's motorcycle was out front before she parked on the street.

She got out of the car, not giving herself time to change her mind. She used her fist to knock on his door, then pushed the bell a couple of times for good measure.

He took his sweet time opening the door. She saw he had rolled down his sleeves but not buttoned the cuffs. He was still wearing his vest and that stupid little dog was scooped into his left hand like a bag of candy.

She demanded, "Why do you always take so long to answer the fucking door?"

"What's wrong?"

She dropped her purse by the door and walked past him into the house. An audiobook was playing in the background and a pocket watch was laid out on the worktable where he had taken it apart to repair it. She looked at the tiny springs and gears he had stuck into a piece of cork, the various instruments he used to repair the winding mechanism. Angie had always been shocked by the fact that Will could figure out how a watch worked in about ten seconds but it took him half an hour to understand a page in a book.

Will put the dog on the floor. She trotted off into the kitchen. Angie heard her drinking some water.

"What's wrong?" Will repeated, muting the stereo.

"You need to talk to Aleesha's pimp."

"Baby G?" Will asked. "He's dead."

"What?"

"He died this afternoon," Will told her. "His cousins got sick of being pushed around."

"Slow down," she said, though she was the one with the racing heart. "Tell me what happened."

He narrowed his eyes, but still told her. "The day that Michael and I talked to Baby G, there

were two kids sitting on the hood of his BMW. G said they were his cousins."

Angie sat on the couch. "Okay."

"He chased them off with a bat. I guess they didn't like it. They ambushed him, shot him three times."

"Sit down," Angie told him. She hated when he hovered over her. "Are you sure that's what happened? The cousins shot him?"

"As sure as you can be when you're dealing with these thugs." Will sat beside her. "I talked to the arresting officer this afternoon. The kids will probably be tried as adults. One's already flipped on the other. He's got a record, a drug bust, an assault. This would be his third strike. He's trying to talk his way out of a life sentence."

"Are you sure they're not involved in the case?"

"Neither one of them even knew Aleesha."

Angie nodded, letting him know that she had heard him. She was too shocked to talk. Whatever Baby G knew about Michael Ormewood would be taken to his grave.

Will said, "You look bad."

"Thanks."

"I mean it," he said. "What's wrong with you?"

"I had a really hard day," she told him, suddenly feeling everything catch up with her. "I had to go to the hospital."

He sat up, took her hand. "Are you okay?"

"Not for me." She lied because it was easier than dealing with his anger if he found out she'd gone to Piedmont this morning to put the fear of Jesus into Ormewood's wife. "I took one of the girls in. It wasn't anything bad. Women stuff."

Will nodded, and she knew he wouldn't press her.

Christ, what a mess. She had things to tell him but didn't know where to begin. What could she say? That the night of Ken's party, Michael was rough with her? That Michael was the kind of guy you couldn't change your mind with? That with him, once things got started, there was no such thing as stopping?

She could still remember how much it hurt the next day, the bruises on her thighs, the feeling that something deep inside her had been torn. Shit, she'd been drunk out of her mind, but the marks on her skin were clear enough to tell the story.

"You okay?" Will tucked her hair behind her ear. The gentle gesture was something new. He never touched her like that, or maybe she never let him.

She said, "It was hard being there," not telling him exactly where "there" was. "I kept thinking about my mom."

Will stroked her hair and she wanted to close her eyes, put her head on his shoulder. Angie had taken him to see her mother a couple of times. Going to her mother's grave would have been easier for Angie than seeing Deidre lying in that hospital bed, not knowing if somewhere behind those closed eyes she was screaming for help. Why did Angie love the one person she should hate the most?

"Come here," Will said, pulling her close, putting his arms around her. He leaned back on the couch, taking her with him. "Just stay like this for a while."

Angie wanted to cry, but she couldn't let herself break down in front of Will. She pressed her face to his shoulder, smelling the detergent he used and the soy sauce that had dripped onto his tie. If she could stay like this, if she could just let him hold her, then maybe things would get better. Maybe they could make each other whole.

She turned her face toward him and kissed his neck. His skin reacted, and she kissed his Adam's apple as he swallowed.

He said, "We don't have to ..."

She cupped her hand around his neck and put her lips to his. Will was reluctant, but she teased the passion out of him, using her teeth and tongue until he started kissing her in earnest. His arms tensed as he gently lifted her up and laid her back on the couch. He kept his weight on his left elbow, his hand brushing her face as he kissed her neck.

The cuff of his shirt had slipped back, and Angie saw the angry pink scar on the inside of his wrist. She had taken him to the hospital that night, stayed by his bed as she waited for him to wake up and realize that it hadn't worked, that he was still alive.

Tentatively, she touched his wrist, tracing her finger along the same path the razor blade had taken as it had flayed open his skin.

Will jerked away, staring at her in shock.

"I'm sorry," she apologized.

He tried to sit up, but she grabbed his vest in her fists, pulling him back. "I said I'm sorry."

"Angie—" He tried to pull away again, but she wouldn't let him. They struggled but Will would never use his full strength against her. She managed to pull him down, pressing her lips firmly to his. She arced up into him and he stopped resisting. Angie kissed him deeper, rougher than usual, and to her surprise he returned it with the same intensity.

She felt her breath quicken, her mind blur. The weight of him on top of her was enough to bring tears to her eyes, and she slid her hand down into the waist of his pants, needing for this to go quickly before she lost herself.

"Christ," she mumbled, pulling open his vest, tugging his shirt out of his pants, then his undershirt, so that there was room enough for her hand.

He had pushed up her shirt, his mouth finding her bare breast. When she wrapped her hand around him, he lost his rhythm. She took over, using her free hand to slide down her panties. Angie guided him inside her before he could stop her.

His breath caught as she thrust up to him, tightening herself around him, trying to make him come.

"No," he whispered, struggling to slow down. His eyes were squeezed shut and he shook from the effort of restraining himself. She licked her tongue in his ear, bit the lobe, did everything in her power to force his release. He groaned loudly as he gave in, shuddering in climax.

"Oh, God," he breathed. "Angie ..."

She let him kiss her some more, stopping him when his mouth started to move down on her.

"No," she told him, pulling him back up to her face. "I need to go."

He was sweating, his breathing hard as he kissed her breasts. "Let me taste you."

The raw growl of his voice sent a tingle through her body. She bit her bottom lip, trying not to think about how good his mouth would feel down lower as his lips grazed her stomach.

"No," she managed, gently pulling him back up. "I need to go."

"Stay with me."

Somehow, the begging quality to his voice made it easier for her to leave. "I've got work tomorrow."

"So do I."

She pushed him away more firmly this time. "Will."

He rolled off her and fell against the back of the couch with another groan, but this one was far from an expression of pleasure.

She pulled her underwear back on as she stood. Her shirt was still crooked and she leaned over as she adjusted it.

He wrapped his hand around her leg. "Why do you do this?"

She stepped out of his reach, finding her purse on the table by the front door. "Why do you let me?"

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

FEBRUARY 9, 2006

9:58 AM

Martha Lam had apparently made not one but several phone calls. John had gotten a full refund on the rent he had paid at the flophouse and the room at Mr. Applebaum's was almost thirty dollars cheaper a month. Combined with the fifty bucks John had gotten for crawling through the vacuum tank, he might actually be able to eat this month.

"Damn," Ray-Ray said. He was looking at a woman who had just pulled up with a Toyota Camry full of screaming kids. "She cain't help that she ugly, but the least she could do is stay at home."

John gave him a sideways glance. "When'd you learn to speak in complete sentences?"

"They's a lot more to a brother than what you see," Ray-Ray told him.

He left John at the dryer and went to help wipe down one of the cars. John's uneasy peace with Ray-Ray had settled into some kind of friendliness on the other man's part since he'd taken him to the hospital. John wasn't sure what had brought about this transformation, but he wasn't about to complain. He had enough people after him right now. Anything that got Ray-Ray off his back was all right with him.

The hospital visit had been a good thing for John, too. He still felt his heart skip in his chest when he thought about seeing Robin in the waiting room. She'd been wearing her work attire, but he couldn't help seeing past that to her soft skin, her full lips. The way she stood with her weight shifted to one leg, her hip jutting out. What would it be like to run his hand along that hip, pull her close to him? These were the kinds of thoughts that kept a man awake at night.

Robin wasn't the reason John had gotten in to work early this morning, showing up even before Art. Moving from one place to the other wasn't a big deal. John had tossed his clothes into the cooler and used it as a suitcase as he walked the six blocks over to Mr. Applebaum's house. Once John was settled in, he went back to Ashby Street one more time and dug up the knife where he had buried it under a tree for safekeeping. He'd sweated all the way on the bus, scared he'd be caught with a weapon. At the car wash, John had dropped it in the vacuum canister and sat on the retaining wall under the magnolia tree until Art had driven up in his Cadillac, asking, "What's with you, Shelley? You bucking for a promotion?" as he locked his car door.

John was trying to think logically, figure out what to do next, but as much as he tried to concentrate, all he could feel was a burning anger. Michael had put that knife under his mattress in the flophouse just like he'd stashed the kitchen knife, the so-called murder weapon, in John's closet all those years ago. What the hell did the guy have against him? What did John ever do to Michael to bring this down on his head? Not just John's head, but on his entire family.

It was one thing to set up John all those years ago, but to keep it up, to use his identity while he was locked away in prison ... that was some kind of sick obsession. Michael hated him. You didn't hold on to another man's name for all these years unless you really fucking hated the guy. And the prick had obviously used his position on the police force to reach out to Ms. Lam, trying to get her to throw John back into Coastal with the pedophiles and rapists. It wasn't enough to frame him. He wanted John to suffer.

John had adjusted to his loss of freedom over the years, letting himself believe on some level that he belonged with men like Ben Carver. He had been a bad kid, a bad son. Richard Shelley could have testified to that. Even without his father's damning testimony, in John's own court of

opinion, he did not come out completely blameless in Mary Alice's murder. He had invited her to the party. He had been stoned. He had given her the alcoholic drink. He had gone back to her house, sneaked into her bedroom. He had snorted the speedball that knocked him on his ass. He had let it all happen.

But knowing it was Michael, his own cousin Woody, who had butchered Mary Alice made John sick with rage. He couldn't be angry for his own sake, but he could be angry for Mary Alice, livid as hell that Michael had not just raped the girl, not just killed her, but ravaged her like a rabid animal.

The crime scene photographs in the courtroom had been shocking, but John had been there, had seen her body with his own two eyes. The bite marks on her small breasts. The dark bruises and deep lacerations on her inner thighs. The way her eyes were still open, staring at the door like she thought her mother would walk through at any minute and wake her for church. Her mouth had been brimming with her own blood, her hair stuck to the pillow with it.

That fucking bastard. That God damn sick bastard.

It didn't stop with Mary Alice, though. Michael was still out there, still doing whatever the hell he wanted to do in John's name. And he was a cop. A cop! He could jam up John anytime, was probably sitting on his ass right now thinking of yet another way to put John in the frame for his own sick crimes. The thought of last night, the tips of John's fingers touching the folding knife, almost getting caught with a weapon in his hands, made him break out into a cold sweat. Michael could do anything. He could arrest John right now and there was nothing John could do about it.

And maybe John deserved it. Maybe after what he had done to Michael's neighbor, he deserved to be tossed back in jail with all the other sick bastards. He had mutilated a child. He had used his own hands to defile that girl. It didn't seem right that he should get away with such a thing.

The way things were looking, he probably wouldn't.

The dryer stopped and John started folding the towels, piling them up in a rolling sixty-drum trashcan so they could move them around the cars as they worked. He needed to talk to Ben again. John had grown up in prison, but he thought like a prisoner, not a criminal. He needed someone to tell him what to do.

"Are you John?"

The woman in front of him was slim, about five-eight or -nine. Her black hair was in a pixie cut and she wore a close-fit cropped jacket over her tight blue jeans.

"Can I help you?" he asked, looking for the telltale bulge under her jacket. She didn't look like a cop to him, her jacket was too nice, but John had never been good at spotting the bad guys.

"You're John Shelley?" she asked.

He glanced over her shoulder. Ray-Ray was sucking on a lollipop, but John could see his eyes were taking in the scene.

John asked, "Do I know you?"

"You moved," she said. "I thought you lived on Ashby Street."

He tried to smile when what he really wanted to do was drop the towels and run. "What's going on?"

She had her hands on her hips, and he thought about Ms. Lam. He couldn't help himself. He looked right at the metal cap screwed onto the vacuum tank.

"I'm Kathy Keenan," she said. "A friend of your sister's."

He dropped the towels. "Is Joyce—"

"She's fine," the woman assured him. "You just need to talk to her."

"I..." He looked down at the pile of towels, then back up at the woman. He didn't know who she was or why she was here, but she was crazy if she thought she could make Joyce do anything she didn't want to do.

John knelt down to scoop up the towels. "She doesn't want to talk to me."

"I know she doesn't," Kathy said. "But she needs to."

"Who are you?"

"I told you. I'm a friend of hers."

"You can't know her very well if you think this will work."

"I've shared her bed for the last twelve years, John. I think I pretty much know her better than anyone on earth."

So, Joyce was gay. John wondered what Richard thought about that. One child a convicted rapist and murderer, the other queer as a three-dollar bill. John couldn't help but smile at the probable magnitude of Richard's disappointment.

Kathy had asked, "Does it bother you that your sister's a lesbian?"

"I really don't think I have room to talk," John had admitted, all the while thinking, God, Richard must have been livid when he found out. His perfect Joyce was batting for the other team.

Kathy drove a black Porsche, the kind of car John could only see from his hands and knees as he cleaned the trash out of it. She had driven him straight up Piedmont Road, taking a right on Sidney Marcus and ending up parked in front of a small building on Lenox Road right up from the interstate. The sign outside read Keener, Rose and Shelley in fancy gold script. The car beside them, a graphite gray BMW, was parked in the space reserved for Joyce Shelley.

Joyce worked less than two miles from the Gorilla. She might have even passed him every day on her drive in.

"She's handling a closing right now," Kathy said. "She won't be long."

John's knees popped as he rolled himself out of the low-lying car. Time and again, he had to remind himself that he was almost forty years old. For some reason, he still felt fifteen, like Coastal had happened to another John, his mind going there while his body stayed on the outside, not aging, waiting for him to come back and claim it.

"We'll wait in her office," Kathy suggested, leading him through the building. The receptionist's eyes followed John as he walked past her desk, and he imagined that but for the janitor, she wasn't used to seeing his kind strolling through these pristine corridors.

"Back here." Kathy had grabbed some notes from a cubbyhole with her name on it, and she read through these as they walked down the hall.

Joyce's office was nice, exactly as John would have imagined if he let himself think about his sister and her life outside of him. The Persian carpet on the floor had deep blues and burgundies and the curtains were a thin linen that let in the sunlight. The paint on the wall was a kind of chocolate beige. The colors were masculine, but there was something really feminine to the way Joyce had used them. Or maybe a designer had done the office, some pricey chick from Buckhead who got paid to spend rich people's money. There were a couple of Oriental-looking paintings that weren't to John's taste, but the pictures on the credenza under the windows made his heart hurt in his chest.

A young Joyce and John on the log ride at Six Flags. Baby John in Richard's lap as he gave him a bottle. Ten-year-old Joyce on the beach in her two-piece bathing suit, a Popsicle in each hand. There were more recent photographs, too. Kathy and Joyce at the zoo. Kathy on a horse with a mountain view behind her. Two Labrador retrievers rolling around on the grass.

The photo that stopped him was of his mother. Emily with a scarf around her head, her eyes sunken, cheeks hollow. She was smiling, though. His mother had always had the most beautiful smile. John had gotten through so many nights thinking about that smile, the easy way she bestowed it, the genuine kindness behind it. Tears fell from his eyes at the sight of her, and he felt a physical ache knowing he would never see her again.

Kathy said, "Emily was a wonderful person."

John made himself put the frame back where it belonged. He used the back of his hand to wipe his eyes. "You knew her?"

"Yes," Kathy said. "She was very close to Joyce. It was hard on all of us when she got sick."

"I don't ..." John didn't know how to say this. "I don't remember seeing you at the funeral."

"I was there," she said, and he saw tension around her eyes. "Your father isn't very accepting of Joyce's relationship with me."

"No," John said. "He wouldn't be." Richard had always been certain that he knew the difference between right and wrong, good and bad. Whoever crossed that line was as easily cut out of his life as the cancerous tumors he removed in the operating room.

John felt the need to say, "I'm sorry about that. He's always loved Joyce."

Kathy gave him a careful look. "Are you trying to defend your father?"

"I guess it helps me if I try to understand his side of things, why he thinks the way he does."

She walked across the room and opened a door. John assumed it led to the bathroom, but he could see now that it was a walk-in closet lined with three filing cabinets. Spiral notebooks,

probably fifty in all, were stacked in neat piles on top of each one.

"These are all your court transcripts from your preliminary hearing, to the change of venue denial, to the last appeal." She had pointed to different drawers as she said this. "This is your medical stuff." She rested her hand on the top drawer of the cabinet nearest John. "Your first overdose in the ER, your admit after they arrested you, and ..." Her mouth opened, but she had stopped. She still looked him in the eye, though. "Information from the Coastal infirmary."

John swallowed. Zebra. They knew about Zebra.

"This is mostly parole board reports," Kathy said, opening a drawer that contained six or seven thick files. "Joyce got the copy of your last one about a month ago."

"Why?" John said, thinking about the volumes of files Joyce had kept for over twenty years. "Why would she have this?"

"It was your mother's," Kathy told him. "These notebooks." She took one off the pile. "These are all her notes. She knew your case backward and forward."

John opened the notebook, stared at his mother's neat cursive without really seeing it. When Emily was growing up, penmanship had mattered. Her writing was beautiful, flowing across the page like perfect flowers.

The words, however, weren't so pretty.

Speedball = heroin + cocaine + ??? Why the bradycardia? Why the apnea? John turned the page. *Bite marks around breasts match dental impressions? And, No semen recovered. Where is condom???*

Kathy said, "She was trying to get the physical evidence from the county at the end."

"Why?"

"She wanted to do a DNA test on the knife to prove that it was her blood, but the sample was so small they could only do a mitochondrial panel." When he shook his head, Kathy explained, "Mitochondrial DNA comes from the mother, so even if it was Emily's blood, there's no way to rule out that it couldn't be yours, too. Or Joyce's for that matter, but that still wouldn't have helped the case."

"'Bite marks'?" he read.

"She thought they could show your teeth didn't match the bite marks, but there was a case, a Supreme Court case, where bite-mark evidence was ruled inadmissible." She added, "But she thought that might help with the ... the severing."

"What?"

"The state's odontologist was never called to the stand. About three years before she died, Emily petitioned for all your evidence, all the files. She was determined to start over, see if she missed anything. She found a report where the state's dental expert said that he thought the tongue was ... that it was bitten off, not cut off."

"Bitten off?" John echoed. His mind flashed on Cynthia Barrett, the sickening slickness of her tongue when he'd gripped it between his thumb and forefinger. Cutting was hard enough, but biting? What kind of monster bit off a girl's tongue?

"John?"

He cleared his throat, made himself speak. "The knife was their key piece of evidence. They had an expert who said it was used to cut out her tongue. It proved premeditation."

"Right. Emily was going for prosecutorial misconduct. They claim they handed over the doctor's report about the bite to Lydia during pretrial discovery, but Emily couldn't find any record of it. It could have been grounds for an appeal."

He fanned through the pages, looked at the dates. "Mom was working on this when she was sick."

"She couldn't stop," Kathy told him. "She wanted to get you out."

He couldn't get over the volume of notes she had taken. Pages and pages filled with all sorts of horrible details his mother should have never even heard about. For the second time that day, he was crying in front of his sister's lover. "Why?" he asked. "Why did she do this? The appeals were over."

"There was still a slim chance," Kathy answered. "She didn't want to give that up."

"She was too sick," he said, flipping to the back of the notebook, seeing that the last entry was a week before she went into the hospital for the last time. "She shouldn't have been doing this. She should've been focusing on getting stronger, getting better."

"Emily knew she wasn't going to get better," Kathy told him. "She spent the last days of her life doing exactly what she wanted to do."

He was really crying now—big, fat tears as he thought about his mother poring over all this information every night, trying to find something, anything, that would get him out.

"She never told me," John said. "She never told me she was doing this."

"She didn't want to get your hopes up," Joyce said.

He swung around, wondering how long his sister had been standing behind him.

Joyce didn't look angry when she said, "Kathy, what are you doing?"

"Interfering," the other woman answered, smiling the way someone smiles when they've done something wrong but they know you'll forgive them.

Kathy said, "I'll leave you two alone." She squeezed Joyce's hand as she walked past her, then pulled the door closed.

John was still holding the notebook, Emily's life's work. "Your office is nice," he said. "And Kathy ..."

"How about that?" she said, wryly. "A bona fide homo in the Shelley clan."

"I bet Dad was proud."

She snorted a laugh. "Yeah. So happy that he changed his will."

John clenched his jaw. He didn't know what he was supposed to say.

"Mama made me promise not to throw those out," Joyce told him, waving her hand toward the closet. "I wanted to. I wanted to dump them all out in the yard and have a big bonfire. I almost did." She gave a humorless bark of a laugh, as if she was still surprised she hadn't torched everything. "I should have. I should have at least put them in a storage place or buried them somewhere." She let out a heavy sigh. "But I didn't."

"Why?"

"Because it's her. All of those files, all of those stupid notebooks. Did you know she never went anywhere without one?" Joyce added wryly, "Of course you didn't. She never took them inside when she visited you, but she worked on them, thought about them, the whole way down and the whole way back. Sometimes she'd call me in the middle of the night and ask me to look into some obscure law she found, something she thought might wrangle a new trial for you." Joyce looked back at the filing cabinets, the notebooks. "It's like they're tiny little pieces of her heart, her soul, and if I throw them out now, then I'm throwing her out, too."

John smoothed his hand along the cover of the notebook. His mother had given her life to him, dedicated her every waking moment to getting him out of Coastal.

All because of Michael Ormewood.

Michael might as well have killed Emily after he finished with Mary Alice. He should have reached into Joyce's chest and squeezed the life out of her heart. Oh, God, John wanted to kill him. He wanted to beat him senseless, then wrap his hands around Michael's neck and watch the other man's eyes as he realized he was going to die. John would loosen his hands, taking him to the edge then bringing him back just to watch the fear, the absolute fucking terror, as Michael realized he was completely helpless. Then, John would just leave him. He'd leave him alone in the middle of nowhere and let him die all by himself.

"John?" Joyce said. She had always been intuitive, always known when something was bothering him.

He opened the notebook again, skimmed his mother's writing. "What's this?" he asked. "Bradycardia. What does that mean?"

Joyce walked over to the closet and opened one of the file drawers. "When they arrested you," she said, "you were too weak to stand on your own."

"Yeah." He had been terrified.

"They took you to the hospital. Mom kept insisting something was wrong with you." She searched through the files. "She made them do an EKG, an EEG, bloodwork, MRI."

John had a vague recollection of this. "Why?"

"Because she knew that something was wrong." Joyce finally found what she was looking for. "Here."

He took the medical report, carefully reading the words while Joyce waited. The numbers on the tests made no sense to him, but John had worked at the prison infirmary. He knew the section to look for. He read aloud from the handwritten doctor's notes under the box labeled "conclusions."

"'Resting heart rate below sixty, ataxic breathing and general physical condition indicate drug toxicity.'" He looked back at Joyce. "I took drugs, Joyce. I never said I didn't."

"No." She shook her head. "Read the rest."

John read to himself this time. The doctor had indicated that John's symptoms were not consistent with an overdose of cocaine and heroin. He suspected another drug was involved. Further blood tests were inconclusive, but testing was recommended on the powdered substance found at the scene.

The powdered substance. Michael had given him the baggie. John had never done heroin in his life. He had assumed good old Woody was trying to do him a favor, when in fact he had been trying to knock him out. Not just knock him out. Maybe there had been something else in that bag besides cocaine and heroin. John knew from prison talk that the labs could only find what they were specifically looking for. Michael could have spiked the speedball with something even more potent, something that would finish the job in case the volatile mixture didn't.

"What?" Joyce asked.

John's surprise must have registered on his face. He had been focusing on Mary Alice all this time. Had Michael meant to kill John, too? Had he thought to make it easier for himself to do whatever he wanted with Mary Alice and leave the blame at the foot of John's grave?

Two days after Mary Alice's body had been found, Michael and his mother had come by to visit. John was laid up in his room, feeling like shit, hiding behind a story he told to his mother about having a bad cold when in fact he could barely breathe every time he thought about Mary Alice's body lying beside him in her bed.

Michael had been the same as always, at least as far as John could recall. His cousin had stayed with him in his room, talking about—what?—John couldn't remember now. Something stupid, he was sure. John had fallen asleep. Was it then that Michael had planted the knife in his closet? Was it then that Michael had formed his plan? Or had somebody else worked it out from the beginning, sent Michael upstairs with the knife, told him to put it in John's closet so that there would be something concrete that tied him to Mary Alice's bedroom?

"Johnny?" Joyce said. She hadn't called him that since they were kids. "What is it?"

He closed the folder. "What do you remember about Aunt Lydia?"

"She was your lawyer." Joyce added, "She quit criminal law and went over to corporate after what happened to you. She said she lost her stomach for it. She never forgave herself for not being able to help you."

"I'll bet."

Joyce was obviously taken aback by the hatred in his tone. "I'm serious, John. She came to see Mom at the hospital."

"When was this?"

"I guess it was the day before Mom passed away. They had just put the tube down her throat so she could breathe." Joyce paused, collecting herself. "She was in a lot of pain. They had her on a morphine drip. I'm not even sure she knew Kathy and I were there, let alone Lydia."

"What did Lydia say to her?"

"I have no idea. We left them alone." She added, "She looked really bad. Aunt Lydia, I mean. She hadn't seen Mom in years but she couldn't stop crying. I never thought they were close, but maybe during the trial ... I don't know. I was so upset back then that I wasn't paying much attention to anybody."

"You didn't hear anything?"

"No," Joyce said. "Well, just at the end. I came back too soon, I guess. Lydia was holding Mom's hand. We'd told her the doctors said she didn't have long, maybe a day at the most." Joyce paused, probably thinking back on the scene. "Mom's eyes were closed—I don't even think she was aware that Lydia was there." She tilted her head. "But Lydia was sobbing. Really sobbing, John, like her heart was broken. She was shaking, and she kept saying, 'I'm so sorry, Emily. I'm so sorry.'" Joyce concluded, "She never forgave herself. She never got over losing your case."

Right, John thought. Aunt Lydia was probably plenty over it now. Nothing like unburdening your sins to someone who wouldn't live to tell them.

He asked, "How was Mom after she left?"

"Still out of it," Joyce answered. "She slept all of the time. It was hard for her to keep her eyes open."

"Did she say anything?"

"She couldn't, John. She had the tube down her throat."

John nodded. It was all making sense now. The first thing Aunt Lydia had done as his lawyer was sit John down and make him tell her everything about that night, everything that had

happened. John had been terrified. He had told her the absolute truth, fuck whatever code of honor you were supposed to have about ratting out other kids. He told her about Michael tossing him the bag of what John thought was coke, about walking Mary Alice home and climbing through the window into her bedroom. He told her about the kiss, the way his brain had exploded like a rocket had gone off in his head. He told her about waking up the next morning lying in a pool of Mary Alice's blood.

When John had finished telling her the story, Aunt Lydia had tears in her eyes. She took his hand—grabbed it, actually—so hard that it hurt.

"Don't worry, John," she had said. "I'll take care of everything."

And she did. The bitch certainly did.

Joyce was still looking at him, waiting. He could tell she was tired, maybe exhausted. Makeup couldn't hide the dark circles under her eyes. Her shoulders were slumped in defeat. Still, John could not help but notice that she had stood here in her office talking to him for around thirty minutes without once yelling at him or accusing him of anything.

He asked, "Did they ever test the drugs? The white powder?"

"Of course. Lydia sent it to a private lab. Mom was on pins and needles for a week. They didn't come up with anything unusual, though. It was cocaine and heroin."

John felt a stabbing pain in his jaw. He had been clenching his teeth again.

"Johnny," Joyce said, sounding tired. So tired. "Tell me."

He closed his mother's notebook, the last notebook she had used on his case, the last thing she had ever held in her hands that connected her to her son.

"Get Kathy back in here," John said. "I think she needs to hear this, too."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

9:22 PM

Will sat in his office, trying not to twiddle his thumbs. He had paid a visit to Luther Morrison, Jasmine Allison's ... what? What did you call a thirty-year-old man who was having sex with a fourteen-year-old girl? Sick God damn bastard was what Will had decided on, and it had taken everything in him not to punch the animal in the face.

After that pleasant visit, Will had returned to City Hall East and caught up Amanda Wagner on the case. She hadn't offered any staggering insight but neither had she taken him to task for not having a lot to say. Amanda could be demanding, but she knew a difficult case when she saw one.

The one thing she had told him was to not focus so much on the missing girl. Will's case was the murder of Aleesha Monroe and how it connected to the other girls, not a runaway named Jasmine Allison. All he had was a ten-year-old boy's story and a bad feeling, and while Amanda respected his gut instinct, she wasn't about to waste time and resources based on either. She summed it up for him with her usual heartwarming pragmatism: the girl had a history of running away. She was dating a man who was twice her age. Her mother was in prison, her father was who knows where and most days, her grandmother couldn't get out of a chair without assistance.

The only way this would be news is if she *hadn't* run away.

The DeKalb cops hadn't moved an inch on Cynthia Barrett's case and they weren't keen to share their notes with Will. The DNA obtained from the vaginal swab Pete had taken was too contaminated to test. Toxicology had not yet come back, but Will wasn't holding his breath for a miraculous revelation.

As for Aleesha Monroe, Forensics had reported nothing more earth-shattering about her apartment than what Will had seen for himself: the place was remarkably clean. He'd even sent back the techs to test the spot he'd found in Monroe's doorway the night Jasmine was reported missing. There had not been enough of a sample to determine anything other than the spot was human blood.

All Will had to follow now was the stack of papers Leo Donnelly had left on his desk. Will had counted out the pages so that he would know what was ahead of him. About sixty rap sheets, two or three pages each, all detailing the lurid crimes of the metro area's recently released sex offenders.

He wasn't that desperate yet.

Will opened the fluorescent pink folder on his desk and found a recordable DVD in the back pocket. He slid this into the tray on his computer and clicked play.

The monitor showed two women and a man sitting at a table with a teenage girl. The man spoke first, identifying himself as Detective Dave Sanders of the Tucker police department, then giving the names of the two women before saying, "This is the statement of Julie Renee Cooper. Case number sixteen-forty-three-seven. Today is December ninth, two-thousand-five."

Julie Cooper leaned toward the microphone. The camera angle was wide and Will could see the girl's feet swinging back and forth over the floor.

"I went to the movies," the girl began, her words difficult to understand. Will knew that when the recording had been made, her severed tongue had only recently been reattached. "There was a man in the alley." Will had watched the teenager's statement so many times that he could almost recite the story along with her. He knew when she paused to cry, her head down on the

table, and the point where she got so upset that the recording had to be stopped.

Her abductor had dragged her into the alley. Julie had been too frightened to scream. He was wearing a black mask with holes for the mouth and eyes. She tasted blood when he put his mouth over hers, shoved his tongue past her lips. When she tried to turn her head away, he punched her in the face.

"Kiss me," he kept saying. "Kiss me."

Will jumped at the sound of his phone ringing. He picked up the receiver, said, "Will Trent."

There was a pause on the other end, but no words.

"Hello?" Will asked, turning down the volume on the computer speakers.

"Hey, man," Michael Ormewood said. "Didn't think you'd be there this late."

Will sat back in his chair, wondering why Michael had called if he'd thought Will wasn't going to be there. "Why didn't you try my cell?"

"Couldn't find the number," Michael explained, though how that was possible, Will did not know. He'd given all his numbers—even his home—on every message he'd left for Michael since Monday night. At first, Will had just wanted to talk to the man about Jasmine; now, he wanted to know why Michael had been avoiding his calls.

Will asked, "Everything okay?"

"Yeah. Thanks for asking." Will heard the click of a lighter. Michael inhaled, then said, "Been making myself useful around here. Knocked out some of those chores Gina's been ragging me about."

"Good." Will was quiet, knowing Michael would fill in the silence.

The detective said, "I talked to Barbara like you asked. My mother-in-law? She says she never saw Cynthia skipping school. Maybe the kid just wasn't feeling good that day?"

"Makes sense," Will allowed. He wasn't used to talking to people like Michael unless he was interrogating them, and Will struggled not to let his hatred come through. That's what it was—hatred. The man beat his wife. To Will's thinking, he raped prostitutes. God only knew what he had done to Angie.

Will asked, "How's your family?"

Michael hesitated. "What?"

"You said the other day you didn't feel safe. I was just wondering if they were doing okay."

"Yeah," Michael answered. "I got them over at my mother-in-law's, like I said." He chuckled. "Tell you what, she spoils Tim. There's gonna be a major adjustment when he gets back home."

Will thought about Miriam Monroe, the huge difference between the loving way she talked about her children and the way Michael talked about Tim. Michael was just giving it lip service, saying the words he thought a good father should say. The man beat his wife. Did he hurt his mentally retarded son, too?

Michael said, "You still there, man?"

"Yes."

"I said, DeKalb PD is shutting me out." He paused, probably to give Will room to respond. When he didn't, Michael asked, "You hear anything from them?"

He was fishing about the restraining order. Will gave him a nonanswer. "They don't exactly have a reputation for flashing their cards around the table."

"Right, right," Michael agreed. He blew out a stream of smoke. "Phil's real broken up about this. I tried to see if there was anything he knew, but the guy's just shattered, you know?"

"I appreciate your trying." Will decided to take a risk. "Detective Polaski told me she helped you go through some of your Vice files."

Michael was silent for a beat too long. "Right, she did. Great chick. You hook up with her?"

"Did you find anything in the files?"

Michael paused, blew out some more smoke. "Nothing. I ran her in a few times, like Polaski said."

"Aleesha?"

"Yeah. Couple of times, maybe three. I wrote down the dates. You want me to get them? She was part of the sweeps we did, just like I told you. Twenty, thirty girls at a time. I'm not surprised I didn't remember her."

"How about Baby G?"

"Nothing on him. He's pretty new at the Homes. I could'a met him before, but there's nothing in my files about it and I sure as shit don't remember. Maybe we should go at him again? Bring him down to the station and see what he knows?"

Will wondered if he knew the pimp was dead.

"So," Michael continued. "How's it going? Anything on Aleesha?"

"Nothing big," Will answered. "Tell me about Jasmine."

"Is that one of the girls?"

"She's the kid who took some skin off your face."

"Oh, that one." Michael's laugh sounded strained. "Yeah. Little hellfire."

"Did she say anything to you before she ran up the stairs?"

"Nothing I want to repeat in front of my wife."

"Your wife's there with you?"

He gave that laugh again. "Where else would she be?"

There was a long stretch of silence. Michael had said less than a minute ago that his family was staying with his mother-in-law. Why was he lying?

"Anyway," Michael said. "The girl—what's her name? She didn't say anything. You think she saw something the night Aleesha was killed?"

"I don't know." Was he embarrassed? Is that why he lied?

"I'd bring her into the station if you're gonna question her, man. I'm not trying to tell you how to do your job or anything, but you don't want some black brat bringing a charge against you. I was lucky I got away with a slap."

"I'll keep that in mind." Will wondered if Michael had already found out that Jasmine was missing. If he'd lie about one thing, he'd certainly have no problem lying about another. "I've been thinking, Michael, how strange it is that Aleesha is so much older than the other victims."

"How's that?"

"She's a grown woman. The other girls were teenagers. Then there's the tongue. Your neighbor's was cut out, the rest of the girls had theirs bitten."

"Yeah," Michael allowed, his tone measured. "Come to think of it, that is kind of strange."

Will watched Julie Cooper giving her statement on his computer screen. She was about to ask the detectives to turn off the camera for a minute so she could collect herself. How did a young girl survive that kind of thing? How did she manage to go to school, do her homework like every other teenager, with the knowledge of what she had endured always lurking in her mind?

Michael suggested, "Maybe he's been visiting the hookers to blow off some steam in between talking these girls." He paused. "I remember when I was in Vice how these girls used to talk themselves into trouble with the johns. Sometimes they'd get in the middle of things and go up on the price. Sometimes they'd negotiate certain acts, positions, whatever, just to get the guy to go back to their place, then they'd change the rules, say they weren't going to do it or they wanted more money."

Will hadn't considered that angle, but it was actually a good avenue to follow. That still didn't explain Cynthia Barrett, though.

He asked, "Are you sure you didn't piss somebody off, Michael? Maybe piss them off enough for them to do some kind of copycat thing with Cynthia, bring it to your back door?"

Michael laughed. "Are you being serious?"

"You tell me."

"That's fucking crazy, man."

"How's that?"

"They'd have to know a hell of a lot about the case," Michael pointed out. "We didn't release the detail about Monroe's tongue to the press. The only people who knew about that were cops." Michael muffled the phone, but Will heard him say, "Yeah, baby, I'll be right there." He said to Will, "Listen, Gina needs my help with Tim. Can I call you back in about ten minutes?"

"No," Will told him. "I don't need anything else."

"Just call if you do."

Will hung up the phone. He leaned back in his chair as he stared out the window. It had been dark out for some time, but the streetlights cast an unnatural spotlight on the abandoned rail yard next to the building. Will had gotten used to the depressing view.

The computer tooted like a steam train and Will closed the DVD program and opened his e-mail. The state computer wasn't very sophisticated—the dictionary was extremely limited and the spell-check didn't know half the words the average law enforcement officer used every day. Even if Will had asked, he knew they wouldn't let him put any outside programs on the hard drive, so he was stuck with it. Still, like most computers, there was a reading option.

He scrolled through some spam before finding a new e-mail from Pete Hanson. He highlighted

the text, clicked the menu bar, then selected "speak." A stilted voice read him Pete's message. The toxicology report had come back on Cynthia Barrett. Her last meal had been eggs and toast. There was a high level of nicotine in her system. There were also traces of alcohol and cocaine in her bloodstream.

Another dead end.

Will took out the copy he'd made of Alesha Monroe's letter to her mother, and he spread it out on the desk, pressing the folds open so it would lay flat. Her looping cursive was a nightmare but Will had already memorized the letter, so it was easier to read than if he'd come to it cold. Now, he went line-by-line, checking each sentence against his memory. Except for Monroe's tendency to capitalize when it suited her, Will didn't find anything new.

He folded up the letter and tucked it into his pocket. He glanced at the parole forms Leo had culled. A photograph was stapled to the corner of every profile, each inmate looking into the camera as he held up a black signboard that gave his vitals: name, crime, date of conviction, date of parole.

Reluctantly, Will slid open the top drawer to his desk. He found the staple remover and detached the photograph from the first offender profile. His office door was closed, the lights in the hall turned off. Still, he kept his voice to little above a whisper as he sounded out the first name.

After about an hour of this, he'd barely made a dent in the pile. His head was pounding and he dry-swallowed a handful of aspirin, thinking he would rather die of aspirin poisoning than from the headache hammering behind his eyes. Leo Donnelly had taken half the stack. He'd probably finished reading through his group in under an hour.

Will stood up and put on his jacket, thinking the task was probably a pointless one. If there was an offender in the database who had a habit of biting off tongues, Will would have pulled it when he first read about Monroe's case and did a keyword search in the computer. Leo's offender reports were from different districts and sometimes different states, so there was no uniformity in the description of the crimes. Some of the arresting officers had listed little more than the offense and age of the victim, others went into lurid detail, intimately describing the convict's predatory actions. Unless one of the photos had a guy standing with a severed tongue in his hand, Will was pretty much looking for a needle in a haystack.

Still, he grabbed the files before he took the elevator down to the garage. The reports sat on the passenger seat as he drove home, and Will found himself glancing down at them every so often as if he could not quite understand why they were there. He parked in the driveway behind his motorcycle, Betty's barks greeting him before he even made it up the porch. The little dog rushed out the door as soon as he opened it. Will snatched up the leash, prepared to track her down, but she did what she needed to do right on the front lawn and darted back inside before he could make it down the porch steps.

He turned around to find her enshrined on the couch pillows.

"Good evening to you, too," he told her, shutting the door. He stopped it before it caught and went back out to the car to fetch the files. Will dropped them on his desk, glancing at the answering machine. The message light was solid, but he picked up the phone just to make sure it was working.

The dial tone buzzed in his ear.

Supper was the same as breakfast, a bowl of cereal he ate standing over the sink. All he really wanted to do was lie down on the couch and fall asleep watching television. The files were stopping him, though. A man who could read well would have finished those summaries hours ago. A cop who was doing his job would've scanned them over lunch, knowing he was probably wasting his time but also knowing that good police work meant exhausting every lead you had.

Will could not abandon the work halfway through.

He took off his jacket and draped it over the back of his swivel chair. This shouldn't take too long, maybe three more hours at the most. Will wasn't going to quit just because it was hard and he sure as hell was not going to show up at work tomorrow knowing that he had left something undone. He should have come home earlier and tackled the reports in earnest. There were certain things he could not do at work without giving himself away.

The staple remover was in his coat pocket and he put it beside the stack of reports on his desk. He took two rulers out of his desk drawer and adjusted the shade on the desk lamp so that the bulb faced the wall, casting little more than a sliver of light onto the work surface.

"All right, handsome," Will mumbled, looking at the photograph stapled to the top of the next

report. The guy had about three teeth and the kind of greasy, thin hair that you only ever found in your lesser trailer parks.

Will removed the photograph and set it aside. He put the two rulers on top of the page and isolated the first line of text. Using the tips of his index fingers, he blocked out individual words so that he could examine them one-by-one. His tendency was to read backward, and separating words with his fingers kept his eyes from darting where they shouldn't go. Oddly, long words were easiest. Will was always seeing something simple, like "never" and turning it into "very" so that the sentence made absolutely no sense by the time he got to the end.

He picked out the three words at the top of the page, reading the name aloud so that he could better comprehend it. "Carter, Isaiah Henry." It didn't come out that easy, though. First, he said Cash, then Ford, probably because of the "car" part at the beginning of the last name. Isaiah was easy. Henry was another matter.

Christ, he was stupid.

Will looked up at the blank computer monitor in front of him, blinked to clear his vision. He turned on the computer just to buy some time while his mind played out the usual taunts, telling him he was probably retarded, that maybe he had something wrong with his brain that no one had ever bothered to figure out. God knew he had been beaten in the head enough times to knock something loose. At the end of the day, none of the possible reasons for his problem mattered and none of it changed the fact that there were kids in third grade who could read better than Will. And he was talking about the stupid ones who sat in the back.

The computer booted up, the fan whirring like the propeller on a model plane. Will clicked open his e-mail program and stared at the in-box for a couple of minutes before deleting an offer to extend the warranty on an appliance he did not even own. There was nothing else to distract him.

He returned to the stack of offenders, trying to make a game of it. The photograph was of a guy in his sixties. His white hair was combed in a neat part and his deep blue eyes made his ordinary face look more interesting. Put a hat on him and he could be a traveling salesman. Give him a Bible and he could be a deacon at the local church.

Slowly, Will slid the rulers down the page, reading line by line. A feed supply salesman by occupation, the man was a rapist who enjoyed torturing his victims. He had been sentenced for twelve years but gotten out in seven for good behavior. What exactly constituted good behavior for a man who pulled the fingernails off the hands of a twenty-two-year-old college student, Will was uncertain.

Another photo came off, another sheet of paper was put under the rulers. Will kept at it for hours, reading all the horrifying details of the sexual predators who had served their time and been paroled for good behavior. None of them did their full time, all but a handful looked like the sort of man you would smile at if you saw him walking down the street. Time crawled by, but Will did not look up until he was three rap sheets away from being finished.

Will stretched back, feeling his spine adjust against the hard edge of the chair. His knee bumped the desk, and the computer monitor flickered on.

It was past midnight. He might as well take a break and check his e-mail before he deciphered the details of the last three offenders.

There was a new mail from Amanda in his in-box, but he had no desire to read it. There were two requests from Caroline, Amanda's secretary, asking about evidence in a case. Will opened his speech program and used the microphone to dictate a response, then did spell-check and had the computer read it back. When he was satisfied the words made sense, he highlighted the text and pasted it into the body of an e-mail, then did another spell-check before sending it off.

A hot stock tip had come in while he was doing this and Will clicked it into the trash. Next, he went into the trash folder and deleted all the crap he had sent there.

Will figured if there was an Olympic medal in wasting time, he was at least qualified enough to be an alternate. Surely there was more he could do, though. He opened up his spam folder, highlighted everything and slid the cursor over to delete. A message popped up and judging by the shape of it, Will assumed it was asking him if he was sure he wanted to do this. Will clicked the blue button that meant okay, then watched the junk e-mails drain off the list.

He scrolled back into his unread mail, thinking he might take a moment to check out what Amanda had to say. A new e-mail from Caroline had come in. She was probably just making a joke about both of them working so late, but at this point, Will would have opened an herbal Viagra offer to postpone reading reports for even a second.

There was a jpeg file attached to Caroline's e-mail, and he clicked on download before highlighting the text of the e-mail so he could copy it into his speech program. Betty stirred on the couch, giving a muffled bark, and he turned around to make sure she was okay. The little dog was on her back with her skinny legs kicking in the air as she dreamed about ... whatever it was little dogs dreamed about. Cheese?

Will turned back around, the grin on his face dropping when he saw what was on his monitor. The photo had finished downloading. The boy was probably sixteen, his hair long to his collar, his mouth in a half-smile that came automatically from having a camera stuck in your face at every holiday or family outing. He held a signboard in front of his narrow chest, the skin of his fingertips ragged where he'd bitten his nails down to the quick. Will did not try to read the sign; he knew it told a name, a date of conviction, a charge. The eyes were what gave the boy away. A lot could change from fifteen to thirty-five, but the eyes were constant: the almond shape of the opening, the variation of color in the iris, the long, long lashes that were almost like a girl's.

The photo from the rap sheet Will had been about to read was still at his elbow. He held it up, thinking that there was no mistaking that the boy on the screen had grown up to be the felon in the photo.

Will pasted Caroline's mail into the speech program. He turned up the sound to his speakers, then clicked the menu bar and scrolled down to speak. The words were slow and metallic, their content enough to make him feel like he had been punched in the gut.

The program finished. Will did not need to hear it a second time.

He grabbed his car keys.

Angie's lieutenant had told Will she was at a liquor store on Cheshire Bridge Road. Will found the store easily enough, but Angie was not among the prostitutes leaning against the building.

He said, "I'm looking for someone."

"Me, too, handsome."

"No," Will said. He knew Angie didn't go by her real name when she did this, but she had never told him her chosen alias. "She's about five-eight. Brown hair, brown eyes. Olive skin."

"Sounds like me, sweetheart." This came from a short platinum blonde with a gap between her front teeth so pronounced that she whistled when she talked.

Another one said, "You looking for Robin, baby?"

"I don't know," he admitted, turning to the older woman. She had a black eye that was made worse by the makeup she had spackled over it.

"I'm Lola." She pushed herself away from the wall. "You her brother?"

"Yes," Will managed, not bothering to explain. "I need to talk to her."

"Give it a minute, honey," Lola soothed him. "She went back to the pokey with a date about ten minutes ago. She should be finishing up about now."

"Thank you," Will said. He tucked his hands into his pockets, realizing it was cold. He had been in such a hurry to leave the house that he hadn't even brought his coat.

Behind him, a car door slammed. A woman got out and while Will was watching, she reached between her legs, wiped herself and shook out her hand. She saw Will, then glanced back at the other girls, a question in her eyes.

Lola provided, "He's Robin's brother."

The woman walked her hooker's stroll past Will, giving him the once-over. "I had a brother like that, I would'a never left home."

Will glanced at his watch. He started to pace to try to work out the tension that was coiling every muscle he had into a tight ball, but each second that passed with Angie not showing her face only served to make it worse.

She always did this. She always put herself right in the middle of trouble and did not give a damn that Will suffered the consequences. As long as he had known her, Angie had pushed people as hard as she could, constantly testing their limits. It was a game that would get her killed one day, and then Will would be the one sitting on the couch, some other cop the unlucky bastard who had to hold his hand and tell him that she had been found strangled, beaten, raped, murdered.

The girls had been trash-talking, but Will noticed they'd turned quiet. He heard a rustling from the woods and Angie came out, flashlight in her hand.

She looked at Will, then the girls, then back at Will. Her mouth was set, her eyes lit with fury.

She turned on her heel, heading back into the woods, and Will followed her.

"Stop," he said, trying to keep up. "Would you just stop?"

She wouldn't listen. All he could do was follow the beam of her flashlight.

About twenty feet into the woods, she turned on him. "What the fuck are you doing here?" Her tone was sharp as a knife.

"I'm just your brother paying you a call."

Angie looked over his shoulder and Will followed suit. He could clearly see the girls standing in front of the liquor store. They made no attempt to hide their interest.

She whispered hoarsely, trying to keep her voice down. "This is the wrong fucking place for this, Will. Lola already thinks something's up."

He shoved John Shelley's rap sheet in her face. She did a double take when she saw the photograph, and he could have sworn her eyes softened.

"Read it," he ordered. "Read it to me so that I know I've got it right."

Angie shined the flashlight on the first page. He saw her eyes moving, reading the words. She looked up, said, "Will," like he was being unreasonable.

"Read it."

She held the flashlight under her arm, training the beam on the first page, then flipping to the second and third.

Finally, she looked up again. "So?"

He wanted to shake her. "Did you read what it says?"

Taking her time, she turned back to the first page and read aloud in a bored tone, "Jonathan Winston Shelley, six-one, one hundred ninety-five pounds, brown hair, brown eyes. Prior record: theft by taking. Received May 10, 1986, Coastal State Prison, maximum security, special offender's wing, age sixteen. Paroled July 22, 2005, age thirty-five. Registered sexual offender, pedophile." She looked back up, repeated, "So?"

"Read the last page," he said, meaning the part he'd printed out from Caroline's e-mail. Shelley's rap sheet had been brief, just listing the highlights of his crimes, but the records Caroline had found filled in all the blanks in horrid detail.

"Read it," he demanded.

She didn't want to. He could tell that from the steely way she glared at him.

He asked, "You want me to read it for you?"

"I only get an hour break for supper."

He snatched the pages from her hand, tried to find the right section. He was so angry that the words kept reversing on the page, their shapes morphing one into the other. He tried, "Ca ..." Will felt a knife-sharp pain in the front of his temple. God damnit, he knew at least two of the words. "Jonathan Shelley." He tried to pick out another one. "Drain. No, he—dead. He killed—"

Angie put her hand over his. She tried to take the report but he wouldn't let go. "Come on," she coaxed, gently, pulling the pages from his grasp.

Will clenched his fists as he stared at the ground. Christ. No wonder she couldn't stand to be with him.

She spoke softly. "I'm sorry."

He wanted to sink into the ground, just magically to somewhere else.

"I'm sorry."

"I read it before."

"I know you did," she told him, taking his hand again. "Look at me, Will. I'm sorry."

He could not look at her.

"You want me to read it out loud?"

"I don't care what you do."

"Will."

He knew he was sounding petulant, but couldn't stop. "I really don't."

The flashlight had fallen to the ground and she reached down to pick it up, still holding on to him. She shined the light on the pages and read, "On June 15, 1985, Shelley sexually assaulted Mary Alice Finney, a fifteen-year-old white female, then removed her tongue with a serrated kitchen knife, resulting in her death. In addition, Shelley made several deep bite marks in the victim's flesh and urinated on the body. Shelley's bloody fingerprints were found at the scene and on the body. The murder weapon was found in Shelley's bedroom closet. Known drug addictions: heroin, cocaine."

"Angie," was all he could say.

She was silent, letting a couple of cars pass before she said, "Remember I told you that Michael Ormewood came by here that one time?"

He was sick of hearing about Ormewood. If he never heard the man's name again, Will would die a happy man.

Angie said, "He told us to look out for a recently released sex offender named John Shelley. He said he was really a bad guy and to stay away from him." She looked down at the rap sheet. "Michael went to Decatur High School. He must have grown up in the area."

"Did you manage to ask him about his childhood years while you were going down on him?"

"Do you want me to go down on you, too, Will? Is that what this is about?"

He slapped her hand away. "Stop it."

She told him, "I read his personnel file."

"You're real interested in Michael for some reason. Why is he different? What makes him so special?"

"You're not listening to what I'm saying." She was talking to him like he was a child and he did not like it. "Michael went to Decatur High School, so he must have lived in the area. He was a few years older than John, but he would have heard about the crime. He would have known the details about the tongue. Why didn't he mention it to you? Why didn't he say, 'Hey, this reminds me of something that happened about twenty years ago right down the street from me.'"

Will was too upset to even consider the question.

She said, "John told me that someone was blackmailing him."

Will laughed. "You think that Michael Ormewood knows there's a guy out there raping and murdering women, taking out their tongues, but instead of arresting the doer, Michael's blackmailing him? For what? What could John Shelley possibly have that Michael Ormewood would want?"

"How do you explain Michael telling me to look out for John Shelley? How do you explain his not mentioning this same thing happening to a girl in the same neighborhood where he grew up?"

Will tried to make her see reason. "How do you explain the other girls?"

"What other girls?"

"Last year, two girls were sexually assaulted by a man wearing a black ski mask. Both of them had their tongues bitten off."

Her lips parted in surprise.

"John Shelley's been out seven months," Will told her. "Both girls lived thirty, forty minutes away from here." She was silent, so he added, "Julie Cooper's fifteen. The other girl was only fourteen. What do these crimes have in common? What's the link here?"

Angie said, "You know perps have their way of doing things. Why would he deviate? Why would he cut off some and bite off the others? Why would he go from little girls to a grown woman?"

Will recalled Michael's answer to this question, but he did not share it with Angie.

She asked, "Why didn't you tell me about the other cases before?"

"When, Angie? Over dinner? Maybe when we were holding hands, taking a long stroll in the park?"

"You could have told me."

"Why?" he asked. "Who knew you'd end up screwing around with a convicted pedophile?"

Her head jerked up. "I haven't slept with him."

"Yet."

Angie gave a heavy sigh.

"Here's an indisputable fact: Shelley raped and killed a fifteen-year-old girl. He cut out her tongue."

"He's not ..." She looked back at Shelley's photograph. "Whatever he did, he's not that guy anymore."

"Julie Cooper was fifteen," Will told her. "He raped her in an alley behind a movie theater. He bit off her tongue."

Angie shook her head.

"Anna Linder was fourteen. They found her in Stone Mountain Park the next day. She was holding her tongue in her hand like a security blanket. They had to pry it from her fingers."

Angie still did not respond.

"Cynthia Barrett, Angie. Cynthia Barrett was fifteen."

"Michael's neighbor."

Will shrugged. "So what?"

"Tell me this: How do they know each other? How did Michael know to warn me off him in the first place?" She indicated the liquor store with an angry wave of her hand. "You weren't there when he did it. There's something between them. Michael hates the guy."

"What else am I missing here?" Will asked. "Because what it sounds like to me is that you're so pissed at Michael Ormewood that you can't see straight. Why is that, Angie? Why can't you get this asshole out of your system?"

He could see the fury in her eyes, knew she was remembering the millions of times he had asked her this before.

Her voice was eerily calm when she said, "Did you ask Michael how old his wife was when he met her?" She didn't let him respond. "She was fifteen, Will. He was twenty-five."

"Did he rape her and bite out her tongue?" Will asked. "Because, unless he did, I don't see why that makes a bit of difference."

"I'm telling you, John didn't do this."

"I'll ask him myself when I bring him in."

"No." She grabbed his arm as if she could physically stop him. "I'll do it."

Will could only stare at her. "You've got to be kidding me."

"The minute you put those cuffs on him, he's shutting down."

"You don't know that."

"He's a con. Of course he'll shut down. He won't so much as fart until his lawyer shows up, and then the lawyer will tell you to go fuck yourself."

"You're not going to control this."

"What's the charge? Jaywalking?" She raised her eyebrows, as if she expected an answer. "You can bring him in for questioning, but what do you have? You can search his place, but what are you going to tell the judge when you ask for the warrant? 'He did it twenty years ago, Your Honor, so maybe, probably, possibly he could have done it again now?' " Angie crossed her arms. "Last time I checked, unless you're the president of the United States, you need some kind of evidence to throw a guy in jail."

Will did not answer because he knew that she was right.

"Do you have John's fingerprints on anything? Any witnesses? Anybody who saw anything?"

Jasmine, Will thought. Maybe she saw something. If she did, she was probably at the bottom of a lake right now.

Angie summed it up: "No forensic evidence, no witnesses and no case. You're right, Will. Let's go out and arrest him right now, why don't we?"

"He could be stalking his next victim," Will said, not adding that Angie could very well be the next woman he set his sights on.

"If you arrest him now, you'll have to kick him in twenty-four hours, and if it is Shelley who's doing this, then he'll know you're on to him and he'll go so deep underground that you'll never find him again."

"What do you propose I do? Wait until another girl is raped? Maybe murdered?" Will pointed out, "He could already have his next victim right now, Angie. What if he's got Jasmine? Am I supposed to sit around while she's counting down the minutes left in her life?"

"He'll talk to me. He doesn't know I'm a cop."

"What is it with this guy, Angie? Why won't you see him for what he is?"

"Maybe it's a good thing I don't judge men based on what they've done in their past."

"Is that supposed to hurt me?"

"Let me talk to him," she pleaded. "You can watch his house until morning, make sure he doesn't go out. If he's got that little girl, then he won't touch her without you knowing. I'll go to the car wash tomorrow morning and sit him down and talk to him."

"You think he's going to confide in you?"

"If he's innocent ..." She nodded. "Yeah. I can make him talk."

"And if he's not?"

"Then you'll be there." She actually tried to tease him. "You'll protect me, won't you, Willy?"

"This isn't anything to joke about."

"I know." She was looking over his shoulder again, watching the girls. "I need to get back to work."

“I don’t like this,” he said. “I don’t like any of this and I don’t want to do it.”

“That’s nothing new for either of us, is it?” She put her hand to his cheek, brushed her lips against his. “Go away, Will.”

“I don’t want to leave you.”

“You don’t have a choice.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

FEBRUARY 10, 2006

7:22 AM

John sat on a stool at the counter of the Empire Diner. He had walked in the door ravenously hungry, but for some reason when his food came, he could only bring himself to take a few bites. Nerves had his stomach in a death grip as he waited for his life to begin.

He had spent most of the night with Kathy and Joyce, trying to come up with a plan of action. Kathy wanted to go to the police, but if there was one thing the Shelley children could agree upon, it was that you could not trust the police. Michael would never talk. He was too smart to leave himself open. John's credit report might raise some questions, but the answers could very well come back and bite John in the ass. In the end, they had decided that Joyce would use her contacts at the county records department to try to find out where Aunt Lydia was living. Uncle Barry had only been married to her for a few years before he died, and they hadn't been able to find anything under the Carson family name. There had to be a trail somewhere. Once they found it, the Shelley children would confront Lydia about her role in framing John. She had obviously confessed her sins once before. They would not give her a moment's peace until she confessed them again—this time on the record.

As far as John's own confession went, he had not told his sister and her lover everything that had happened. He'd been as honest as possible up to a point. He had not told them about Michael's next-door neighbor. The thought of what he had done, the depths to which he had sunk, made him sick. All this time, John had believed Michael was the animal, but in that one moment when the opportunity had presented itself, John had been just as sadistic, just as vengeful as his cousin. Was this what Emily had fought for? Was this why his mother had spent hour upon hour writing in her notebooks, so that her little Johnny could get out of jail and mutilate a fifteen-year-old girl? For the first time in his life, John was glad his mother was gone, glad that he would never have to look into her beautiful eyes and know that she was looking at someone who was capable of such atrocities.

"Top you off?" the waitress asked, but she was already filling John's mug with coffee.

"Thanks," he mumbled.

The door opened and he glanced up into the mirror behind the counter to see Robin standing with her hands on her hips, looking around for a table. The restaurant was fairly busy, so she didn't notice him staring.

John fought the urge to turn around. He wanted to call her over, point to the empty stool beside him and listen to her talk. Too much was going on now, though. He had blood on his hands, guilt in his heart. He looked back down at his mug, staring into the murky liquid, wishing it could show him his future. Would there ever be a woman in his life? Would he ever find someone who knew what had happened to him, what he had done, and not run away screaming?

"Hey, you." Robin slipped onto the stool beside him. She was dressed differently. Her hair was in a ponytail and she was wearing jeans and a T-shirt instead of her usual hooker garb.

"Hey," John returned. "Off the clock?"

"Yeah," she said, turning over her coffee cup and signaling for the waitress.

Something else was different about her, but John couldn't pinpoint exactly what that was. It had nothing to do with the way she was dressed or the fact that she wasn't wearing a pound of makeup. If he knew her better, he might say that she was nervous.

She said, "You ever think that you just hate your job? That maybe you should just run away from home and never look back?"

He smiled. He had considered running away from home the whole time he was at Coastal. "You okay?"

She nodded, then gave him a sly smile. "Are you stalking me? First the hospital and now this."

He looked around. "You own this place or something?"

"This is my regular breakfast hangout."

"Sorry," he apologized. "Just looked like a good place to sit awhile." He'd had money in his pocket for the first time in forever and he'd wanted to treat himself.

She said, "I lied to you."

"About what?"

"My first kiss," she said. "It wasn't my little brother's best friend."

He tried to make a joke of it, even though his feelings were hurt. "Please tell me it wasn't your little brother."

She smiled, poured some cream into her coffee. "My parents were speed freaks," she said. "At least my mom and whoever it was she was banging were." Robin picked up her spoon and stirred the coffee. "The state took me away from her when I was a kid."

John didn't know what to say. He settled on, "I'm sorry to hear that."

"Yeah," she said. "I was in and out of foster care for a while. Met a lot of foster dads who were real happy to have a little girl living under their roof."

John was silent, watching her stir her coffee. She had the smallest hands. Why was it that women's hands were so much more attractive than men's?

"What about you?" she asked. "Did you come from a broken home, too?"

She had said the words sarcastically. John had met plenty of felons who claimed they were victims of circumstance, their dysfunctional families forcing them into a life of crime. The way they told their stories, you wouldn't think they had a choice in the matter.

"No," he told her. "I came from a perfectly normal home. Wonderful, cookie-baking, scout-leading mom. Kind of distant father, but he was home every night and he took an interest in what I was doing." He thought about Joyce. She was probably on the phone right now working her magic. He didn't know whether or not Aunt Lydia would do the right thing, but John thought he could live the rest of his life in peace just knowing that for the first time in twenty years, Joyce believed in him.

Robin tapped her spoon twice against the mug, then put it on the counter. "So, what happened to you, John? How'd you end up in jail?"

He shrugged. "Wrong crowd."

She laughed, but obviously didn't think it was funny. "I guess you were innocent?"

She had asked this two days ago at the hospital, and he gave her the stock answer. "Everybody in prison is innocent."

Robin was silent, staring at the mirror behind the counter.

"So," he said, wanting to change the subject. "Who was your first kiss?"

"My first real kiss?" she asked. "The first guy I kissed who I really wanted to kiss?" She seemed to think about it. "I met him at the state home," she finally said. "We were together for twenty-five years."

John blew on his coffee, took a sip. "That's a long time."

"Yeah, well." She picked up her spoon again. "I fucked around on him a lot."

John choked on his coffee.

She smiled, but it was more for her own sake. "We broke up two years ago."

"Why?"

"Because when you know somebody that long, when you grow up with somebody like that, you're just too ..." She searched for a word. "Raw," she decided. "Too vulnerable. I know everything about him and he knows everything about me. You can't really love somebody like that. I mean, sure, you can love them—he's like a part of me, part of my heart. But you can never be with them the way you want to. Not love them like a lover." She shrugged. "If I really cared about him, I'd leave him so that he could get on with his life."

John wasn't sure how to respond. "He's crazy to let you go."

"Well, there's more to it than my side of the story," she admitted. "I'm a real bitch, in case you hadn't noticed. What about you?"

John gave a startled "Me?"

"You have a girlfriend?"

He laughed. "Are you kidding me? I went in when I was sixteen. The only woman I ever saw was my mother."

"What about ...?" Her voice trailed off. "You were a kid, right? When you got to prison?"

John felt his jaw work. He nodded without looking at her, trying not to let his mind conjure up the image of Zebra, those black-and-white teeth, those hands clamping down on the back of his neck.

If she saw his acknowledgment, she didn't comment. Instead, she blew on her coffee and finally took a sip, saying, "Damn, it's cold."

John signaled for the waitress.

"How y'all doing here?" the woman asked.

"Fine, thank you," John told her, letting her fill his cup with more coffee. He wasn't used to so much caffeine in the morning and his hands were sweating. Or maybe he was just nervous because Robin was here. She was talking to him like they knew each other. John couldn't remember if there had ever been a time in his life when he'd had a conversation like this.

The waitress said, "Y'all let me know if you need anything."

Robin waited for the woman to leave before asking, "So, John, what have you been doing since you got out?"

"Reconnecting with my family," he answered. He couldn't help but add, "I've been looking for my cousin. There's some things we need to talk about."

Robin looked over his shoulder at a man sitting alone in the corner booth. John checked the guy's reflection in the mirror, wondering if he was one of her johns. The man was wearing a three-piece suit. He was probably a lawyer or a doctor with a family at home.

"John?" He looked back at Robin. She surprised him by asking, "What kind of trouble are you in?"

"No kind of trouble."

"You said somebody was blackmailing you."

He nodded. "I did."

"Who?"

John put his hands on either side of his cup. He wanted to answer her, to tell her everything that had happened, but Robin had enough in her life without him adding to the burden. What's more, he didn't have Joyce's optimism about Aunt Lydia doing the right thing. Michael was still her son, even if he was a sadistic murderer. There was no telling what he was capable of doing. John wouldn't be able to live with himself if something bad came down on Robin because of him.

He told her, "I can't get you caught up in all of this."

Her hand went to his thigh. "What if I want to be involved?" John's breath caught as she moved her hand higher. "I know you're a good guy."

His mouth opened so that he could breathe. "Maybe you shouldn't ..."

"I know you don't have anybody to talk to," she said, her hand firm on his leg. "I just want you to know that you can talk to me."

He shook his head, whispering, "Robin ..."

She rubbed her hand back and forth. "It's been a long time, huh?"

Never, John thought. It's been never.

"You wanna go somewhere and talk?"

"I don't ..." He couldn't think. "I don't have any money to—"

She moved closer to him. "I told you. I'm off the clock."

If her hand went any higher, he was going to have to ask the waitress for a towel. He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to find some strength.

He put his hand over hers. "I can't."

"You don't want me?"

"There's not a man alive who doesn't want you," he said, thinking there were no truer words ever spoken. "I care about you, Robin. I know that's stupid. I know I don't even know you. But I can't get you involved in my problems, okay? There's already been too many people hurt. If something happened to you, if you got hurt, too ..." He shook his head. He couldn't think about it. "When this is over," he said. "When this is over, I'll find you."

Robin had taken her hand away. She held her cup up to her mouth and repeated the question. "Who's blackmailing you, John?"

Her tone had changed. He couldn't exactly pinpoint how, but it reminded him of the guards in prison, the way they asked a question knowing that you had to answer them or they'd throw you in the hole.

He said, "It'll all be settled soon."

"How's that?"

"I'm just taking care of it," he told her. "I can't say anything else about it right now."

"You're not going to tell me anything?"

"Nope," he told her.

"Are you sure, John?"

She was so serious. He gave her a questioning smile, said, "Let's talk about something else."

"I need you to talk to me," she said. "I need to know what's going on."

"What's this all about?"

"It's about your life, John. Can't you be up-front with me?"

The hairs on the back of his neck went up. "I don't like where this is going."

Robin put down her mug. She stood up, her expression turning hard. "I tried to help you. Remember that."

"Come on," he said, not knowing what he'd done wrong. "Robin—"

He felt a hand on his shoulder and looked up to see the man in the three-piece suit standing behind him.

John said, "What's going on?"

The man looked at Robin, so John did, too.

"I'm sorry, John," she said, and she really seemed to be, but he did not know why. She reached into her purse and pulled out her wallet. Stupidly, he thought she was going to pay the bill. He opened his mouth to tell her not to worry about it, but by then he caught the glint of gold as she flipped open her badge.

As if he couldn't see for himself, she told him, "I'm a cop."

"Robin—"

"It's Angie, actually." The man behind him tightened his hand on John's shoulder. "Let's do this outside."

"No ..." John could feel his body starting to shake, his muscles turning to liquid.

"Outside," she ordered, her hand digging up under his arm, making him stand.

He walked like an invalid, leaning against her as the man opened the door. The Decatur cops had done the same thing to him when they had dragged him out of his bedroom. They had taken him down the stairs, into the front yard and cuffed him in front of the whole neighborhood. Somebody had screamed, and when he looked behind him, he realized it was his mother. Emily had fallen to her knees, Richard not even trying to hold her up, as she sobbed.

The sun in the parking lot outside the diner was brutal, and John blinked. He realized he was panting. Jail. They were taking him to jail. They'd take away his clothes, strip-search him, fingerprint him, throw him in a cell with a bunch of other men who were just waiting for John to show back up, waiting to show him exactly what they thought about a child-raping con who couldn't make it on the outside.

"Will." She was talking to the man behind John. "Don't."

John saw the silver cuffs the man held in his hand.

"Please ..." John managed. He couldn't breathe. His knees buckled. The last thing he saw was Robin moving forward to break his fall.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

8:55 AM

Angie felt dirty. Even after a scalding hot shower, she felt like she would never get rid of the filth inside.

The look on John's face, the fear, the sense of betrayal, had cut her heart like a jagged piece of metal. Will had carried John to the car, helped him into the backseat like a child getting ready for a trip to the store. Angie had stood there thinking, Here are the two men whose lives I've ruined the most.

She left before Will could stop her.

What was it about John Shelley that made her want to save him? Maybe it was because he was all alone in the world. Maybe it was because he wore his loneliness like a suit of armor that only Angie could see. He was like Will. Exactly like Will.

Despite the fact that she had cleaned her house top to bottom a few days before, Angie put on her gloves and went to work. She used half a gallon of bleach in the bathroom, scrubbing the glistening white grout with a toothbrush. Will had laid the tile for her, putting it on a diagonal because he knew instinctively that this would make the room look larger. He had painted the walls a creamy yellow and used an off-white oil on the trim while Angie had chided him about his decorating skills.

She should call him. Will was just doing his job. He was a good cop, but he was also a good man and it wasn't right for her to punish him because John Shelley had gotten mixed up in something bad. As soon as she finished cleaning the house, she would call Will's cell, make sure he knew it was the situation she hated, not him.

Angie started on the kitchen next, taking out pots and pans, wiping out all the cabinets. She kept going over what had happened this morning, trying to think if there was a way she could have made it easier.

"Fuck," Angie cursed. She needed shelf liner. It was stupid to wipe out the cabinets when there was probably all kinds of trash underneath the liner. She picked at the corner of the sticky vinyl on the bottom of the sink cabinet, ripping it up in two pieces. The base was clean, but she had already ruined the liner. Angie stood to get more, realizing before she even reached the pantry that she was out.

"Fuck," she cursed again, snapping off her cleaning gloves. She threw them into the sink, offering a few more expletives as she looked for her keys.

Ten minutes later, she was in her car, driving not to the grocery store, but straight up Ponce de Leon toward Stone Mountain. She knew where Michael lived. After they fucked, or, more to the point, after Michael fucked her, Angie had gotten a little obsessed. She had driven by his house a couple of times, seen his wife and kid in the driveway, caught sight of Michael washing his car. This behavior hadn't lasted long—maybe a week—before she realized she was acting like a deranged person. It wasn't Michael she was furious with, but herself, for getting into another bad situation.

The Ormewoods lived in a ranch house that fit the other houses in the neighborhood. Angie parked in the empty driveway. If any of the neighbors noticed her black Monte Carlo SS was out of place, they didn't come running. Every inch of her skin tingled as she got out of the car.

She was dressed in her usual cleaning attire: a pair of cutoffs, one of Will's old shirts and some pink flip-flops she had slid into as she left the house. The shoes made a popping sound against

her soles as she walked up to the garage. The wind was blowing, and Angie wrapped her arms around her waist to fight the chill. She stood on tiptoe as she peered into the garage.

The windows had been blacked out with paint.

A car drove by, and Angie followed it with her eyes, making sure it didn't slow, before heading to the front door. She rang the bell and waited, relishing the thought of Michael's surprise when he opened the front door and saw her standing here. She was going to tell him that John had been arrested, then she was going to ask Michael how he knew John Shelley, why he had told her and the girls to look out for the recently released murderer.

Angie knocked, then rang the bell again.

Nothing.

She tried the door, but it was locked. Forcing herself not to look over her shoulder or do anything else that might make her look like a thief, she walked casually around the house to the backyard, keeping her pace slow, glancing at the windows as if she was a friend who had just dropped by for a visit. She wished she had her cell phone as a prop, but she'd left it at home to charge.

A dog door was cut into the back door. The door looked old and she figured it had come with the house. Michael hated dogs. She remembered this from their first bust together. One of the girls had a mutt that wouldn't stop barking and Michael had pulled his gun when the animal lunged at him. The prostitute had laughed, and so had Angie. Come to think of it, this same prostitute was the girl who had told Angie that Michael was getting freebies.

Angie got on her knees and twisted her shoulders so she could get through the door. Her breeder's hips caught—thank you, Mother—but she managed to pull herself through. She crawled inside and stood in place, straining her ears, making sure no one was home. For the first time since she had left her own house, she wondered what the hell she was doing. Why would she break into Michael's house? What did she expect to find?

Maybe Will was right. Michael was certainly a jerk, and he beat his wife, and he had probably raped Angie that night she had been too drunk to know better, but that didn't mean he was mixed up in all of this. So why was she here?

"Shit," she hissed, turning around to crawl back out the way she'd come. She stopped mid-crouch as she heard a noise. A whimper? Was that what she had heard? Did Michael have a dog now?

Angie froze, listening. The sound didn't repeat itself, and she wondered for a half second if she was losing her mind. The fact that she had broken into a man's house did bring her sanity into question.

Still, Angie stood up. She might as well finish what she started. She left her shoes by the door. She hated being barefooted, but she didn't want the flip-flop sound to follow her through the house.

She stopped midway through the kitchen, hearing a car drive by. Angie listened, her ears straining. A door opened and slammed shut, but it was across the street. She heard somebody call a hello, a conversation start up, and she unclenched her ass. Christ, all she needed was for Michael to come home and find her snooping around his house.

The living room was what she would expect: an overstuffed couch and a big-screen television. She glanced down the hallway, but Angie didn't want to go into the bedrooms. She didn't want to see where Michael screwed his wife, know that this was the place where he probably beat Gina.

Had he beaten Angie? She didn't know. Her arms were bruised the next day, her privates on fire with pain. She had passed out in the car and he had done whatever he wanted to do. The stupid fucker. Couldn't he tell by looking at her that she could do pretty much anything? It wasn't like he had to wait for her to pass out.

There was a door at the back of the living room. A hasp lock bolted it shut. She tried to orient herself, figuring the garage was on the other side of the door. Why would he have such a serious lock on the garage door when anybody could come in through the dog door? And why would the windows be blacked out?

Angie walked over to the door, put her ear to the cool metal. The hinge on the lock squeaked as she pried it open. She put her hand on the knob and opened the door. The room was pitch-black, and she groped along the wall for the light switch. The fluorescent bulbs flickered on and off several times, and in the strobe she saw a workbench, a lawn mower, a pool table.

The lights stayed on. A naked young girl was tied to the pool table. Her mouth was gagged, her

face bloody. Her eyes opened wide at the sight of Angie, the whites showing in a complete circle around her irises. Except for the rapid rise and fall of her chest, she wasn't moving.

Angie's breath caught. She felt a sharp, searing pain at the back of her skull, then saw a blinding explosion as she crumpled to the floor. She heard the girl sobbing, a man laughing, and then nothing at all.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

10:13 AM

Will leaned back in his chair, looking out at the dismal view his office afforded. He picked up his phone and tried Angie's cell again, waiting until it went over into voice mail before disconnecting. He'd been trying to call her for the last hour, first on her home line, then on her cell. She'd told him she was going straight home, and it wasn't like her not to answer when he called. Even if she was mad at Will, Angie would have picked up the phone at least to cuss him out and tell him to stop calling.

She had been right about one thing at least. John Shelley hadn't said a word from the moment Will had put him in the car.

Leo Donnelly knocked on Will's office door, opening it before he was told to. "Lawyer's here."

"Thank you."

"Claims she's a friend of his sister's."

Will stood up, slipped on his jacket. "You don't believe her?"

Leo handed Will a business card, saying, "She's a real estate lawyer." He lowered his voice. "Hot-looking dyke."

Will didn't know what he was expected to say. He stared at the card for an appropriate amount of time before tucking it into his vest pocket.

Leo walked beside Will up the hallway. "I gotta tell you, she's a big loss for our side. Know what I mean?"

Will didn't want to have this conversation, so he asked, "Have you ever heard Michael mention John Shelley?"

"The perp?" Leo pursed his lips, thought about it. "Nope."

"There's a woman who works in Vice—Angie Polaski."

Leo's mouth shot up in a knowing grin. "Yeah, I know her."

Will opened the doorway to the stairs. Leo didn't look pleased that they weren't taking the elevator down the two flights to the interrogation rooms, but the man should be glad Will wasn't punching that grin off his face.

He told Leo, "Detective Polaski said that a couple of months ago, Michael warned her and some of the girls to look out for a con named John Shelley."

Leo's smile faltered as they reached the landing. "Mike knew about this guy before?"

"Seems like it."

Leo continued down the stairs, his fingers trailing the handrail. He stopped on the landing and Will turned around.

"Listen," Leo said. He glanced over the railing, lowered his voice. "This Polaski chick ... Mike threw her a bone a while back. He's a married guy, you know, really loves his wife but it's not like he's gonna say no to getting his knob polished, especially by something like that. Know what I mean?"

"What happened?"

"Polaski didn't understand the rules. She was looking for something a little more permanent. Mike tried to let her down easy, but she's had a real hard-on for him ever since."

Will almost laughed at the thought of someone thinking Angie wanted to be in a serious relationship. He continued down the stairs, asking, "You think she's making it up?"

"I think hell hath no fury, you know?"

"Yeah," Will agreed. "But why would she make up something like that?"

Leo took a few seconds to think of an answer. He finally shrugged. "Women, you know?"

"Didn't you tell me the other day that Gina filed a restraining order against Michael for beating her?"

"Well ..." Leo stopped again. "Yeah. So?"

Will kept walking. "You didn't seem to think she was making that up."

"No," Leo admitted. He rubbed his thumb along his chin, a tell Will had picked up on within minutes of meeting the detective. He hoped the man never played poker. "It's like this," Leo eventually said, "Mike called me last night and asked me how the case was going."

"He called me, too."

"What'd you tell him?"

Will opened the door to the second floor. "Probably the same as you. We don't have anything to go on."

"Yeah, but then I mentioned that you'd asked me to pull the sex offenders list. He got all hot and bothered about it. Said it was fucking brilliant." Leo gave Will an apologetic half-smile. "I don't think I'm squeezing your toes when I say that going through those files was a Hail Mary if there ever was one."

Will nodded. Shelley had been included in his group of registered offenders, but the parole sheet lacked the details Caroline had pulled for him. If Angie hadn't asked Will to look into the man, then Shelley would probably still be out in the street.

Of course, Michael Ormewood had been the one who told Angie about Shelley in the first place.

Leo's stride was shorter than Will's. He struggled to keep up as they walked down the hallway, saying, "Point is, Mike's been on the job almost as long as me. He knows it's a long shot, too." Will slowed his pace. "And he also knows that some smack-head pross living in the projects ain't gonna be keeping no tidy house."

Will stopped, thinking maybe he'd underestimated Leo Donnelly.

The detective said, "I'd bet my left one that place was scrubbed down before we got there."

"You mentioned this to Michael?"

"He argued with me," Leo admitted. "Mike's usually an easygoing guy, you know? But he got real pissed when I said the place had been cleaned. He wouldn't even put it in his report."

"Maybe he was just being careful?"

"Careful is when you leave out the fact that you found your name in the bitch's little black book, not when you forget to notice somebody's rubbed down the place with a gallon of Clorox."

Will tucked his hands into his pockets. "What are you doing now?"

Leo shrugged. "I got a couple'a three other cases I'm working. Why?"

"You mind going over to Michael's?"

"What for?"

"Pay him a call," Will said. "Make sure he's doing okay."

"I gotta say," Leo began, "the way he's been acting, I'm thinking right now I don't give a shit one way or the other if the guy is okay."

"Just check on him," Will insisted, putting his hand on Leo's shoulder. "I want to know where he is."

Leo stared up at him for a few seconds, then nodded. "Sure," he finally said. "Okay."

Will put his hand on the doorknob to the interrogation room but didn't open it. He closed his eyes, trying to center himself. While he was in that room, he couldn't think about Angie or Michael or Jasmine or anything else that would throw him off his game. John was the target and Will would not settle for anything less than a direct hit.

He knocked once on the door and walked into the room without waiting to be invited. John Shelley sat at the table. His lawyer was leaning across him, holding both his hands in hers.

They moved apart quickly when Will entered the room.

Will said, "I apologize for interrupting."

The woman stood up. Her voice was strong, indignant. She might have specialized in real estate, but she was still a lawyer. "Is my client under arrest?"

"I'm Special Agent Will Trent," he told her. "And you are?"

"Katherine Keenan. Can you tell me why my client is here?"

"I believe you're a real estate lawyer," Will said. "Are you representing Mr. Shelley in an acquisition?"

Her eyes narrowed. "Is he under arrest or not?"

Will started to sit, asking, "Do you mind?"

"Detective, I don't care whether you sit or stand or levitate into the air. Just stop dicking me around and answer my question."

John looked down at the table, but not before Will saw him smile.

"All right." Will sat down across from them, telling the lawyer, "But, if you don't mind, it's actually Special Agent Trent. Detectives work in local PD. I'm with State. The Georgia Bureau of Investigation. Perhaps you've seen us on the news?"

Keenan was obviously at a loss to the relevance, but John seemed to realize what that difference meant. State turned up the heat. Either the locals couldn't handle the case or the crime involved several jurisdictions.

John said, "I'm not answering any questions."

Will told him, "That's fine, Mr. Shelley. I don't have any questions for you. If I did, I might ask something like, 'Where were you the evening of December third of last year?' Or maybe I'd ask about October thirteenth." If the dates meant anything to John, he wasn't letting on. Will continued, "Then, I might get curious about last Sunday." Now, there was a reaction. Will pushed a little more. "You'd remember that day because of the Super Bowl. And the next day, the sixth. That was a Monday. Maybe I'd ask you where you were last Monday."

Keenan said, "He doesn't have to answer any of your questions."

Will spoke directly to John. "You need to trust me."

John stared at Will the way he might stare at a blank wall.

Will sat back in his chair and listed it off for both of them. "I've got a dead hooker, a dead teenager and two little girls north of here who are trying to figure out how to live the rest of their lives after having their tongues bitten off."

Will was watching the lawyer as he said this. She wasn't as practiced as John, hadn't learned how to hide her emotions as well.

Will continued, "I've also got a missing little girl. Her name is Jasmine. She's fourteen. Lives at the Homes with her little brother, Cedric. Last Sunday, a white man with brown hair paid her twenty dollars to make a phone call."

John clasped his hands together on the table.

"The funny thing is, this man gave her a dime to make the call." Will paused a moment. "I don't think pay phones have cost a dime since at least nineteen eighty-five."

John worked his hands.

Will told the lawyer, "Ms. Keenan, this is the question that keeps coming up: How does John Shelley know Michael Ormewood?"

She literally gasped at the name.

"Kathy," John cautioned.

Will explained the situation. "Last Monday, a fifteen-year-old girl died. Somebody cut her tongue out. I can't help thinking, Mr. Shelley, that twenty years ago, you cut out another little girl's tongue."

Keenan couldn't take it anymore. "It wasn't cut!"

"Kathy," John said. "Wait outside."

"John—"

"Please," he told her. "Just wait outside. Try to find Joyce."

She obviously didn't want to go.

"Please," he repeated.

"All right," she told him. "But I'll be right outside."

"Actually," Will began, standing, "you're not allowed to wait in the hall, Ms. Keenan. Government office, terrorists, you know how it is." He opened the door for her. "There's a room for attorneys one floor down, right by the vending machine. You can make some calls there, maybe get a snack."

She shot daggers at Will as she left the room. If anything, her departure heightened the tension rather than alleviated it.

Will took his time closing the door before sitting back down. He crossed his arms over his chest, waiting for John Shelley to speak. At least five minutes of silence ticked by. Will waited a little longer, then decided to give in. "How do you know Michael?"

John's fists were still clasped on the table, and the fingers tightened. "What did he say?"

"I'm not asking him. I'm asking you."

John stared all his anger straight into Will.

Will asked, "Is Joyce your sister?"

"Leave her out of this."

"It must've been hard all those years. You being in prison like that, her on the outside."

"She knows I didn't do it."

"That must have made it even harder."

"Stop trying your psychology bullshit on me."

"I was just curious about what it was like."

"What was it like?" John repeated, some of his anger starting to seep out. "What was it like to ruin my family, send my mother to an early grave? What was it like to be treated like some kind of fucking pariah by my own father? What do you think, man? What the fuck do you think?"

John's words hung in the air, his voice echoing in Will's ears. What did Will think? He thought that the pieces were finally fitting into place.

He said, "I want you to do something for me."

John's shoulders went up in a noncommittal gesture.

Will had kept a copy of Aleesha Monroe's letter in his pocket, sort of like a talisman to help him in the case. He unfolded the paper, slid it across the table to John. "Can you read this for me? Out loud, please."

The man gave him a strange look, but curiosity won out. He leaned over the table, not touching the paper as he read it to himself first.

John looked up at Will, confused. "You want me to read this out loud?"

"If you don't mind."

John cleared his throat. Obviously, he didn't know what was going on, but Will took it as a sign of trust when the man actually started reading it.

"Dear Mama," John began, but Will stopped him.

"Sorry. Third line down," he said. "If you could start with that."

John gave him another look that said he was only going to let Will go so far with this. "The Bible tells us that the sins of the parent are visited on the child. I am the outcast, the untouchable who can only live with the other Pariah, because of your sins." He stopped, staring at the words like he knew he was missing something that was right under his nose.

John asked, "Who's Alicia?"

"Aleesha Monroe," Will told him, and the expression on John's face showed him everything he needed to know. "I talked to her mother yesterday morning. I had to tell her that her daughter was dead."

John swallowed visibly. "Dead?"

"Aleesha Monroe was raped. Beaten. Her tongue was bitten out."

"It was ..." John whispered, more to himself. He picked up the letter, stared at Aleesha's words to her mother.

"She wrote pariah twice," Will said, knowing that now was his only chance to get John to trust him. "The first time, she used a lowercase p. The second time, she capitalized it. *Pariah*, not *pariahs*. She meant one person, not a group."

John's eyes scanned the page, and Will knew the line he was reading. *The untouchable who can only live with the other Pariah*.

Will leaned forward over the table, made sure he had John's attention. "Who is the Pariah, John?"

He was still staring at the letter. "I don't know."

"It's somebody Aleesha knew way back when. Somebody she's having to live with now." Will's phone rang in his pocket, but he ignored it. "I need you to tell me who the Pariah is, John. I need to hear it from you."

John knew the answer, had figured it out. Will could see it in his eyes.

All the man said was, "Your phone is ringing."

"Don't worry about it," Will said. "Who's the Pariah?"

He shook his head, but Will could tell he was right on the edge.

"Tell me what she's talking about."

The phone kept ringing. Will didn't move to turn it off. He saw John starting to slip away, the ringing acting like some kind of warning bell reminding the con to keep his mouth shut.

"John," Will prodded.

John stood, wadding up the note and throwing it in Will's face, screaming, "I said I don't

know!"

Will sat back in his chair, cursing Angie for picking now to return his call. He flipped open the phone, demanding, "What?"

"Trent," Leo Donnelly said. "I'm at Mike's place."

"Hold on," Will said, then pressed the phone to his chest as he told John, "I'm going to step out and take this call for a minute, okay?"

John shook his head. "Whatever."

Will left the room, putting the phone to his ear as he closed the door. "What is it, Leo?"

"I went to Mike's house like you said."

Will felt a spark of anger. John had been about to crack. If the stupid phone hadn't rung, he'd be laying out the whole story right now.

"I'm knocking on the door, knowing Mike's home because I see his car in the street."

Will leaned against the wall, feeling his sleepless night catch up with him. "And?"

"No answer, but then a DeKalb PD cruiser pulls up with Gina right behind him. Gina's the wife, right? She called them for protection while she gets some of her stuff out of the house."

"Okay."

"She backs into the driveway and it's not like I can duck under a bush, so I go up to her, ask her how she's doing. She looks at me like I'm a turd in her cereal, I guess thinking I'm Mike's buddy."

Will thought about John, sitting in the interrogation room. "Is this going somewhere?"

"You think I'm tugging your root, junior? I got at least ten years on you."

"You're right," Will allowed, leaning back against the wall, wondering how long this was going to take. "Go ahead."

"So," Leo continued. "DeKalb's not happy to see me, right? Apparently, Mike's been giving them the runaround about the dead neighbor. Won't talk to them, won't give a statement, won't let them look in his house."

He had Will's undivided attention now.

"My thinking is they jumped on Gina's call so they could get a peek around."

"And?"

"After she figured out Mike wasn't home, she wouldn't let them into the house." Leo added with some appreciation, "She may hate his fucking guts, but she's still a cop's wife. She knows you don't let nobody poke around unless they've got a paper from the judge."

"What am I missing here?"

"Lemme finish," Leo cautioned. "This cop, Barkley, he's pretty pissed standing around with his dick in his hand. So, he takes it out on me, tells me to get the fuck off the property." Will heard a lighter flick open as Leo lit a cigarette. "Me, I mosey out into the street. It's a free country, right? Barkley don't own the street."

Will could imagine the scene. You didn't tell a cop to leave unless you wanted him to hang around your neck for the rest of your natural life.

Leo continued, "I'm poking around Mike's car, wondering why it's parked across the street and not in his drive, when the neighbor pulls up with her groceries. Real nosy bitch, but I ask her where Mike is, and she says—" Leo paused to take a drag on his cigarette. "She says that Mike was there about an hour ago. She was getting her mail when he pulled up. He asked her about the car parked in his driveway."

Will stood away from the wall. "What car?"

"Some car in the driveway," Leo answered. "Mike wanted to know how long it had been there. She tells him five, maybe ten minutes, then he just walks away, doesn't even say thank you."

"Then what?"

"The neighbor got inside her house, gets her grocery list and heads back out." Leo took another drag. "Only she notices that now the car in the driveway is facing the other direction. It's backed up to the garage now. She sees Mike standing there, closing the garage door."

"Shit."

"He throws her a wave, closes the trunk, gets in and drives off."

Closes the trunk, Will echoed in his head. Michael had put something in the trunk.

Will asked, "Did she say what kind of car it was?"

"Black. She don't know models."

His heart wasn't beating anymore. "Leo, is the cop still there?"

"Yeah."

"Gina's car is still backed into the driveway?"

"Yeah."

"I need you to go into the driveway and look under the back of her car. Tell me if there's fresh oil on the concrete."

"You want me to get my dick shot off?"

"You've got to do this," Will insisted, his throat hurting from the effort it took to speak. "Tell me if there are any fresh oil stains."

"Jesus," Leo muttered. Will heard him blow out a stream of smoke. "All right, hold on."

Will squeezed his eyes closed, picturing Leo walking across the street into Michael's driveway. There was a man's voice, probably the cop named Barkley, then a few groans as Leo must have struggled to get down on the ground. More yelling from the local cop, Leo yelling back. Finally, he got back on the phone. "Yeah, there's fresh oil. Can't be from Gina's car because she backed into the drive—"

Will snapped the phone closed, tucking it into his pocket as he slammed into the interrogation room.

John saw him and backed up, saying, "What the—"

Will twisted the man's arm around behind his back and smashed his face into the wall. He put his mouth an inch from John's ear to make sure the bastard heard every word.

"Tell me where he is."

John screamed in pain, going up on his toes.

"Tell me where he is," Will repeated, pushing the arm higher, feeling the shoulder start to give.

"I don't—"

"He's got Angie, you asshole." Will twisted the arm harder. "Tell me where he is."

"Tennessee," John whispered. "He's got a place in Tennessee."

Will let go and John dropped to the floor.

"Where in Tennessee?"

John shook his head, tried to stand. "Take me with you."

"Tell me the address."

He pushed himself up, wincing from the pain in his shoulder. "Take me with you."

"I'm only going to ask you one more time." When he didn't answer, Will took a step toward him.

"All right!" John screamed, holding up the only arm he could move. "Twenty-nine Elton Road. Ducktown, Tennessee."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Angie had vomited at some point, but the gag had kept most of it in her mouth. Judging by the acrid smell in the trunk she had managed to urinate on herself as well. Her head was pounding, and her body ached so badly she couldn't move without moaning in pain. Her hands and feet were hogtied behind her. Even if she had been able to move, she had nowhere to go, no way of helping herself. She was completely powerless.

She tried to concentrate on breathing, keeping herself oriented so that she wasn't sick again. This was hardly her first concussion, nor was it the worst, but the darkness in the trunk made it difficult to keep from panicking, and every time the car stopped for a traffic light or stop sign, she could not calm the fear that burned in her chest like acid.

The car slowed again, and she tensed, listening to the tires crunching against a gravel road. They were off the pavement now. Angie had no idea how long she'd been in the trunk. She hadn't seen who had hit her on the back of the head, but she knew it was Michael. His laughter still rang in her ears. It was the same laugh he'd given the night of Ken's party when he'd shoved her into the backseat of her car.

The girl.

There had been a girl tied to the pool table. Blood and bruises had riddled her small body. Jasmine. It had to be Jasmine.

The car rolled to a slow stop. Angie counted the seconds. At twelve, a door opened. The car shifted as weight lifted from the front seat. The door slammed. Footsteps crunched against gravel. The passenger side door opened, then closed hard as if it had been kicked shut.

Twenty seconds. Fifty. A hundred. Angie had given up counting by the time she heard the key scrape in the lock of the trunk.

She was blinded by sunlight. Angie squeezed her eyes tight against the pain. The fresh air was like heaven, and she opened her mouth wide around the gag, flared her nostrils, desperate to breathe it in.

A shadow blocked the sun. Slowly, she opened her eyes. Michael was smiling down at her, the ragged scratch Jasmine had made down his cheek three days before looking like war paint.

"Have a nice nap?"

She strained against the ropes.

"Settle down," he cautioned.

Angie barked out a "fuck you," around the gag.

He unsheathed a long hunting knife, warning her, "Don't try anything," as he sliced through the ropes behind her back.

She moaned with relief as she stretched her legs as much as she could. Her hands were still tied behind her back, but at least she could move.

"Get out of the car."

Angie struggled to sit up. Michael slid the knife back into the sheath and pulled out his service weapon. He pointed it at her head and she stopped moving.

"Slowly," he ordered. "Don't think for a minute I won't shoot you."

The rope bit into her wrists as she pressed her palms flat against the floor of the trunk. After several attempts, she managed to push herself up. She threw her legs over the side of the open trunk. Groaning, she forced herself out, tottering as her feet hit the ground, but somehow keeping her balance.

She stood up straight, looking around, trying to get her bearings.

"That was pretty impressive," he said. "I'd forgotten how limber you are."

She wanted to rip his eyes out with her bare hands.

"Look around," he told her. She saw rolling hills and snow-capped mountains looming behind a rustic-looking cabin. "You can scream all you want, but no one is going to hear you."

He pulled down the gag and she gulped for air. Her nose felt broken, and when she spit on the ground, a clot of blood mixed with chunks of food from breakfast.

She screamed like a banshee.

Michael just stood there as she doubled over from the exertion, her lungs rattling in her chest. She yelled until there was no air left in her lungs, nothing in her mind except the sound of her own screams.

He asked, "Finished?"

She lunged for him and he brought up his knee smack into her chest. She buckled to the ground, gravel shooting sharp pains through her legs.

He pressed the Glock to the side of her head, put his face a few inches from hers. "Remember this, Angie: you're second-string here."

Jasmine. "Where is she?"

He yanked her up by the hair, dragging her toward the cabin. Angie struggled against him, pulling the ropes as she bumped against the stairs. "Let me go!" she screamed. "Let me go, you fucker!"

He opened the front door and pushed her inside. "Get in there." He grabbed her arm and threw her into the bathroom.

She fell into the tub, her head popping against the plastic wall. Michael still had his gun in one hand. With the other, he turned on the shower. Angie tried to stand, her legs slipping out from under her as the cold water beat down on her face.

"Take off your shorts," Michael ordered. He squirted a glob of shampoo on her as she struggled to stand. "Get them off."

Even if she'd wanted to, Angie couldn't do anything with her hands tied behind her back. Michael seemed to realize this. He reached in and ripped open the top button of the cutoffs, then pulled down the zipper.

"Underwear, too," he said. "Now."

Her fingers were numb, the circulation cut off. Still, she managed to hook her thumbs in the waistband and pull down the shorts. She kicked them away with her feet.

"What did you do with the little girl?" she demanded, pushing down her panties. "What did you do to Jasmine?"

"Don't worry." Michael smiled, like he was enjoying a private joke. "She won't talk."

Angie lunged again, her head barreling into his gut. Michael fell back into the hall and the gun skipped across the wet floor. In one swift motion, he picked up Angie and threw her across the room. She landed awkwardly, reaching for the empty space behind her to break the fall. Her right hand twisted as her full weight pressed into the wrist and she heard a crack just as a lightning bolt of pain set her arm on fire.

"Get up," Michael ordered.

Her hand was throbbing, needles running up and down her arm. She rolled to the side, sobbing. Oh, God, she had broken her wrist. What was she going to do? How was she going to get out of here?

She heard noises in the next room. Michael was gone. Where was the girl? What was he doing to Jasmine?

Angie pressed her face into the floor, forcing herself to her knees, then her feet. She leaned against the wall as her head started swimming, her vision blurring. She took a breath, braced herself, then moved away from the wall. Her wet underwear was wrapped around her ankle and she kicked it off as she limped into the outer room.

Michael was sitting on the couch, one leg crossed over the other, foot bouncing up and down. The Glock was on the cushion beside him. He knew she couldn't get to it in time.

"Sit down," he said, indicating the rocking chair by the fireplace. Carefully, she sat on the edge of the seat, trying not to fall back.

"What were you doing in my house?"

Angie looked around the room, which was about ten feet by twenty, a living room with a small kitchen at the back. She remembered the mountains outside, the stark isolation of the cabin. He had been right: no one would hear her scream.

She asked, "What are you going to do?"

He had that same smirk on his face, that smile she had seen the night of Ken's party and taken for flirting. "What do you think I'm going to do?"

Angie could not stop her bottom lip from trembling. Her hand was going numb, dull throbs of pain ringing around her wrist. The rope was wet from the shower, somehow made thicker and heavier by the water. The skin felt as if it had been burned away.

She looked at the gun on the couch.

"Don't be stupid."

Angie cleared her throat, feeling like she had swallowed cotton. "John told me everything," she said, wondering how hard she could push before Michael broke her. No one knew where she was. Will was probably still interviewing John Shelley, trying to get to the truth. If John had learned anything in prison, he was keeping his mouth closed. It would be hours, maybe days, before Will even thought to look for her, and when he finally did, there was no way he would know about this tiny cabin in the hills.

Michael asked, "What did John tell you?"

"About Mary Alice," Angie said, praying she'd got the girl's name right. "He told me what really happened."

Michael laughed, but he wasn't smiling. "John doesn't know what really happened."

"He figured it out."

"John's too stupid to figure anything out."

"I told everybody."

"Don't lie to me," he warned. "I'm being nice now, but we both know what I'm capable of."

"Will. I told Will."

He was scared of Will. She could see that in his eyes.

He asked, "Trent?"

"He's my boyfriend."

Michael kept staring at her, obviously trying to decide if she was telling the truth. Finally, he shook his head. "Uh-uh." He didn't believe her.

"It's true," she insisted. "I've known him all my life."

He let his gaze take in her body. She was naked below the waist, her legs braced apart so that she would not fall. He told her, "You need to remember there are a lot of different ways you can die."

"The scar on Will's face," she tried. "It goes down his jaw to his neck."

Michael shrugged. "Anybody can see that."

"His hand," she said. "He was shot with a nail gun. I took him to the hospital."

Anger flashed in his eyes. He stood slowly from the couch and walked over to where she was sitting. Angie tried to lean back as he put his hands on either side of her, bracing himself against the arms of the rocking chair. His voice was a low growl when he asked, "What did you tell him?"

Fear tightened like a band around her throat. "Everything ..." She heard the terror in her voice, knew he would hear it, too, but her mouth would not stop moving, the words would not stop coming. "John told me ... and I told ... I told Will ..."

He was gripping the arms so hard that the whole chair seemed to vibrate. "Told you what?"

"That you knew Aleesha!"

"Fuck!" Michael pushed himself away from the chair so violently that it almost tipped over. Angie's legs flailed as she scrambled not to fall. "God damnit!" He lifted his foot to kick over the coffee table but stopped himself at the last minute. Slowly, his foot went back to the floor, but his fists were still clenched at his sides and he shook with fury.

Angie stared at his back, breathless with fear. Carefully, she stilled the rocking chair, inched her way closer to the edge of the seat. The floor creaked as she shifted her weight.

Michael turned and backhanded her so hard that she slammed onto the floor.

Angie lay there. She couldn't move. Her head was still echoing from the impact.

"Get up."

He didn't have to threaten her. Angie tried to sit up but couldn't. She pressed her face to the floor and closed her eyes, waiting for the punishment.

Nothing came.

"My dad left me when I was ten."

Angie opened her eyes. She must have passed out, missed something. Michael was at the kitchen sink. He took a metal tin out of one of the cabinets.

He said, "You know what that's like?"

Angie didn't answer. She watched him open the tin, check the contents.

"John thought he had it hard. He didn't know what hard was." Michael waved a bag of white powder in the air. He was back to being that guy again, that normal guy he projected out to the world so that they wouldn't figure out what a monster he was.

He said, "This is good stuff. You want some?"

She tried to shake her head.

"You didn't want that last drink, either." He smiled like it was funny. "Remember that, Angie—Ken's big party? I got you a drink."

She couldn't remember, but she nodded anyway.

"Roofies, baby." He sat down on the couch, putting the tin on the coffee table between them. "You gulped down a mouthful of roofies."

Rohypnol. He had drugged her.

Michael laughed at her expression. He took a razor blade and a small mirror out of the tin and tapped some of the powder onto the glass. Angie watched as he chopped the coke with the blade. "You ever have a kid?" he asked, not looking at her. "I bet you've had about sixty abortions by now." He kept cutting the coke, businesslike. "My son has problems. You know that."

Angie willed her body to move. She was gasping with pain by the time she managed to sit up. At least she had managed it, though. At least she was no longer lying helpless on the floor.

"He's retarded," Michael told her, cutting the powder into four lines. He took a rolled dollar bill out of the tin and inhaled one of the lines. He made an "ahh" sound, then told Angie, "This is some good shit. You sure you don't want some?"

She shook her head again.

"Don't like being out of control? That's what you said at Ken's party when I handed you that drink." He chuckled. "You drank it anyway, didn't you? Could have put it down, but you gulped it like a damn fish." He held out the mirror, offering, "Sure?"

"You broke my nose."

"Your loss." He put the mirror back on the table.

"Just let me go." She was trembling so hard she could barely speak. "I won't tell anybody."

"You can't honestly think you're getting out of here."

"Where's Jasmine?"

"You'll find out soon enough." He leaned his head back on the couch, studying her. "Don't you want to know about John?"

"What about him?"

"Half that prison plowed John's ass. I bet he has AIDS."

Angie took deep breaths, coughed from the effort. Her wrist was throbbing with every heartbeat. The rope was tightening around her skin as it dried in the heat of the cabin.

"So, Tim, right?" He let out a short breath. "We got the diagnosis six years ago."

Angie tested the ropes around her wrists, gently pulling to see if there was any give. "That must have been ... hard."

"It's always about money, isn't it?" He indicated the mirror on the table, the lines of coke. "That's how I paid for it. Give the girls a little bump, let them help pay for my boy to learn how to tie his fucking shoes. State insurance won't cover half the shit he needs. What am I going to do, let my child waste away in some home?"

Angie didn't answer. Her mind processed his words, tried to make sense of them. Had Michael been selling dope to the girls, taking it in trade when he felt like it? He had been in Vice for at least ten years. His son couldn't be more than eight. Tim had nothing to do with it.

"Then I had all that cash and nowhere to park it. Can't put it in my account because Uncle Sam might get curious. Can't leave it lying around because Gina might ask questions." He pointed his finger at Angie. "Then, I figured, why not open up some accounts for my good old cousin Johnny? I already had his social security number from all that court shit my mom had lying around."

Cousin. Angie didn't know if Michael meant they were related or he was just using slang.

Michael said, "Wasn't like I had to worry about him getting out."

She felt her eyes wanting to close and fought to stay awake.

"Where are your questions, Angie?" The coke had made him more alert, talkative. "Come on, girlie. Ask your questions."

Angie's mind reeled. She couldn't think of anything but, "You knew Aleesha Monroe."

"Yeah, we go way back."

Angie waited for him to figure out that she had lied before, but he was too wrapped up in his own story to take apart hers.

He said, "First day in uniform, I got a call to the Homes—got stuck in the freaking elevator. All the old-timers were busting a gut by the time they got me out, and there was Leesha, laughing right along with them. At least, she was laughing until she recognized me." He wagged his finger. "Nobody laughs at Michael Ormewood, Angie. Nobody laughs at him, and sure as shit nobody pushes him away."

Angie felt a trickle of blood sliding down the back of her throat. She gagged at the taste of it.

Michael said, "She was a whore in high school and she was a whore fifteen years later. Bitch would suck off a dog for the swill in a spoon." He was smiling again, that smile that said he was in charge. "What they don't realize is you have to control it. Take it when you want it, not when you need it." He meant the coke. "Don't smoke it, don't shoot it, don't get too greedy."

Michael was stupider than she thought if he believed he could control an addiction. She asked, "Why did you kill Aleesha?"

"She pissed me off. Tried to change the rules."

"You didn't want to pay her." Angie had been around enough prostitutes to know the score.

"Did Jasmine piss you off, too?"

"Jasmine ..." He smiled. "I wonder what your boyfriend would think if he found out I stashed her up in Aleesha's place while I drove him back to the station?" He watched her closely, seemed to be feeding off her reaction. "Remember when we were going over my reports? You were wearing that tight skirt up to your slit, flashing your tits every time you leaned over? She was in my trunk the whole time, Angie. The whole time you were rubbing up against me, she was in the trunk of my car, pissing herself thinking about what was going to happen."

Angie parted her lips, let some of the blood drip out. One of her back teeth was throbbing. It was probably broken.

He had stopped speaking, and she wondered if the coke was starting to wear off. She couldn't tell how much time had passed since he'd snorted the line. Maybe he was one of those people who had the opposite reaction to the stimulant. Maybe he was so in control of himself that it didn't matter.

He was silent for so long that Angie felt her eyes closing, felt her body relax into some kind of sleep. Michael started talking again and she jerked awake.

"They all act like they're so fucking good, but all it ever takes is one hit, one snort, and they're hooked. They keep coming back, begging at your feet. All of them. Especially John."

Angie had to clear her throat a few times before she could talk. "Is that why you framed him?"

"That was Mom's idea, but he got what he deserved. They all got what they deserved." He glanced down at her. "Just like you."

Angie felt her eyes wanting to shut again, her muscles start to loosen. She fought it off, biting her split lip until she tasted more blood, using the pain to keep her alive.

"Once you get a taste for it," Michael was saying, his voice low, thoughtful, "you can't do it the other way. You need that fear, the way they push against you, the panic in their eyes."

Angie tested the rope again. The bones in her broken wrist shifted against each other, made a clicking sound that echoed inside her head.

"I got Johnny some credit cards," Michael continued. "Got this place." He meant the cabin. "You think I'm stupid, but I'm not." He tapped the side of his head. "Think, right? What's the first thing you do when you're trying to pin down a perp to the scene? Check their credit card receipts: gas bills, hotel bills, all that shit. Place the perp close to the scene, right day, right time, bingo, you've caught 'em." He shook his head. "They won't find nothin' on Michael Ormewood, that's for sure. Not in Alabama, not in Tennessee, sure as shit not in Atlanta. I'm just a family man, taking care of my poor retarded boy, looking after my wife, home every night in front of the tube."

"You sold them drugs," Angie said, thinking about all those girls she'd met on the streets, all those addicts who did anything to feed their addiction. A cop had supplied them. A cop had exploited their need and filled his own. How many had he raped? How many had he killed?

"I should be mad at you, but I'm not." He rubbed his jaw, kept his eyes on her. "Stupid people let their emotions get the better of them; that's when they make mistakes. I'm in control here, Angie. I'm the one who's going to decide how you die."

He stood up from the couch and she braced herself for more pain, but he went over to the

fireplace, rested his hand on the mantel. Angie remembered being with Will three nights ago. He had stood at the fireplace in her house and she'd looked at his back, his strong shoulders, and wanted nothing more than to put her arms around him. She would never have that moment with him again. He would never know how she felt.

Michael said, "You don't know what it's like to have this dream in your head that you're gonna have a perfect life, a perfect family, and then something like Tim happens and you feel like you're just a fucking failure."

She breathed in as much air as she could, tried to keep her thoughts clear. "How did it start?"

"You know about Mary Alice."

"The other ones." There had to be other ones.

"How far do you want to go back? Eighty-five? Ninety-five? Last year?" The smile was on his face again. "Hell, I can't even remember which states they were in. Your boyfriend's into that profiling shit, right? I guess he'd say I escalated when old Johnny got out. Took the gloves off because I knew when the heat was turned up, all I had to do was point the finger back at him."

"They were just kids."

"Believe me, they were a lot more experienced than they let on. Real mature for their ages." He shook his head, as if he could not get over the irony. "Bunch of prick teases is what y'all are."

From out of nowhere, Angie felt shame welling up inside of her. How many of her mother's boyfriends had said the same thing about Angie? How many times had she accepted their stuffed animals or their nice meals out or their pretty clothes and then been told she was going to have to pay for it with her mouth?

Michael told her, "Most of those girls have been drilled so many times they can't even feel it unless you pound it into them." He was looking at her again, appraising her. "You were exactly like Mary Alice. You know that? You tease me, let me kiss you, touch you for a while, and then you push me away like I'm not good enough for you." He snorted his disgust. "You play it all innocent, but then when I'm inside you, I feel like my cock's in a fucking vacuum."

Angie stared at the gun on the couch.

"The whores are good for that. You can do anything to them, right? I mean, that's what you pay for." He had turned his back to her, his hands pressed into the mantel. Angie kept her eyes on the Glock, hoping the weapon wasn't some kind of trick her mind had played on her. "All I wanted was to blow off a little steam with Aleesha before the game. And then she gets all uppity with me, chases me out of the apartment and into the stairway like I'm some kind of punk. I don't pay for that shit. She kept pushing me and pushing me, and then she learned the lesson. Michael Ormewood does not pay."

Angie pressed her face to the floor, willing herself to endure this.

"Yeah, I let her get my temper up." She heard his footsteps, could feel him standing inches from her face. "But, nobody really cares when a whore dies, right? Nobody cares about you."

She squeezed her eyes shut. She had let him get into her head, let him have control, just like he wanted.

Angie said, "All that John had to do was tell them." She took a chance, adding, "You're his cousin."

"Oh, sweetheart," Michael tsked. "You actually think John would've had the chance to open his mouth in a courtroom?" He shook his head, telling her, "I've been playing with him all along, just tugging his strings whenever I wanted to." He chuckled to himself. "Sure, I almost shit in my pants when I opened that toolbox, saw what he put in there, but that's nothing compared to the shock I had planned for him. I was gonna have some wicked fun with that little girl, then lay it all back on Johnny's door—or, more specifically, that shithole room he lives in."

"It wouldn't have worked," she said, knowing that it probably would have.

"'Hero cop catches serial killer in the act.' My DNA all over the room from holding the poor little dead thing in my arms. Cops busting in, seeing Johnny dead, me wailing in grief. I would've gotten a fucking promotion for killing that bastard. Do you know how much it costs to put a man on death row? I'd be saving the city twenty million bucks, easy."

"They would've found out."

"From who? All his friends? His loving family? His devoted, dead mother?"

"People would remember you."

"Nobody remembers me," Michael snapped, and she could tell she'd cut close to the bone. "John's the one who always stood out. I was just in the background—always in the background. Nobody ever noticed me, and you know what? Now, the only thing they're going to remember

their precious Johnny for is being a killer.”

“But John’s not a killer, is he?” When he didn’t answer, she looked up.

Michael was standing in front of a closed door that she assumed led to a closet. He reached up, feeling along the sill at the top, and pulled down a key.

She saw the dead bolt. Her heart stopped mid-beat. “What are you doing?”

“Enough talking,” he said, slipping the key into the lock.

Angie’s leg muscles trembled as she forced herself to stand. She backed away from him, pushing toward the couch.

Michael read her mind. He scooped up the gun. “Move.” He used the muzzle to nudge her toward the closet. “Go on.”

Angie took small steps, the closet coming into view. It wasn’t a closet at all. Stairs led down to what must be a cellar.

“You fucked it all up,” Michael told her. “That little girl and me, we were having a real good time.”

The stairs got closer. If he put her in that cellar, Angie knew she would be dead.

“Move.”

She stopped walking and he bumped into her from behind. “Don’t do this.”

His breath was hot in her ear. “I’m gonna fuck you, Angie. I’m going to fuck every hole you’ve got.” He kept forcing her toward the cellar. “You sit down there and wait for me. Think about what I’m gonna do to you.”

“No!” She dug her bare feet into the floor, pushed back against him. Her soles skidded across the wood. She tried to twist away, but he grabbed her by the waist, lifting her, closing the distance in two steps. She screamed “No!” bracing her feet against the doorjamb, fighting as hard as she could.

“Stop it!” he yelled, jerking her up again. Her legs swung wild as he threw her down the stairs. Angie careened against the walls as she fell. She landed in a heap at the bottom of the stairs, weeping from pain.

The overhead light flicked on, a single bulb illuminating what must have been a root cellar at one point. Jasmine was in a corner, curled up into a lifeless ball. Angie tried to go to the girl, but something held her back. She looked down, saw the shard of glass that impaled her upper arm. More glass stuck up like shark’s teeth where broken bottles had been cemented into the bottom stair.

The glass made a sucking noise as she tried to move.

“Think about it,” Michael called from the open doorway above. “Think about what’s going to happen to you.”

The light went out. The door closed. The bolt slid home.

She was going to die.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Will kept his cell phone to his ear as he drove, praying that Amanda would be in her office. He had brought John with him because he needed to hear his story, wanted to know what kind of animal he would be dealing with when he reached Tennessee. For his part, John was more than willing to oblige. All of the man's recalcitrance had disappeared, and Will's head was spinning from his theories.

Caroline finally answered the phone, saying, "Amanda Wagner's office."

"I need Amanda now. It's urgent."

She put him on hold. Will kept his eyes on the road, speeding up Interstate 75 in the HOV lane thirty miles over the posted speed limit.

"Will?" Amanda said. "What's going on?"

"I'm on my way to Tennessee."

"I don't recall signing off on a vacation request."

"I think Michael Ormewood is the killer."

"All right," Amanda drawled. "Break it down for me, Will."

Will told her John's story, how Michael had tried to lean on the parole officer, how John's sister had told him about the cabin in Tennessee. He finished with the oil stains in Michael's driveway and what the neighbor had told Leo Donnelly.

"You checked Polaski's house?"

"I had a cruiser go by. She's not there. Her car's not in the driveway."

Amanda was silent. Will had introduced her to Angie once—not by choice. She had taken him to the hospital when Amanda had shot him with the nail gun. Inconceivably, the two women had gotten along.

Finally, she spoke. "So, what you're saying is, based on some unanswered phone calls and a few spots on a driveway, you're taking a convicted felon over state lines to look for an Atlanta police detective who may or may not have snatched another detective in broad daylight?"

"You need to search his house."

"This is the house in DeKalb County's jurisdiction? How do you propose I get a warrant, Dr. Trent? Not that your mysterious oil stains in the drive aren't compelling, but I doubt there's a judge alive who would sign off on it."

"Amanda," Will said, trying to control his voice. "You are a nasty, horrible person, but you have always had my back every time I worked a case. Don't do this to me now."

"Well, Will," she countered. "You are a high-functioning dyslexic who reads on a second-grade level, but let's not throw stones."

Will felt all the saliva in his mouth dry up. When had she found out?

Amanda said, "I don't have many friends in Tennessee, Will. I can't reach out to them to help you with nothing more to go on than the bad feeling in your gut and we both know Yip Gomez would rather eat his own shit than give you a hand." Yip was Will's old boss in the northwest field office. She added, "This is why I keep telling you not to burn bridges," as if now was the time for one of her lessons.

"I don't know what you want me to say," he admitted. "You're right. This could be nothing. I could get there and it could be just a waste of time, but I can't stand around not doing anything, Amanda."

"You put out an APB on Polaski's car?"

"Yes."

She was silent for a few seconds, then asked, "Tell me, this Detective Donnelly, he was the last

person to leave Ormewood's house?"

"Yes."

"Well, look at this," Amanda exclaimed, her voice raised in mock surprise. "Caroline just handed me a message. It's an anonymous tip. A concerned citizen has noticed that Detective Ormewood's back door has been busted open. I think I should check on it myself, don't you?"

Will felt a wave of relief. Amanda was going to help him. He could almost hear her thinking it through over the phone.

"Thank you," he breathed. "Thank you."

"I'll let you know when I get there."

Will ended the call. He kept the phone in his hand as he drove, taking the exit onto 575 with an abrupt jerk of the wheel that made John Shelley grab the side of the door like he was afraid they were going to roll. Will had been in such a hurry that he hadn't even considered how he was going to find the cabin until John had asked for a map. The five-minute detour to the gas station had seemed like a lifetime. If what the neighbor had told Donnelly was right, Michael had about an hour on them. But, then, Michael was probably driving the speed limit, staying under the radar. Will wasn't being so careful.

John asked, "What did she say?"

"You could have prevented this," Will told him. "You could have stopped this four days ago."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Michael was with me when Cynthia Barrett died."

John looked down at the map he had spread across his lap. "I heard she was running across the yard and tripped. Hit her head on a rock and died."

"Then cut out her own tongue?"

John didn't offer an answer.

"You should have done something then."

"What?" John demanded. "Gone to you? You don't even believe my story now, man. What am I going to do? Turn in a cop? Who's gonna believe an ex-con who works at a car wash?"

Will kept his hands tight around the wheel. John had brought this down on Angie. She would be safe now but for the man's arrogance and stupidity. "You were baiting him. You knew exactly what you were doing."

John snapped the map along a crease, folding it into a smaller section as he kept trying to defend himself. "You tell me what I should've done and I'll get back in my magic time machine and do it. Tell you what, though, let's don't stop at four days. Let's go back twenty years. Give me my youth back. Give me my mother and my grandparents and my family. Hell, throw in a wife and a couple of kids for me while you're at it."

"She was running away from something in that yard."

John was still working on the map, but Will could hear the anguish in the other man's voice when he said, "Don't you think I know that?"

Will looked back at the road, watched the signs blur by, the mile markers with their bold numbers popping up along the landscape. He hadn't thought this through; hadn't considered that he might be endangering John.

Will said, "It violates your parole to go over state lines."

"I know."

"You could be arrested. I can't help you in Tennessee."

"You can't help me in Atlanta, either."

Will chewed his lip, staring at the black pavement, the other cars on the road. He had driven back and forth between Atlanta and the mountains for the last two years, so he knew exactly where all the speed traps were. He slowed down through Ellijay, not resuming his speed until he crossed Miciak Creek. He coasted by the new Wal-Mart and the old one, then past several outdoor flea markets and a couple of liquor stores. At the town of Blue Ridge, he took a left. He was flying down Coote Mason Highway, just beyond the apple orchard, when the phone rang.

He flipped it open on the side of his leg. "Amanda?"

Her tone was grim. "We found blood in the garage. Two different types and lots of it."

"Angie?"

"She's not here, Will."

His mouth opened, but words failed him.

"Here's how this is going to work," Amanda said. "I've called Bob Burg at the Tee Bees." The Tennessee Bureau of Investigation. "He's putting together a team right now. They're about forty

minutes out from the cabin.”

“I’m closer.”

“I figured you would be,” she said. “Let me speak to the pedophile. I’ve got directions to Elton Road.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Angie had almost passed out when she lifted her arm off the shard of glass cemented to the bottom stair.—not so much from the pain, but from the sensation of the glass sliding out of her flesh. There wasn't much blood, and compared to the throbbing in her wrist, the wound was manageable. She had been lucky. Her right wrist was the one that was probably broken and she had by some miracle fallen on her right shoulder at the bottom of the stairs. Like Will, Angie was left-handed.

"Jasmine?" she whispered, her voice echoing in the pitch-black cellar. "Jasmine?" There was no response.

Angie pressed her good shoulder against the wall and stood. She took a moment to catch her breath, then carefully slid her bare feet across the dirt floor, searching for the girl.

"Jasmine?" she repeated, her foot making contact. "Are you okay?"

The girl was either too terrified to answer or was dead.

Angie knelt down, put her head to where she thought Jasmine's mouth and nose might be and tried to listen for signs of life.

Nothing.

Angie turned around, reaching blindly with her fingers. She felt along the girl's naked body, touching sticky blood, finally feeling the shallow up and down of Jasmine's chest laboring to breathe. Angie didn't touch her mother much, but the few times she'd visited Deidre in the home, this is what she had felt like: dead weight, just a shell that looked like a body.

"Jasmine?" Angie whispered.

The girl did not stir as Angie touched her face, her hair. Angie's fingers slipped under the scalp and she recoiled.

"Oh, Jesus!" Angie bent at the waist, trying not to vomit again. She'd touched the girl's skull, felt the splintered bone and the soft, wet, gray matter underneath.

They had to get out of here. They had to get help.

Angie stood again. She paced out the cellar. Ten feet wide, maybe twelve feet deep. Before the bulb had been switched off, she had glimpsed crude wooden shelves built into the walls. With her hands tied behind her back, it was difficult to check the top shelves. Her fingers felt nothing but vacant space as she checked the lower shelves for anything that might be used as a weapon.

The cellar was empty. Even the packed dirt floor was swept clean.

Maybe her wrist was not completely broken. Angie could still move her fingers, though they felt swollen and hot as if an infection was already working its way through her bloodstream. She was becoming used to the pain, almost welcoming it because it took her mind off the pounding in her head, the roiling in her stomach. The dark helped, too. There was nothing for her eyes to focus on, nothing to throw her balance.

Michael was upstairs. She thought he might be making a meal, lunch or dinner. She didn't know what time of day it was or how long she'd been in this fucking hole.

Every noise he made—a chair sliding across the floor, joists squeaking as he walked around—intensified her fury. Angie seethed with hatred. He had gotten to her. He had worked his way into her mind and made her feel like a useless piece of shit. She'd had more men inside her body than she could count, but not one of them had ever gotten into her head like this.

She would kill him when he came back. She would kill him or make him kill her. Those were the only two options.

Angie braced herself, sliding down the wall until she was on her knees. Two paces to the stair, the broken glass imbedded in the tread. She turned and felt for it with her hands, careful not to

slice her already shredded fingers as she positioned the thick, knotted rope over the biggest shards. She sucked in air through her teeth, trying not to think about the pain as she sawed the rope against the glass.

Michael's handcuffs were on Jasmine. He had used rope to tie up Angie.

"You fucker," she breathed, a mantra to herself. Michael Ormewood didn't make mistakes. He was always in control, always on top of everything. Everything but the fact that glass could cut rope.

"You stupid fucker."

Blood soaked her hands, wet the rope that bound her wrists together. Angie stopped sawing, trying to catch her breath, take it slow. She'd almost passed out the first time she'd tried to cut the rope, but with each new attempt, she honed her technique, learned more about the knots he'd tied, the way the rope bound her wrists. She could feel that the rope had shifted down a little, was rubbing raw a new section of skin. Her blood was acting as a lubricant.

She would get out of this. She would saw off her own hand if she had to.

"Oh!" She gasped as the rope skipped down the glass, her hands slipping, the razor-sharp edges slicing into her fingers.

Angie held her breath, listening for Michael. God, she had never hurt so bad in her life. She couldn't stand it, couldn't take the feeling of the flesh being sliced off bone. She leaned forward, her forehead touching the ground as she cried.

"Will," she whispered. She couldn't pray to God, not after everything she'd done, so she prayed to Will. "I'm going to get out of this," she promised him. "I'm going to get out of this and ...". She didn't say the words, but she knew them in her heart. She would leave Will for good. She would finally let him escape.

Overhead, footsteps walked across the floor. Angie reared up, her hands fumbling for the glass. She furiously worked the rope, fear anesthetizing her against the pain.

"Angie?" Michael called. He was on the other side of the locked door. "Answer me. I know you hear me."

She stretched the rope taut, wrenching her shoulders, desperate to break free. "Fuck you, motherfucker!"

"Get away from the stairs, Angie. I'm gonna open the door, and I've got my gun trained right on you."

She didn't answer, couldn't answer. Faster, faster, she sawed the rope up and down the jagged glass.

The key scraped in the lock.

"No," Angie whispered, forcing herself to hurry. "Not yet, not yet."

"Get away from the stairs," he said. "I mean it."

"No!" she screamed, jumping away from the glass just as the door flew open.

The light blazed on. Angie looked at Jasmine, saw the girl's face was turned toward her, the eyes slit open but unseeing. Her mouth was open. Blood pooled around her head.

"Don't try anything," Michael warned. He stood at the top of the stairs with the gun in his hand. He was bare-chested, jeans and sneakers the only thing covering his body.

"Fuck off," Angie told him. She'd felt the rope give, but not enough. Blood wet her hands like water. She was still trapped, still helpless.

He tucked the gun into the waist of his jeans, then reached into his back pocket.

"Go away," Angie told him.

He put on a black ski mask, holes cut out for the eyes and mouth.

"Go away!" she screamed, backing into the wall, scrambling to stand.

He took out the gun and started down the stairs. Slowly, one tread at a time.

Angie's shoulders tensed to their breaking point as she pulled at the rope. She had felt it give before. She had felt it give.

He kept up his steady pace down into the cellar. The ski mask was unnerving, more terrifying than anything he could have said. The gun stayed trained on her chest, and she saw the knife sheathed at his side.

Angie's throat tensed. She could barely speak. "No ..."

He stepped over the last stair and stopped. His eyes were dark, almost black. She could see dried blood around the mouth of the mask.

The sight of him sent an uncontrollable tremble through her body.

He looked at Jasmine lying in the corner, then took a step closer to Angie. They both stood

there facing each other, the room quiet but for the short breaths Angie was taking.

His voice was so soft she could barely hear him. "Michael is going to hurt you."

"I'll kill you," she breathed. "I'll kill you if you touch me."

"Lie down."

She kicked out at him. "You sick fucker."

He still spoke gently. "Lie down on the floor."

"Fuck you!"

He brought up his gun and slammed it down on her head.

Angie slumped to the ground. She couldn't keep her head up, couldn't remember for a moment where she was.

He cupped her chin in his hand, his words still soft; the tone he would use with a child who was misbehaving. "Don't pass out on me," he whispered. "You hear me?"

She saw Jasmine lying behind him, her body limp. What had Michael done to her? What had the child endured before her body simply gave up?

"Look at me," Michael said, gently, as if this was some kind of seduction. "Keep looking at me, Angie. Look at Michael."

Her head rolled to the side. She couldn't make her eyes focus.

"Come on, darlin', don't pass out." He cupped her chin with his hand again, tilted up her face. "You okay?"

She nodded, mostly to prove to herself that there was still some part of her body that she could control.

"That's good," he soothed, placing the gun on one of the shelves above her head, high out of the way. He took the knife out of the sheath and knelt down, holding the blade to her face so that she could see.

"No ..." she begged.

He used his knife to cut open her shirt—Will's shirt—pushing it back on her shoulders. She tried to watch him, tried to see his hand as he traced his fingers across her breasts, but she could only feel what he was doing.

"No," she pleaded. "Don't."

"Lie down," he coaxed. "Lie down and I'll be sweet to you."

She rolled back her head, trying to look at his face. Who was behind the mask? Was it John? Had she tricked her mind into thinking it was Michael when it was really John?

"Angie?" He was so calm. Like Will. He knew that was the best way to make her angry. She would fly off in a tantrum and he would just stand there, patiently waiting her out, staring at the floor. Oh, God, Will. How would he live with this? How would he live with himself knowing that he'd failed to stop this bastard?

"An-gie," he sang. "Look at me."

She knew that voice, knew that body.

"An-gie ..."

She squeezed her eyes shut, seeing Will's arm, the angry scar where the razor had cut into his flesh.

"Okay," she said. "Okay."

She fell to her side, her uninjured shoulder thumping into the packed-dirt floor. He helped her lie flat on her back, tugging at her shirt when it got caught around her arms. All of her weight rested on her hands, her pelvis arching up as if it was on display for him.

"That's good," he whispered, straddling her legs. She saw his tongue dart out of his mouth as he traced the tip of the knife down her abdomen, stopping just shy of her snatch.

Where was the gun? Where had he put the gun?

"Look at me." He leaned over her body, pressing the knife against her neck.

The shelf. He had put it on the shelf.

"Look at me."

She looked at him.

"Kiss me."

Too high. The shelf was too high.

"Kiss me," he said.

Her whole body shook, but she leaned up, pulling at the rope as hard as she could as she brought her mouth to his. He was still trying to be tender, his lips soft against hers. She could taste her own blood, feel his heart pumping against her chest as he pressed against her. When he

put his tongue in her mouth, she gagged, instinctively trying to jerk away, but he pressed the knife harder against her throat, and Angie had no choice but to let him kiss her.

He made a smacking noise as he sat back up, satisfied. "If you'd kissed me like that in the back of the car, maybe it would have gone differently."

Angie looked up at him. The bare lightbulb made a halo behind his head. She turned, saw Jasmine, saw the blood in the girl's mouth, the dead look in her eyes.

"Angie," Michael whispered, tracing his fingers along her face, down her body. Will had touched her like this a long time ago. Why had he stopped touching her? When had she started pushing him away?

Michael leaned over her again, his weight pressing her into the ground.

"Please ... Please don't ..."

He kissed her again. She pushed her weight into her right hand, pulling as hard as she could with the left to stretch the rope. Her stomach muscles shuddered, her breath caught, as the skin started to peel off her hand like a glove. He jammed his tongue farther down her throat, his teeth clashing against hers. She could feel the shattered bones in her right wrist grind against each other. The pain was so unbearable that she finally gave into it, let it rush through her body like a red tide.

Michael sat back on his heels, watching her.

"No ..." she breathed. "Oh, God, no ..." She was going to pass out. She couldn't stop it. Her eyelids flickered. Her vision blurred.

She felt him press harder into her, excited by her pain.

"Take it off," she panted. "Take off the mask."

He shook his head.

"Let me see you."

"No."

"Will," she whispered. Where was Will?

"What?"

She shook her head, blinking, forcing herself to stay lucid. "Oh, Will ..."

"It's not Will," he said, using his free hand to peel off the ski mask. He threw it on the ground. "It's Michael. I'm the one who's doing this to you."

"Will."

He twisted her head, forced her to look at him. "Who's doing this to you, Angie?"

"Will ..."

"Look at me," he repeated, his voice stern. "Look at me, Angie." His weight shifted, pressing her harder into the dirt. Angie moaned as the broken bones shifted.

"Help ..." she whispered, her voice nearly failing her.

"That's it," Michael said. "Yell for help."

"No ..." Angie writhed underneath him, whimpering, "Please don't hurt me ... please."

He dropped the knife and fumbled with the button on his jeans. He was reaching into his pants when she reared straight up and slammed her head into his.

The blow stunned him, and she scooped up the knife in her left hand before he could regain his senses. She was the one straddling him this time. She was the one holding the knife at his throat.

"You stupid cunt," she slurred, blood and saliva spraying his face. "The glass on the stairs. I cut the rope on the glass."

He didn't speak, but she saw it in his eyes. No.

Her body shook with rage as she pressed the blade harder against his flesh. Michael didn't flinch, didn't struggle; the brutal rapist, the violent murderer, and he'd given up just like that.

How many men, Angie thought. How many men's faces were seared into her brain, their twisted mouths grinning as they pounded it into her, their big hands pressing into her wrists so hard that the next day she almost hurt more there than she did between her legs?

Even if Jasmine made it out of here alive, she would always have this bastard's face in her head, always feel his hands on her body every time another man touched her. Even if she loved that man. Even if she wanted that man more than anybody else in the whole world, it would always be Michael's face she would see when she closed her eyes.

Being raped wasn't the hard part. Surviving was what killed you.

"Angie!"

There was a loud crash upstairs, splintering. The front door had busted open.

“Angie!” Will yelled. “Where are you!”

She put her face close to Michael’s, making him look into her eyes as she whispered, “Kiss this, you stupid motherfucker,” and jammed the blade up under his ribs.

Michael’s mouth opened just as Angie’s did. She let out a blood-curdling scream, pulling out the knife and plunging it back in to the hilt, yelling, “Help! I’m down here!” She drew back the blade and slammed it home again and again, screaming until her throat was raw. “Will! We’re down here!”

“Angie!” The cellar door buckled as Will tried to break it down.

“Will!” she pleaded, twisting the blade into Michael’s gut. “Help me!”

Three gunshots splintered the lock off the door. She used the knife like a handle to shift Michael’s weight onto her just as footsteps pounded down the stairs.

Will grabbed Michael from behind and threw him against the wall like a bag of trash.

“Angie!” Will was breathing so hard he almost couldn’t speak. “Did he hurt you? Are you okay?” He tried to take the knife from her, but her hand would not let go. “Did he hurt you? Baby, please talk to me.”

“Will,” she whispered, wanting to touch his face, wipe away the tears streaming out of his eyes.

“It’s okay,” he told her, gently prying open her fingers so she would let go of the knife. “It’s okay now. I’m here.”

“Will ...”

“Your hands,” he said, horrified. “What did he do to your hands?”

Someone else entered the room. She saw a man running down the stairs. John Shelley stopped just before the bottom tread. He looked at Michael, then Jasmine, as if he couldn’t make up his mind what to do.

“Angie.” Will held her in his arms, cradling her. She didn’t stop him even though it hurt all over. “Oh, Angie.”

John went to the girl. He checked her pulse, looked at the wound on her head.

Angie could only watch Michael. She wanted him to see her, wanted the image of her face to haunt him.

His eyes were open. He blinked once, twice. Blood pooled on the floor in front of him like a river flowing out of his body. Pink translucent bubbles sputtered on his lips as his lungs filled. His breath whistled through the holes Angie had made in his chest.

He knew what was happening to him.

He was terrified.

Will pressed his lips to her forehead. “You’re all right,” he whispered. “You’re okay.”

Michael’s eyelids fluttered. A gurgling noise filled the room as he began to choke on his own blood. His mouth gaped open, a thin line of blood tracing a path down his cheek.

Angie pursed her lips and blew him a kiss good-bye.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

FEBRUARY 13, 2006

"You" was all Lydia Ormewood said when she'd opened her front door to find John and Joyce standing there.

Michael's mother had aged well, or more likely she'd spent enough money to make sure she looked like it. Though John knew the woman was in her late sixties, the skin on her face was smooth and healthy-looking. Even her neck and hands, the usual giveaway, were as smooth and young as Joyce's.

Life had obviously been very good to her. She lived in Vinings, one of Atlanta's more expensive suburbs, in a brand-new, three-story house. White walls loomed over everything, white carpets scattered around the bleached oak floors. A gleaming white grand piano was in the living room, and two black leather couches faced each other by a marbled fireplace. Cream silk curtains hung in the windows. Abstract art with bold primary colors hung on the walls, all of it probably original work. Lydia herself was monochromatic. She wore black. John did not know if this was her regular attire or if she was in mourning for her son.

Joyce had been at the DeKalb County courthouse when John was arrested, going page by page through old records, looking for Lydia. Since then, she had taken days off work, digging through all the public records she could find. Lydia had married and divorced twice since her husband Barry had died. Her surname had changed each time, but Joyce had finally managed to trace Michael's mother through a contact who worked at the social security office. Uncle Barry had been fully vested in the system when he died. Lydia had started to collect his social security checks four years ago.

Joyce had the woman's address in her hand three days later.

They sat in front of the fireplace, Joyce and John on one uncomfortable couch, Lydia on the other. Their aunt sat with her spine straight, knees together, legs tilted to the side, like a photograph out of Miss Manners. She looked at John with open distaste.

He knew he looked like hell. Ms. Lam had knocked on his door at five o'clock that morning. She'd handed him the specimen cup, then started searching his room for contraband. He'd come back from the toilet to find her holding the picture of his mother in her hands. John had stood there holding his own piss, feeling a slow shame burning inside him. This was just one more degradation he had forced on Emily. When would it end? When would his mother be able to rest in peace?

Joyce said, "We're here about Michael."

"He was my son," Lydia told them, as if it was that simple.

Joyce stiffened beside him, but John shook his head, willed her to be patient. He loved his sister, but she lived in a world of black and white. She didn't know how to deal with the grays.

John told Lydia, "The little girl he kidnapped is going to be okay."

"Well," she said, dismissing this with a shrug of her narrow shoulders. John waited, but she didn't ask about Angie Polaski, didn't seem interested in the health of her son's last victim. As a matter of fact, she didn't seem interested in anything.

John cleared his throat. "If you could just—"

"He hated you, you know."

John had already figured that out, but he needed to know. "Why?"

"I don't know," she answered, smoothing her skirt with her hand. She had a large diamond ring on her finger, the gold band at least half an inch wide. "He seemed quite obsessed with you."

He kept a scrapbook." She stood suddenly. "I'll get it."

She left the room, her slippers gliding across the white carpet.

Joyce hissed out air between her teeth.

"Calm down," John told her. "She doesn't have to do this."

"She's holding your life in her hands."

"I know," John said, but he was used to having other people control his life, whether it was his father or Michael or the guards at the prison or Martha Lam. John had never known a moment in his adult life when he wasn't trying to keep somebody happy just so he could live through another day.

Joyce started to tear up again. He had forgotten what a crier she was. "I hate her, John. I hate her so much. How can you stand to be in the same room with her?"

He used the back of his finger to wipe away her tears. "We need something from her. She doesn't need anything from us."

Lydia returned, holding a large photo album to her chest. She put it on the low leather ottoman between the couches as she sat down.

John saw a photograph of himself pasted to the outside of the book. At least, he thought it was his photograph. The face had been scratched out with an ink pen.

"My God," Joyce murmured, sliding the album over. She opened the cover to the first page, then the second, as John looked over her shoulder. They were both speechless as they saw pictures of John from junior high—class pictures, team photos, John running in his track uniform. Michael had catalogued each moment of John's teenage life.

"It was Barry who made it worse," Lydia said. Uncle Barry, her husband, their mother's brother. "Barry talked about you all the time, used you as an example."

"An example of what?" Joyce demanded, obviously horrified by the scrapbook.

"Michael went down the wrong path after his father left. He had problems at school. The drugs ... well, I don't know. There was an older boy at school who got him interested in the wrong things. Michael would have never done anything like that on his own."

Joyce's mouth opened but John squeezed her hand, warning her not to speak. You didn't get what you wanted from someone like Lydia Ormewood by telling her what to do. You came with your hat in your hand and you waited. John had done this all of his life. He knew that one false word could ruin everything.

Lydia continued, "Barry thought you would be a good role model for Michael. You always did so well in school." She sighed. "Michael was a good boy. He merely gravitated toward the wrong crowd."

John nodded, like he understood. Maybe, on some level, he did. John himself had gotten sucked into Michael's crowd. So had Aleesha Monroe. She had hung around Michael's house all the time, had even been there the night of the party. She'd had good parents, siblings who were always at the top of their classes. Would John have ended up like Aleesha if Mary Alice hadn't died? Would his life have been wasted like hers no matter what had happened?

Lydia's chest rose and fell as she sighed again. "I made him join the military," she told them. "I didn't let him sit around after you went away. He fought in the war. He tried to help keep those Arab people safe and got shot in the leg for his trouble."

Joyce was so tense John could almost hear her humming like a piano wire.

Lydia picked at a speck of fuzz on her skirt. "And then he came back to Atlanta, settled down, had a family." She looked up at Joyce. "That girl he married, she obviously had something wrong with her. Tim was *not* Michael's fault." She spoke vehemently, and John looked around the room again, trying to find photographs of Michael or his son. The mantel over the fireplace was bare but for a glass vase of silk flowers. The stark metal table on the back wall held nothing but a neat stack of magazines and one of those princess phones like Joyce had in her room when they were growing up. Even the thick cord dangling from the telephone hung in a straight line, as if it, too, was afraid to displease Lydia.

The whole place was like a tomb.

"He got a commendation for saving a woman's life," Lydia continued proudly. "Did you know that?"

John's reply almost caught in his throat. "No. I didn't."

"She was in a car accident. He pulled her from the car before it exploded."

John didn't know what to say. Michael may have saved one woman, but he had ruined countless others, selling drugs to the working girls, raping and murdering for his own sick

pleasure.

"Michael was good," Lydia insisted. "That other part of him"—she waved her hand, dismissing the evil her son had wrought—"that wasn't my Michael. My Michael was a good boy. He had so many friends."

So many friends he got hooked on hard drugs, John thought. Like Aleesha.

"And such promise," she continued.

"You can't do this," Joyce's voice shook with anger. "You cannot sit there and tell us what an angel Michael was. He was an animal."

"Joyce," John tried. She didn't know the rules, didn't know how to give up her control. She had never had someone throw feces in her face just for looking the wrong way. She had never tried to go to sleep while the sixty-year-old man in the next cell whispered about what a beautiful body you had, told you in minute detail what he wanted to do to it.

Lydia raised a thin eyebrow. "You should mind your brother, young lady."

"Don't you dare talk about my brother."

Amusement flashed in Lydia's eyes. John knew they had lost. In that one moment, they had lost everything.

Lydia asked, "Are you threatening me?"

Joyce exploded off the couch, yelling, "You knew John didn't kill Mary Alice!"

"I knew no such thing."

"How can you defend him?" John tried to pull her back to the couch, but Joyce slapped his hand away. "How can you just sit there—"

"You don't have children so you don't know," Lydia snapped. "You and your ... lady friend."

Joyce clenched her fists. "No," she answered. "I don't have children. You're right. I didn't raise a child. I didn't raise a rapist and murderer, either."

Lydia looked as if she had been slapped. "You've no right to speak to me in that tone."

"Did you tell Mama?" Joyce demanded. "When you went to the hospital, is that when you told her what happened, that your child murdered Mary Alice, not hers?"

Lydia advised, "Let the dead rest in peace."

John didn't know if she meant Emily or Michael. For his part, John wasn't sure if Michael's death brought him any peace. Standing there in that cellar, he had wanted with every ounce of his being to fall to his knees, beat the life back into Michael's chest, do whatever it took to bring him back to life so he could kill him again with his own hands.

But, he hadn't. John had saved Jasmine instead. She had stopped breathing, and John had breathed for her, giving her CPR for over forty minutes until the ambulance had arrived at the little cabin Michael had bought in John's name. The same hands that had mutilated Cynthia Barrett had given life to another little girl. There had to be some kind of justice in that. There had to be some kind of peace.

John watched his sister as she walked to the other side of the room, putting some space between herself and the woman who had destroyed her family. Joyce was just trying to defend him. He knew that. He also knew that she had ruined any possibility they had of clearing his name.

Still, he had to try. John had learned patience in a way his sister never had to. He had also learned how to talk to the people in charge.

"She's upset," he told Lydia, a half-apology he knew she was waiting for. "It's been hard for her."

"You've got your freedom," Lydia pointed out. "I don't know what you want from me. I'm an old woman. I just want to be left alone."

"It's not that easy."

"You're out, aren't you?" She said it as if it was a simple thing, as if John wasn't always looking over his shoulder, always waiting for those cuffs to be put back on, for those guards to throw him into a cell with Zebra. He had nearly shit his pants when Will Trent slammed him into the wall. There were some prisons you never got out of.

John took a deep breath, made himself explain to the former criminal lawyer how the justice system worked. "I'm a registered sex offender. A pedophile. I can't get a decent job, buy a home. I'll never have a life."

"What about Michael?" she demanded. "He doesn't have a life, either."

Joyce made a noise of disgust. She was standing by the piano, arms crossed over her chest. She looked just like their father.

John turned back to Lydia, speaking gently, trying to lead her through it. "Michael killed a woman named Aleesha Monroe."

"She was a prostitute."

So, she had been watching the news.

"He kidnapped a police officer," John continued. "The bones in her wrist are so badly broken that she may be permanently disabled."

Lydia didn't have an answer for that one.

"He kidnapped a little girl and raped her, nearly beat her to death."

"From what I've gathered," she said tartly, "the girl was hardly inexperienced."

"He bit off her tongue."

Lydia smoothed her skirt again, keeping silent.

"Michael bit off her tongue, just like he bit off Mary Alice's."

If John hadn't been looking at Lydia, he would've missed her reaction. For just an instant, he was certain she had been surprised.

John said, "I know about the report the state's dental expert wrote."

Her chin went up in challenge. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"I think you do."

"I have no recollection of a report." She added, "And even if I did, there's nothing I can do about it now."

"You can give me my life back." John tried, "All you'd have to do is make a sworn statement —"

"Don't be ridiculous."

"That's all I want, Lydia. Swear under oath that it was Michael who killed Mary Alice and not me. Convince them to clear my record and I'll just—"

"Young man," she interrupted again, her tone clipped. He could tell from her posture that it was over. She pointed to the door. "I want you and your sister out of my house right now."

John stood automatically, always one to follow orders. Joyce was still at the piano. Tears of defeat welled into her eyes. She had fought so hard for him and now she had finally realized that there was nothing more that she could do.

She mouthed, "I'm sorry."

He looked around the house, the mausoleum Lydia had built with the money she'd earned from suing corporations and doctors and anyone else who had made a mistake she could profit on. She'd spent hours with John at the county jail trying to fabricate his defense. Twenty years ago, she had told him not to testify on his own behalf. She had handled the lab tests, the experts, the character witnesses. Lydia was the one who came to Coastal that day to tell him that it was over, that there were no other legal avenues left to explore. She'd started crying, and he had tried to comfort her.

John also remembered another day at Coastal, that first visit his mother had made after Zebra had ripped him in two.

"You will not give up," Emily had ordered, gripping John's hands so hard across the table that his fingers started to go numb. "Do you understand me, Jonathan? You will not give up."

You didn't go through twenty years of hard time without learning something. Prison was nothing but a big clock that never stopped ticking. All any of them had was time, and they spent that time talking. There was trash-talk—plans of escape, plans to shiv the bastard who disrespected you in the lunch line—but you could only bullshit for so long. Invariably, everyone ended up talking about how they'd wound up in the joint. All of them were innocent; framed by some crooked cop, fucked over by the system. All of them were working some angle, some way to snatch that get-out-of-jail-free card.

In 1977, the United States Supreme Court handed down a decision that led to the establishment of adequate law libraries in all state and federal prisons. No one knew exactly what adequate meant, but the library at Coastal rivaled any law school's, and every man in the joint eventually ended up with his head tucked into some case book, searching for an obscure passage, an arcane edict, any loophole they could exploit. Most cons knew more about the law than the lawyers the state had appointed to represent them—a good thing, since you usually got what you paid for.

John picked up the vase of flowers on the mantel.

Lydia stood, spine stiff as a board. "Put that down."

He hefted the vase in his hand. Leaded crystal, heavy as a brick. Probably worth its weight in

gold. That was the only thing Lydia cared about now—money: how much she could make, how much she could hold on to. Four marriages, a son, a grandson, and all she had to show for it were these cold little objects scattered around her pristine mansion.

He said, “You’ve got a nice place, Aunt Lydia.”

“Both of you. Get out of my house this instant.”

“Your house,” John repeated, sliding out the flowers, dropping them one by one on the expensive white rug. “That’s an interesting way to put it.”

“I’m going to call the police.”

“Better duck first.”

“Wha—” She was old but she moved fast when she saw John raise the vase. He threw it well over her head, but the shards of glass that shattered off the wall rained onto the couch where she had been sitting.

Lydia shrieked, “How *dare* you!”

The vase was probably worth more than he’d made since leaving the joint, but John didn’t give a shit about money. There were rich people all over the world who were living in their own prisons, trapped by greed, shut off from the world around them. All he wanted right now was his freedom, and he was going to do whatever it took to get it back.

He asked his sister, “How much do you think this house is worth?”

Joyce stood frozen in place, her mouth gaping open. Any conflict in her life usually consisted of heated negotiations and thinly veiled threats made across a polished conference table or martinis at the club. A veiled threat didn’t count for much at Coastal State Prison.

John guessed, “Quarter of a million dollars? Half a million?”

Joyce shook her head, too shocked to respond.

“You!” Lydia said, her voice shrill with anger. “You have exactly one minute to get out of this house before I call the police and have you arrested.”

“A million bucks?” John prodded. “Come on, Joyce. You handle real estate closings all day. You know how much a house is worth.”

Joyce shook her head like she couldn’t understand. But then she did something that surprised him. She glanced nervously around the room, took in the two-story cathedral ceiling, the large windows looking onto the graciously manicured back lawn. When she looked back at John, he could tell that she was still confused. But she trusted him. She trusted him enough to say, “Three.”

“Three million,” John echoed, incredulous. He’d thought he was rich when he cleaned out the thirty-eight hundred dollars Michael had left in the fake John’s banking account.

He said, “Divide that by twenty years, you get—what—about a hundred fifty thousand bucks a year?”

Joyce was slowly getting it. “Yeah, Johnny. That’s about right.”

“Doesn’t seem like nearly enough, does it?”

His sister’s eyes sparkled. She smiled. “No.”

“What do you think she has in the bank?” He turned back to Lydia. “Maybe I should be directing these questions to you?”

“You should be walking out of that door if you know what’s good for you.”

“What kind of car do you drive? Mercedes? BMW?” He felt like a lawyer on a television program. Maybe he could have been a lawyer. If Michael Ormewood had never entered his life, maybe John Shelley could have been a doctor or a lawyer or a teacher or a ... what? What could he have been? He would never know. No one would ever know.

“John?” Joyce sounded concerned. He had gone too quiet.

His voice was not as strong when he asked Lydia, “How about that ring on your finger? What’s that worth?”

“Get out of my house.”

“You’re a lawyer,” John told her. “You’ve obviously made a very good living by suing people for everything they’ve got.” He indicated the house, her useless things.

“I want you out of here,” Lydia commanded. “I want you out of here right now.”

“I want this house,” he told her, walking around the room, wondering what would make her break. He pulled a monochromatic canvas off the wall. “I want this,” he said, dropping it to the floor as he continued his stroll. “I want that piano.”

He walked over to Joyce’s side, thinking that no matter what happened, nothing would be more valuable to him than knowing she believed in him. Michael had tried to destroy him, but

he was gone now. Nothing could change the past. All they could focus on now was their future.

He asked his sister, "How many times did Mom yell at us about practicing our scales?"

"All the time."

John trailed his hand along the keys. "She'd like this," he said, playing a couple of notes he remembered from a million years ago. "She'd like the idea of me taking up the piano again."

"Yeah," Joyce agreed, a sad smile on her face. "I think she would."

"You can stop right there," Lydia barked.

John warned, "I think you should be careful how you talk to me."

Lydia tucked a hand onto her hip. "You don't have nearly the grounds you need for a criminal conviction. Even with this recent ... innuendo ... you have leveled against my son, you don't have proof of anything."

"The burden of proof is lower in a civil suit. You know that."

"Have you any idea how many years I can hold up depositions and hearings?" She gave a crocodile grin that showed pearly white teeth. She made her voice softer, frail. "I'm an old woman. This has been a terrible shock. I have my good days and my bad ..."

"I can freeze your assets," John told her. "I'm sure you'll have plenty of bad days living in a one-room condo on Buford Highway."

"You can't threaten me."

"What about the press?" he asked. "Joyce found you. I'm sure the reporters can, too. Especially if she gives them a little help."

"I am calling the police," Lydia warned him, walking stiffly to the phone.

"All I'm asking for is a sworn statement. Just tell them Michael framed me, that he killed Mary Alice, and you'll never see me again."

"I'm calling the police right now to remove you from my house."

"How would you like a bunch of reporters camped out on your doorstep? How would you like to explain to them how you knew your son was a killer and you didn't do anything to stop him?"

She took off one of her chunky gold earrings and put the receiver to her ear. "I knew nothing of the sort."

"Michael told me a funny thing in that cellar, Aunt Lydia." Her fingers hovered over the keypad but she did not dial. "He knew he was going to die. He was absolutely certain that he was going to die and he wanted to tell me something."

The cord slapped against the metal table as Lydia let the receiver slide to her shoulder.

"Michael told me that he killed Mary Alice and that you knew all about it. He said it was your idea to frame me. He said that you planned the whole thing from the very beginning." He gave her a wink. "Deathbed confessions aren't considered hearsay, right? Not if the person knows for sure he's going to die."

She clutched the receiver in her bony hand. "No one will believe you."

"You know that cop he took—the one he kidnapped, nearly beat to death and was about to rape and kill?" He lowered his voice as if he was telling her in confidence. "I think she heard him say it, too."

The table banged against the wall as she sagged against it. Her eyes blazed with outrage.

John asked, "Who do you think the prosecutor is going to listen to when he's trying to make the decision about whether or not to file charges against you for obstruction of justice, false imprisonment and conspiracy after the fact?"

A noise came from the receiver, a recorded voice advising her that if she would like to make a call, to please hang up and dial again.

"The prosecutor will come to us," John continued. "He'll ask me and he'll ask Joyce whether we want to pursue criminal charges against you or just drop it." The phone started to make a loud busy signal that echoed in the cavernous room. "Let me tell you one thing I've figured out, Lydia: Michael was a predator, but you were his gatekeeper. You were the one who knew what he was and still let him out in the world."

"No ..."

"Go ahead," he dared her. "Dial the number. Make the call."

Lydia stared at him, nostrils flared, eyes wet with angry tears. He could almost see her thinking it out, that fine legal mind of hers working all the angles, considering all of the options. Somewhere in this pristine white prison of a house, a clock was ticking. John silently counted the ticks in his head, biding his time.

"All right," she finally agreed. "All right."

John knew what she meant, but he wanted to hear her say it, wanted to be the one who *made* her say it. "All right what?"

Her hand trembled so badly that she could barely replace the phone in the cradle. She could not look at him. Her voice was choked with humiliation. "Tell me what I have to do."

CHAPTER FORTY

FEBRUARY 18, 2006

Will was listening to Bruce Springsteen's *Devils & Dust* as he brushed the dog. He wasn't certain why his neighbor had insisted on the brushing. Betty's fur was short. She didn't shed much. Will had to assume the origin of the task was somehow connected to the little dog's pure pleasure in the sensation; however, the neighbor had never struck him as particularly interested in the animal's comfort.

Not that he was assigning a personality to the thing, but there was no denying she liked a good brush.

The doorbell rang and Will stopped mid-stroke. It rang again, and then there was a staccato of knocking.

Will sighed. He put down the brush and rolled down the sleeves of his shirt. He scooped up Betty in his hand and walked to the door.

"What the fuck took you so long?"

"I assumed it was you."

Angie grimaced, which was hard considering her face was still healing. She had butterfly bandages on her forehead and her cheek had turned from black to yellow. Band-Aids on each of her fingers covered more sutures. A neon pink plastic cast was wrapped around her right arm, metal bolts sticking out around her wrist where the bones had been screwed back together.

He looked over her shoulder and saw her car parked in the street. "Did you drive here?"

"Arrest me."

"Why?" he asked. "Do I need to lock you up so you won't skip town?"

"Not this time."

"You're not leaving me for John?"

She laughed. "He's already had half of his life fucked up by some asshole. I figured I'd let him live the other half in peace."

"You didn't sleep with him?"

"Of course I slept with him."

Will's chest fell, but he couldn't say he was surprised. "Do you want to come in?"

"Let's stay out here," she suggested, awkwardly bending down to sit on the porch.

Reluctantly, Will joined her. He kept the dog close to his chest, and Betty tucked her head down, her snout dipping inside his vest.

"It's Saturday," Angie told him. "Why are you wearing that suit?"

"It's a good look for me."

She bumped her shoulder into his, teasing, "You think?"

He tried to make a joke of it. "You know, I'm not wearing any underwear."

She gave a deep, bawdy laugh.

He smiled, relishing the ease between them. "How come it's sexy when you say it, but not when I do?"

"Because the type of man who doesn't wear underwear usually hangs around playgrounds with lots of candy in his pockets."

"I've got candy in my pockets," he told her. "You want to put your hand in and see?"

She laughed again. "You are all talk, Mr. Trent. All talk."

"Yeah," he admitted. "You're probably right."

They both stared out at the street. Traffic noise from Ponce de Leon followed the breeze; car

horns blaring, people shouting. Will heard wind chimes clanging in the distance, and a bicyclist rode by the house.

"I love you," Angie said, very quietly.

Betty stirred. He felt a flutter in his chest. "I know."

"You're my life. You've always been there."

"I'm still here."

She gave a heavy sigh. "I talked to you when I was in the cellar. Before you came." She paused, and he knew she was thinking back to that awful place. "I promised you that I would leave you if I got out of there alive."

"I've never expected you to keep your promises."

She was quiet again. Another cyclist rode by, the metallic whiz of the turning wheels sounding like a field of grasshoppers. Will thought about putting his arm around her shoulders, then remembered the gash from the glass. He was about to put his arm around her waist instead when she turned to him.

"I'm really bad for you."

"Lots of things are bad for me." He listed some examples. "Chocolate. Artificial sweetener. Secondhand smoke."

"Passion," she said, holding her fist to her heart. "I want you to have passion, Will. I want you to know what it's like to fall in love with somebody, to stay awake at night thinking you're going to die if you don't have them."

All he could say was, "I've stayed awake plenty of nights thinking about you."

"Worrying about me," she corrected. "I'm not an old pair of shoes you can wear for the rest of your life just because they're comfortable."

Will didn't know that there was anything wrong about being comfortable, but he held his tongue on the subject, asking instead, "Where am I going to find another woman with your low standards?"

"Isn't Amanda Wagner available?"

"Oh," he groaned. "That's just hurtful."

"You deserve it, you illiterate shit."

He laughed, and Betty stirred.

"God, that thing is ugly." She patted Will's leg. "Help me up."

Will hooked his hand under her good arm to help her stand. "Where are you going?"

"To look through the want ads." She indicated her broken wrist, her torn hands. "I'm not going to sit behind a desk for the next twenty years and even the city of Atlanta isn't desperate enough to give me a gun." She shrugged. "Besides, it'd be nice to find a job where I don't have to dress like a whore unless I want to."

"You don't really need a job," he offered.

She barked a surprised laugh. "You jackass. Do you really think I'm going to stay at home cooking and cleaning while you go to work?"

"Worse things could happen."

"I doubt it."

"Betty could use a mother."

"She could use a plastic bag over her head."

"I—"

Quickly, Angie stood on her toes and pressed her mouth to his neck. Her lips were soft against his skin. He could feel her warm breath, the soft tips of her fingers pressing into his shoulders.

She said, "I love you."

He watched her walk down his driveway, the pink cast held out at her side. She turned around once to wave at him, then got into the car and pulled away.

She was almost proud of the cuts that riddled her face and hands. It was as if she had finally found a way to show on the outside what she'd been feeling on the inside all along. He had not asked her about what happened in that cellar, had not wanted to look too closely at the angle of Michael's wounds or count the number of times the man had been stabbed. Will had just wanted to hold her, to lift her up in his arms and carry her up the stairs and keep her safe for as long as he could.

And for at least a couple of hours, she had let him.

Will wasn't sure how long he stood there looking into the empty street. The Boss was singing "Leah" and Betty was snoring against his chest when a tan Chevy Nova pulled into his neighbor's

driveway.

Betty woke up when the car door slammed.

Will walked across his yard toward the woman, who was hammering a wooden stake into the ground with the heel of her shoe.

He asked, "Can I help you?"

She startled, putting her hand to her throat. "God, you scared me to death."

"I'm Will Trent." He indicated his house. "I live next door."

She was looking at the dog, her lip curled in distaste. "I thought Mother said that thing was dead."

"Betty?"

"Yes, Betty. We moved her to a home."

Will felt his brow furrow. "I'm sorry?"

"Betty, my mother." The woman was impatient; she clearly didn't want to be here and she sure as hell didn't want to explain herself to Will. "She's living in a home now. We're selling the house."

"But," Will tried, "I heard her ..." He looked down at the dog. "At night sometimes," he began. "She—your mother—would yell at someone she called Betty."

"She was yelling at herself, Mr. Trent. Did you never notice that my mother is nutty as a fruitcake?"

He thought about the midnight yelling, the way she would sometimes spontaneously burst into show tunes while watering the plastic plants on her front porch. These things had not struck Will as particularly odd, especially considering the eccentricities of the neighborhood. It was hard to stick out on a street that had six hippies living in a one-bedroom, rainbow-colored house; an abandoned Weiner Mobile up on blocks in front of a Mennonite church; and a six-foot-four functional illiterate who walked a toy dog on a hot pink leash.

The woman had a staple gun, which she used to attach what looked like a homemade For Sale By Owner sign to the wooden stake. "There," she said. "That should do it." She turned back to Will. "Somebody will come by in a day or so to clear out the house."

"Oh."

She slid her shoe back on, then threw the stapler into her car.

"Wait," Will said.

She got in her car anyway, rolling down the window as she cranked the engine. "What is it?"

"The dog," he said, holding up Betty—if, indeed, that was her real name. "What should I do with her?"

"I don't care," she answered, her lip curling up again as she looked at the dog. "Mother couldn't stand the little rat."

"She told me to brush it," he said, as if this would alter her memory.

"She probably said to flush it."

"But—"

The woman turned shrill. "Oh, for the love of God, just take her to the *pound*!"

She glanced over her shoulder then backed straight out of the driveway, nearly running over a passing jogger. Both men watched as the car careened into the street, sideswiping Will's trashcan.

The jogger smiled at Will, asking, "Bad day?"

"Yeah." Will wasn't as polite as he should have been, but he had bigger issues to deal with at the moment.

He looked down at Betty. She leaned her head against his chest, her bug eyes half-closed in ecstasy, tongue lolled to the side, as she stared back up at him. If she had been a cat, she would have purred.

"Crap," he muttered, heading back toward his house.

He remembered what the woman had said, could still hear her screeching voice ringing in his ears. Inside, he put Betty down and she skittered across the floor, jumped on the couch and settled in on her usual cushion.

Will closed the front door with a heavy sigh. A man who has grown up in an orphanage cannot take a dog to the pound.

Even if it is a Chihuahua.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Being an author has given me the great pleasure of traveling to some of the most beautiful places in the world, but there is no city I love more than Atlanta, my hometown. I've always felt that writers are basically professional liars, and I think good liars know how to blend fact and fiction so that their story rings true. With this novel, I have tried to capture the flavor of my city—the areas I love, the ones I wouldn't walk through after dark, and everything in between. I have also taken great liberties with streets, buildings and neighborhoods, so if you are looking to visit our fair city, I would highly recommend you buy a map.

City Hall East was at one point a Sears department store and while there are several city agencies in that building, it's by no means the operation I have described. At the time I wrote this, Grady Homes was slated to be torn down. As with most major metropolitan cities, we are slowly but surely eradicating all low-income and subsidized housing. "Loans Until Payday" schemes tend to charge anywhere from 300 to 500 percent. The monthly rent I cited for Chez Pedro is the going rate, as was the state fine. Bus passes, clothing, and various other luxuries of the low-wage worker were all verified.

Fortunately, I have never had occasion to visit Coastal State Prison, and much of the information I have related about this facility comes from the Internet (www.dcor.state.ga.us). The death row inmates mentioned were real people and their ages are correct to the best of my knowledge. Atlanta has consistently ranked in the top ten most violent cities in America. Over a thousand rapes were reported last year within the Atlanta metro statistical area (www.ganet.org/gbi). Nationally, approximately 44 percent of rape victims are under the age of eighteen and 15 percent are under the age of twelve (www.ncvc.org). In the United States of America, it is estimated that every minute, 1.3 women are raped.

There is a car wash on Piedmont Road with a waving gorilla outside, but that is as far as any similarity goes. The Falcons were not in this year's Super Bowl. Ducktown is a real city in Tennessee. Former DeKalb County Sheriff Sidney Dorsey was indeed convicted of arranging the murder of his elected successor, Derwin Brown. The mayor of Blue Ridge actually had a ringside recliner at the cockfights. He has been quoted as saying that he's getting old and might soon "retire from politics and chickens."

Oh—and, trust me, dogs really should not eat cheese.

For Kate and Kate

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Two years ago, I decided that I wanted to write a book outside my Grant County series. This was a risky proposition, and I knew that people would either think I was really smart or really crazy. So, first thanks goes to Kate Elton, Kate Miciak and Victoria Sanders for not having me committed—yet—and for letting me get this story out of my head.

As usual, Dr. David Harper kindly checked over the medical details for me. Trish Hawkins answered myriad questions about learning disabilities and Debbie Teague shared her first-hand knowledge about living with dyslexia. JS explained to me the uphill battle of the convicted felon and verified some drug facts. Jeanene English talked to me about that enigmatic little beast known as the Chihuahua.

At Delacorte, I would like to thank: Irwyn Applebaum, Nita Taublib, Barb Burg, Susan Corcoran, Betsy Hulsebosch, Cynthia Lasky, Steve Maddock, Paolo Pepe, Sharon Propson, Sharon Swados, Don Weisberg, Caitlin Alexander, Kelly Chian, Loyale Coles and the Random House sales team. Lisa George, thank you for forcing me onto unsuspecting friends.

At Random House UK: Mike Abbott, Ron Beard, Faye Brewster, Mike Broderick, Richard Cable, Georgina Hawtrey-Woore, Clare Lawler, Simon Littlewood, Dave Parrish, Gail Rebuck, Emma Rose, Claire Round, Susan Sandon, Trish Slattery and Rob Waddington.

Billie Bennett-Ward, Rebecca Keiper, the real Martha Lam, Fidelis Morgan and Colleen Winters have been supportive friends. My daddy took care of me in the mountains and DA was always there when I came home.

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER
FROM THE AUTHOR OF *BEYOND REACH*

KARIN SLAUGHTER

"One of the best crime novelists in America."

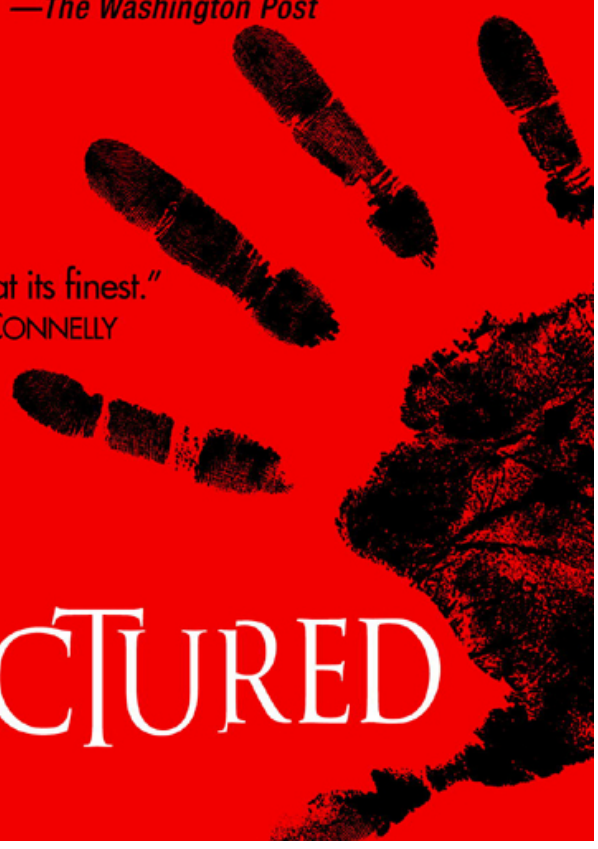
—*The Washington Post*

"Crime fiction at its finest."

—MICHAEL CONNELLY

A NOVEL

FRACTURED



KARIN SLAUGHTER

FRACTURED

A NOVEL



DELL • NEW YORK

FRACTURED
A Delacorte Press Book / August 2008

Published by
Bantam Dell
A Division of Random House, Inc.
New York, New York

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved
Copyright © 2008 by Karin Slaughter

Delacorte Press is a registered trademark of Random House, Inc., and the colophon is a trademark of Random House, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Slaughter, Karin, 1971–
Fractured / Karin Slaughter.

p. cm.

1. Daughters—Crimes against—Fiction. 2. Rape—Fiction. 3. Murder—Fiction. 4. Crimes of passion—Fiction. 5. Abused wives—Fiction. 6. Rich people—Fiction. 7. Georgia. Bureau of Investigation—Employees—Fiction. 8. Atlanta (Ga.)—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3569.L275F73

2003

813'.544—dc22

2008011047

www.bantamdell.com

eISBN: 978-0-440-33794-2

Cover design: Carlos Beltrán

v3.1

Contents

Master - Table of Contents

Fractured

Title Page

Copyright

Prologue

Day One

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Day Two

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Day Three

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Epilogue

Dedication

Acknowledgments

PROLOGUE



Abigail Campano sat in her car parked on the street outside her own house. She was looking up at the mansion they had remodeled almost ten years ago. The house was huge—too much space for three people, especially since one of them, God willing, would be going off to college in less than a year. What would she do with herself once her daughter was busy starting a new life of her own? It would be Abigail and Paul again, just like before Emma was born.

The thought made her stomach clench.

Paul's voice crackled through the car speakers as he came back on the telephone. "Babe, listen —" he began, but her mind was already wandering as she stared up at the house. When had her life gotten so small? When had the most pressing questions of her day turned into concerns about other people, other things: Were Paul's shirts ready at the tailor? Did Emma have volleyball practice tonight? Did the decorator order the new desk for the office? Did somebody remember to let out the dog or was she going to spend the next twenty minutes wiping up two gallons of pee off the kitchen floor?

Abigail swallowed, her throat tightening.

"I don't think you're listening to me," Paul said.

"I'm listening." She turned off the car. There was a click, then through the magic of technology, Paul's voice transferred from the car speakers to the cell phone. Abigail pushed open the door, tossing her keys into her purse. She cradled the phone to her ear as she checked the mailbox. Electric bill, AmEx, Emma's school fees ...

Paul paused for a breath and she took that as her cue.

"If she doesn't mean anything to you, why did you give her a car? Why did you take her to a place where you knew my friends might show up?" Abigail said the words as she walked up the driveway, but she didn't feel them deep in her gut like she had the first few times this had happened. Her only question then had been, Why am I not enough?

Now her only question was Why are you such a needy bastard?

"I just needed a break," he told her, another old standard.

She dug her hand into her purse for her keys as she climbed the porch stairs. She had left the club because of him, skipped her weekly massage and lunch with her closest friends because she was mortified that they had all seen Paul out with some bottle-blond twenty-year-old he'd had the gall to take to their favorite restaurant. She didn't know if she would ever be able to show her face there again.

Abigail said, "I'd like a break, too, Paul. How would you like it if I took a break? How would you like it if you were talking to your friends one day and you knew something was going on, and you had to practically beg them to tell you what was wrong before they finally told you that they saw *me* with another man?"

"I'd find out his fucking name and I'd go to his house and I'd kill him."

Why did part of her always feel flattered when he said things like that? As the mother of a teenage girl, she had trained herself to look for the positive aspects of even the most savage remarks, but this was ridiculous. Besides, Paul's knees were so bad that he could barely take the garbage down to the curb on trash day. The biggest shock in all of this should have been that he could still find a twenty-year-old to screw him.

Abigail slid her key into the old metal lock on the front door. The hinges squeaked like in a horror movie.

The door was already open.

"Wait a minute," she said, as if interrupting, though Paul hadn't been talking. "The front door is open."

"What?"

He hadn't been listening to her, either. "I said the front door is already open," she repeated, pushing it open wider.

"Aw, Jesus. School's only been back for three weeks and she's already skipping again?"

"Maybe the cleaners—" She stopped, her foot crunching glass. Abigail looked down, feeling a sharp, cold panic building somewhere at the base of her spine. "There's glass all over the floor. I just stepped in it."

Paul said something she didn't hear.

"Okay," Abigail answered, automatic. She turned around. One of the tall side windows by the front door was broken. Her mind flashed on a hand reaching in, unlatching the bolt, opening the door.

She shook her head. In broad daylight? In this neighborhood? They couldn't have more than three people over at a time without the batty old woman across the street calling to complain about the noise.

"Abby?"

She was in some kind of bubble, her hearing muffled. She told her husband, "I think someone broke in."

Paul barked, "Get out of the house! They could still be there!"

She dropped the mail onto the hall table, catching her reflection in the mirror. She had been playing tennis for the last two hours. Her hair was still damp, stray wisps plastered to the back of her neck where her ponytail was starting to come loose. The house was cool, but she was sweating.

"Abby?" Paul yelled. "Get out right now. I'm calling the police on the other line."

She turned, mouth open to say something—what?—when she saw the bloody footprint on the floor.

"Emma," she whispered, dropping the phone as she bolted up the stairs toward her daughter's bedroom.

She stopped at the top of the stairs, shocked at the broken furniture, the splintered glass on the floor. Her vision tunneled and she saw Emma lying in a bloody heap at the end of the hallway. A man stood over her, a knife in his hand.

For a few seconds, Abigail was too stunned to move, her breath catching, throat closing. The man started toward her. Her eyes couldn't focus on any one thing. They went back and forth between the knife clenched in his bloody fist and her daughter's body on the floor.

"No—"

The man lunged toward her. Without thinking, Abigail stepped back. She tripped, falling down the stairs, hip and shoulder blades thumping the hard wood as she slid headfirst. There was a chorus of pain from her body: elbow hitting the stiles on the railing, anklebone cracking against the wall, a searing burn in her neck as she tried to keep her head from popping against the sharp tread of the stairs. She landed in the foyer, the breath knocked out of her lungs.

The dog. Where was the stupid dog?

The dog rolled onto her back, wiping blood out of her eyes, feeling broken glass grind into her scalp.

The man was rushing down the stairs, the knife still in his hand. Abigail didn't think. She kicked up as he came off the last tread, lodging the toe of her sneaker somewhere between his asshole and his scrotum. She was far off the mark, but it didn't matter. The man stumbled, cursing as he went down on one knee.

She rolled onto her stomach and scrambled toward the door. He grabbed her leg, yanking her back so hard that a white-hot pain shot up her spine and into her shoulder. She clutched at the glass on the floor, trying to find a piece to hurt him with, but the tiny shards only ripped open the skin of her hand. She started kicking at him, legs flailing wildly behind her as she inched toward the front door.

"Stop it!" he screamed, both his hands clamping down on her ankles. "God dammit, I said stop!"

She stopped, trying to catch her breath, trying to think. Her head was still ringing, her mind unable to focus. Two feet ahead, the front door was still open, offering a view down the gentle slope of the walk to her car parked on the street. She twisted around so she could face her

attacker. He was on his knees, holding her ankles to keep her from kicking. The knife was beside him on the floor. His eyes were a sinister black—two pieces of granite showing beneath heavy lids. His broad chest rose and fell as he panted for breath. Blood soaked his shirt.

Emma's blood.

Abigail tensed her stomach muscles and lunged up toward him, fingers straight out as her nails stabbed into his eyes.

He slapped the side of her ear with his open palm but she kept at it, digging her thumbs into his eye sockets, feeling them start to give. His hands clamped around her wrists, forcing her fingers away. He was twenty times stronger than her, but Abigail was thinking only of Emma now, that split second when she'd seen her daughter upstairs, the way her body was positioned, her shirt pushed up over her small breasts. She was barely recognizable, her head a bloody red mass. He had taken everything, even her daughter's beautiful face.

"You bastard!" Abigail screamed, feeling like her arms were going to break as he pried her hands away from his eyes. She bit his fingers until teeth met with bone. The man screamed, but still held on. This time when Abigail brought up her knee, it made contact squarely between his legs. The man's bloody eyes went wide and his mouth opened, releasing a huff of sour breath. His grip loosened but still did not release. As he fell onto his back, he pulled Abigail along with him.

Automatically, her hands wrapped around his thick neck. She could feel the cartilage in his throat move, the rings that lined the esophagus bending like soft plastic. His grip went tighter around her wrists but her elbows were locked now, her shoulders in line with her hands as she pressed all of her weight into the man's neck. Lightning bolts of pain shot through her shaking arms and shoulders. Her hands cramped as if thousands of tiny needles stabbed into her nerves. She could feel vibrations through her palms as he tried to speak. Her vision tunneled again. She saw starbursts of red dotting his eyes, his wet lips opening, tongue protruding. She was sitting on him, straddling him, and she became aware of the fact that she could feel the man's hip bones pressing into the meat of her thighs as he arched up, trying to buck her off.

Unbidden, she thought of Paul, the night they had made Emma—how Abigail had known, just known, that they were making a baby. She had straddled her husband like this, wanting to make sure she got every drop of him to make their perfect child.

And Emma was perfect ... her sweet smile, her open face. The way she trusted everyone she met no matter how many times Paul warned her.

Emma lying upstairs. Dead. Blood pooled around her. Underwear yanked down. Her poor baby. What had she gone through? What humiliation had she suffered at the hands of this man?

Abigail felt a sudden warmth between her legs. The man had urinated on them both. He stared at her—really saw her—then his eyes glassed over. His arms fell to the sides, hands popping against the glass-strewn tile. His body went limp, mouth gaping open.

Abigail sat back on her heels, looking at the lifeless man in front of her.

She had killed him.

DAY ONE



CHAPTER ONE



Will Trent stared out the window of the car as he listened to his boss yell into her cell phone. Not that Amanda Wagner ever really raised her voice, but she had a certain edge to her tone that had caused more than one of her agents to burst into tears and walk off an active investigation—no mean feat considering the majority of her subordinates at the Georgia Bureau of Investigation were men.

“We’re at”—she craned her neck, squinting at the street sign—“the Prado and Seventeenth.” Amanda paused. “Perhaps you could look up the information on your computer?” She shook her head, obviously not liking what she was hearing.

Will tried, “Maybe we should keep driving around? We might find—”

Amanda covered her eyes with her hand. She whispered into the phone, “How long until the server is back up?” The answer caused her to breathe out a heavy, pronounced sigh.

Will indicated the screen dominating the middle of the woodlined dashboard. The Lexus had more bells and whistles than a clown’s hat. “Don’t you have GPS?”

She dropped her hand, considering his question, then began fiddling with some knobs on the dashboard. The screen didn’t change, but the air-conditioning whirled higher. Will chuckled, and she cut him off with a nasty look, suggesting, “Maybe while we’re waiting for Caroline to find a street map, you can get the owner’s manual out of the glove box and read the directions for me.”

Will tried the latch, but it was locked. He thought this pretty much summed up his relationship with Amanda Wagner. She often sent him the way of locked doors and expected him to find his way around them. Will liked a good puzzle as much as the next man, but just once, it would have been nice to have Amanda hand him the key.

Or maybe not. Will had never been good at asking for help—especially from someone like Amanda, who seemed to keep a running list in her head of people who owed her favors.

He looked out the window as she berated her secretary for not keeping a street map on her person at all times. Will had been born and raised in Atlanta, but didn’t often find himself in Ansley Park. He knew that it was one of the city’s oldest and wealthiest neighborhoods, where over a century ago, lawyers, doctors and bankers had built their enviable estates so that future lawyers, doctors and bankers could live as they did—safely cloistered in the middle of one of the most violent metropolitan cities this side of the Mason-Dixon. The only thing that had changed over the years was that the black women pushing white babies in strollers were better compensated these days.

With its twisting turns and roundabouts, Ansley seemed designed to confuse, if not discourage, visitors. Most of the streets were tree-lined, broad avenues with the houses tucked up on hills to better look down on the world. Densely forested parks with walking trails and swing sets were everywhere. Some of the walkways were still the original cobblestone. Though all the homes were architecturally different, there was a certain uniformity to their crisply painted exteriors and professionally landscaped lawns. Will guessed this was because even a fixer-upper started at the one million mark. Unlike his own Poncey-Highland neighborhood, which was less than six miles from here, there were no rainbow-colored houses or methadone clinics in Ansley.

On the street, Will watched a jogger stop to stretch and surreptitiously check out Amanda’s Lexus. According to the news this morning, there was a code-red smog alert in effect, advising people not to breathe the outside air unless they absolutely had to. No one seemed to be taking that to heart, even as the temperature inched past the one hundred mark. Will had seen at least five joggers since they’d entered Ansley Park. All were women and all so far had fit the stereotype of the perky, perfect soccer mom with their Pilates-toned bodies and bouncy

ponytails.

The Lexus was parked at the bottom of what seemed to be a popular hill, the street behind them lined with tall oaks that cast the pavement into shadow. All of the runners had slowed to look at the car. This wasn't the type of neighborhood where a man and a woman could sit in a parked vehicle for very long without someone calling the police. Of course, this wasn't the kind of neighborhood where teenage girls were brutally raped and murdered in their own homes, either.

He glanced back at Amanda, who was holding the phone to her ear so tightly it looked as if she might snap the plastic in two. She was an attractive woman if you never heard her speak or had to work for her or sit in a car with her for any length of time. She had to be in her early sixties by now. When Will had first started at the GBI over ten years ago, Amanda's hair had been more pepper than salt, but that had changed drastically over the last few months. He didn't know if this was because of something in her personal life or an inability to get an appointment with her hairdresser, but she had lately begun showing her years.

Amanda started pressing buttons on the console again, obviously trying to work the GPS. The radio came on and she quickly turned it off again, but not before Will caught the opening notes of a swing band. She muttered something under her breath and pressed another button, which caused Will's window to slide down. He felt a blast of hot air like someone had opened an oven door. In the side mirror, he saw a jogger at the top of the hill, the leaves on the dogwoods stirring in the breeze.

Amanda gave up on the electronics. "This is ridiculous. We're the top investigatory arm in the state and we can't even find the God damn crime scene."

Will turned around, his seat belt straining against his shoulder as he looked up the hill.

Amanda asked, "What are you doing?"

"That way," he said, pointing behind them. The limbs of the trees overhead were intertwined, casting the street in a dusklike darkness. There was no breeze this time of year, just relentless heat. What he had seen was not rustling leaves but the blue lights of a police cruiser bouncing off the shadows.

Amanda gave another heavy sigh as she put the car into gear and started a U-turn. Without warning, she slammed on the brakes, her arm shooting out in front of Will as if she could stop him from going through the windshield. A large white van blared its horn as it sped by, the driver shaking his fist, mouthing obscenities.

"Channel Five," Will said, recognizing the local news station's logo on the side of the van.

"They're almost as late as we are," Amanda commented, following the news van up the hill. She took a right, coming on a lone police cruiser blocking the next left. A smattering of reporters was already at the scene, representing all the local stations as well as CNN, which had their world headquarters a few miles up the road. A woman strangling the man who had killed her daughter would be big news in any part of the world, but the fact that the daughter was white, that the parents were wealthy and the family was one of the city's most influential gave it an almost giddy, scandalous tinge. Somewhere in New York City, a Lifetime movie executive was drooling into her BlackBerry.

Amanda pulled out her badge and waved it at the cop as she rolled past the blockade. There were more police cruisers up ahead along with a couple of ambulances. The doors were open, the beds empty. Paramedics stood around smoking. The hunter green BMW X5 parked in front of the house seemed out of place among the emergency vehicles, but the gigantic SUV made Will wonder where the coroner's van was. He wouldn't be surprised if the medical examiner had gotten lost, too. Ansley was not a neighborhood well known to someone earning a civil servant's salary.

Amanda put the car into reverse to parallel park between two of the cruisers. The park sensor controls started beeping as she tapped on the gas. "Don't dawdle in there, Will. We're not working this case unless we're taking it over."

Will had heard some variation on this same theme at least twice since they had left city hall. The dead girl's grandfather, Hoyt Bentley, was a billionaire developer who had made his share of enemies over the years. Depending on who you talked to, Bentley was either a scion of the city or a crony from way back, the sort of moneyed crook who made things happen behind the scenes without ever getting his hands dirty. Whichever version of the man's story was true, he had deep enough pockets to buy his share of political friends. Bentley had made one phone call to the governor, who had reached out to the director of the Georgia Bureau of Investigation, who had

in turn assigned Amanda the task of looking into the murder.

If the killing had any markings of a professional hit or hinted at something deeper than a simple assault and burglary gone wrong, then Amanda would make a phone call and snatch the case away from the Atlanta Police Department faster than a toddler taking back a favorite toy. If this was just a random, everyday tragedy, then she would probably leave the explanations to Will while she toddled back to city hall in her fancy car.

Amanda put the gear into drive and inched forward. The gap between the beeps got furiously short as she edged closer to the police car. "If Bentley's got someone mad enough to kill his granddaughter, this case goes to a whole new level."

She sounded almost hopeful at the prospect. Will understood her excitement—breaking this kind of case would be yet another feather in Amanda's cap—but Will hoped he never got to the point where he saw the death of a teenage girl as a career stepping-stone. Though he wasn't sure what he should think of the dead man, either. He was a murderer, but he was also a victim. Considering Georgia's pro-death penalty stance, did it really matter that he had been strangled here in Ansley Park rather than strapped to a gurney and given a lethal injection at Coastal State Prison?

Will opened the door before Amanda put the car into park. The hot air hit him like a punch to the gut, his lungs temporarily straining in his chest. Then the humidity took over, and he wondered if this was what it felt like to have tuberculosis. Still, he put on his suit jacket, covering the paddle holster clipped to the back of his belt. Not for the first time, Will questioned the sanity of wearing a three-piece suit in the middle of August.

Amanda seemed untouched by the heat as she joined Will. A group of uniformed policemen stood clustered at the bottom of the driveway, watching them walk across the street. Recognition dawned in their eyes, and Amanda warned Will, "I don't have to tell you that you're not exactly welcome by the Atlanta Police Department right now."

"No," Will agreed. One of the cops in the circle made a point of spitting on the ground as they passed by. Another one settled on a more subtle raised middle finger. Will plastered a smile on his face and gave the officers a big thumbs-up to let them all know there were no hard feelings.

From her first day in office, Atlanta's mayor had pledged to weed out the corruption that ran unchecked during her predecessor's reign. Over the last few years, she had been working closely with the GBI to open cases against the most blatant offenders. Amanda had graciously volunteered Will to go into the lions' den. Six months ago, he had closed an investigation that had resulted in the firing of six Atlanta police detectives and forced the early retirement of one of the city's highest-ranking officers. The cases were good—the cops were skimming cash off of narcotics busts—but nobody liked a stranger cleaning their house, and Will had not exactly made friends during the course of his investigation.

Amanda had gotten a promotion out of it. Will had been turned into a pariah.

He ignored the hissed "asshole" aimed at his back, trying to focus on the crime at hand as they walked up the curving driveway. The yard was brimming with all kinds of exotic-looking flowers that Will was hard-pressed to name. The house itself was enormous, stately columns holding up a second-floor balcony, a winding set of granite stairs leading to the front doors. Except for the smattering of surly cops marring the scene, it was an impressive estate.

"Trent," someone called, and he saw Detective Leo Donnelly making his way down the front steps. Leo was a short man, at least a full foot less than Will's six-three. His gait had taken on an almost Columbo-like shuffle since they'd last worked together. The effect was that of an agitated monkey. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

Will indicated the cameras, offering Leo the most believable explanation. Everybody knew the GBI would throw a baby into the Chattahoochee if it meant getting on the nightly news. He told the detective, "This is my boss, Dr. Wagner."

"Hey," Leo said, tossing her a nod before turning back to Will. "How's Angie doing?"

"We're engaged." Will felt Amanda's scrutiny focus on him with a cold intensity. He tried to deflect, indicating the open doorway with a nod of his head. "What've we got here?"

"A shitload of hate for you, my friend." Leo took out a cigarette and lit it. "You better watch your back."

Amanda asked, "Is the mother still inside?"

"First door on the left," Leo answered. "My partner's in there with her."

"Gentlemen, if you'll excuse me." Amanda dismissed Leo the way she might a servant. The look she gave Will wasn't that much more pleasant.

Leo exhaled a line of smoke as he watched her go up the stairs. "Puts a chill on things, don't she? Like fucking dry ice."

Will defended her automatically, in that sort of way that you defend a useless uncle or slutty sister when someone outside of the family attacks them. "Amanda is one of the best cops I've ever worked with."

Leo fine-tuned his appraisal. "Nice ass for a grandma."

Will thought back to the car, the way Amanda's arm had shot out in front of him when she thought they were going to get hit by the news van. It was the most maternal thing he had ever seen her do.

Leo offered, "Bet she's a lot of work in the sack."

Will tried not to shudder as he forced the image from his mind. "How've you been?"

"Prostate's got me leaking like a fucking sieve. Haven't been laid in two months and I got this cough that won't go away." He coughed, as if to prove it, then took another hit off the cigarette. "You?"

Will squared his shoulders. "I can't complain."

"Not with Angie Polaski at home." Leo's suggestive laugh reminded Will of what an asthmatic child molester would sound like if he smoked three packs a day. Angie had worked vice for fifteen years before taking medical leave from the force. Leo was under the impression that she was a whore just because her job had required her to dress like one. Or maybe it was the many different men she'd slept with over the years.

Will offered, "I'll tell her you said hello."

"Do that." Leo stared up at Will, taking a deep pull on the cigarette. "What are you really doing here?"

Will tried to shrug it off, knowing that Leo would be furious if he had his case snatched out from under him. "Bentley's got a lot of connections."

Leo dubiously raised an eyebrow. Despite the rumpled suit and the way his forehead sloped like a caveman's, he had been a cop long enough to recognize when someone hadn't exactly answered a question. "Bentley called you in?"

"The GBI can only involve itself in cases when it's invited by the local police force or government."

Leo snorted a laugh, smoke coming out of his nostrils. "You left out kidnapping."

"And bingo," Will added. The GBI had a task force that investigated bingo parlors in the state. It was the sort of job you got when you pissed off the wrong person. Two years ago, Amanda had exiled Will to the north Georgia mountains, where he had spent his time arresting meth-dealing hillbillies and reflecting on the dangers of disobeying his direct superior. He didn't doubt a bingo transfer was in his future should he ever rile her again.

Will indicated the house. "What happened here?"

"The usual." Leo shrugged. He took a long drag on his cigarette, then stubbed it out on his shoe. "Mom comes home from playing tennis, the door's open." He put the butt in his jacket pocket as he led Will into the house. "She goes upstairs and sees her daughter, dead and diddled." He indicated the curving staircase that swept over their heads. "The killer's still here, sets his sights on the mom—who's fucking hot, by the way—fighting ensues, and, surprise, he's the one that winds up dead."

Will studied the grand entranceway. The doors were a double set, one fixed, one open. The broken side window was a good distance from the knob. Someone would have to have a long arm to reach in and unlock the door.

He asked, "Any pets?"

"There's a three-hundred-year-old yellow Lab. He was in the backyard. Deaf as a fuckin' post, according to the mother. Probably slept through the whole thing."

"How old's the girl?"

"Seventeen."

The number echoed in the tiled foyer, where the smell of lavender air freshener and Leo's sweaty, nicotine stench competed alongside the metallic tinge of violent death. At the bottom of the stairs lay the source of the most dominant of all the odors. The man was lying on his back with his hands palms up near his head as if in surrender. A medium-sized kitchen knife with a wooden handle and a jagged edge was a few feet from his hand, lying in a nest of broken glass. His black jeans looked soiled, the skin of his neck bruised red from strangulation. The smattering of a mustache under his nose made his lip look dirty. Acne spotted his sideburns. One of his

sneakers had come untied, the laces stiff with dried blood. Incongruously, the killer's T-shirt had a dancing cherry on it, the stem cocked at a jaunty angle. The shirt was dark red, so it was hard to tell if the darker parts were blood, sweat, urine or a combination of all three.

Will followed the dead man's gaze up to the chandelier hovering overhead. The glass made a tinkling noise as it swayed in the artificial breeze from the air-conditioning. White spots of light danced around the foyer, reflecting the sunlight that came in through the palladium window over the doors.

Will asked, "Do you have an ID on him yet?"

"Looks like his wallet's in his back pocket, but he's not going anywhere. I don't want to roll the body until Pete gets here." He meant Pete Hanson, the city medical examiner. "Perp looks pretty young, you know?"

"Yeah," Will agreed, thinking that the killer was probably not old enough to buy alcohol. Amanda had been excited by the prospect of a contract killing. Unless Hoyt Bentley's enemies had a crack team of mercenary frat boys on the payroll, Will doubted there was a connection.

He asked, "Domestic?"

Leo shrugged again, a gesture that was more like a tic. "Looks like it, huh? Boyfriend snaps, kills the girl, panics when the mom comes home and goes after her. Problem is, Campano swears she's never seen him before in her life."

"Campano?" Will echoed, feeling his gut tighten at the name.

"Abigail Campano. That's the mother." Leo studied him. "You know her?"

"No." Will looked down at the body, hoping his voice would not give him away. "I thought the last name was Bentley."

"That's the wife's father. The husband's Paul Campano. He owns a bunch of car dealerships. You heard the commercials, right? 'We never say no at Campano.'"

"Where is he?"

Leo's cell phone started to ring and he slid it off the clip on his belt. "Shouldn't be too much longer. He was on the phone with her when it happened. He's the one who called 9-1-1."

Will cleared his throat so his voice would come back. "Might be interesting to know what he heard."

"You think?" He studied Will closely as he opened his cell phone, answering, "Donnelly."

Leo stepped outside and Will looked around the foyer, taking in the dead body, the broken glass. Obviously, there had been a massive struggle here. Blood streaked the floor, two different sets of tennis shoes leaving smeared waffle prints across the creamy white tile. A frail, antique-looking table had fallen on its side, a glass bowl shattered beside it. There was a busted cell phone that looked as if it had been stepped on. Mail was scattered around like confetti and a woman's handbag was overturned, the contents adding to the mess.

Over by the wall, there was a lamp sitting upright on the floor as if someone had placed it there. The base was cracked and there was a tilt to the shade. Will wondered if someone had turned it right side up or if the lamp, defying all probabilities, had landed upright. He also wondered if anyone had noticed the bloody bare footprint beside the lamp.

His eyes followed the curving line of the polished wooden stairs, seeing two sets of bloody tennis-shoe prints heading down but no other bare footprints. There were scuffs and deep ruts in the walls where shoes and body parts had dug out the plaster, indicating at least one person had fallen. The trip must have been brutal. Abigail Campano had known she was fighting for her life. For his part, the dead kid at the bottom of the stairs was no lightweight. The definition of his muscles was evident under the red T-shirt. He must have been shocked to find himself overpowered even as he pulled his last breath.

In his head, Will sketched a diagram of the house, trying to get his bearings. A long hallway under the stairs led to the back of the house and what looked like the kitchen and family room. There were two rooms off the front entrance, probably originally intended to be parlors to give the men separate space from the women. Pocket doors closed off one room, but the second, which looked to be used as a library, was open. Dark paneling dominated the open parlor. Bookshelves lined the walls and a fireplace with a deep hearth already had wood laid for a fire. The furniture was heavy, probably oak. Two large leather chairs dominated the space. Will assumed the other parlor was the opposite, the walls painted in white or cream and the furnishings less masculine.

Upstairs, there would probably be the usual layout to these old houses: five or six bedrooms connected by a long, T-shaped hallway with what would have originally been servants' stairs

leading down to the kitchen in the back. If the other houses in the neighborhood were anything to go by, there would be a carriage house outside that had been converted to a garage with an apartment overhead. Measuring and mapping it all out for the reports would be a lot of work. Will was glad the task wouldn't fall to him.

He was also glad he wouldn't have to explain why the single bloody footprint on the foyer was heading up the stairs instead of running out the front doorway.

Leo came back into the house, obviously annoyed by the phone call. "Like I don't got enough people sticking their heads up my ass with this prostate thing." He indicated the scene. "You solve this one for me yet?"

Will asked, "Who does the green BMW on the street belong to?"

"The mother."

"What about the girl—does she have a car?"

"A black Beemer, if you can believe it, 325 convertible. Parents took it away when her grades started to slide." He pointed to the house across the street. "Nosey neighbor turned her in when she saw the car in the driveway during school hours."

"Did the neighbor see anything today?"

"She's even older than the dog, so don't get your hopes up." He gave a half shrug of his shoulder, allowing, "We've got somebody over there talking to her right now."

"The mother's sure she doesn't recognize the killer?"

"Positive. I had her look at him again when she was more calmed down. Never seen him before in her life."

Will looked back at the dead man. Everything was adding up but nothing made sense. "How'd he get here?"

"No idea. Could've taken the bus and walked from Peachtree Street."

Peachtree, one of the busiest streets in Atlanta, was less than ten minutes away. Buses and trains went back and forth over-and underground bringing thousands of people to the office buildings and shops along the strip. Will had heard of criminals doing more stupid things than timing a brutal murder around a bus schedule, but the explanation didn't feel right. This was Atlanta. Only the desperately poor or ecologically eccentric took public transportation. The man on the floor was a clean-cut white kid wearing what looked like a three-hundred-dollar pair of jeans and a two-hundred-dollar pair of Nikes. Either he had a car or he lived in the neighborhood.

Leo offered, "We've got patrol out looking for a car that don't belong."

"You were the first detective on the scene?"

Leo took his time answering, making sure Will knew that he was doing so as a courtesy. "I was the first cop, period," he finally said. "Nine-one-one came in around twelve-thirty. I was finishing lunch at that sandwich place on Fourteenth. I got here maybe two seconds before the cruiser pulled up. We checked the house, made sure no one else was here, then I told everybody to get the hell out."

Fourteenth Street was less than a five-minute drive from where they stood. It was luck that the first responding officer had been a detective who could secure the scene. "You were the first one to talk to the mother?"

"She was freaked the fuck out, let me tell you. Hands were shaking, couldn't get her words out. Took about ten minutes for her to calm down enough to get the story out."

"So, this looks clean to you? Some kind of domestic violence scene between two teenagers, then the mom comes in and puts a kink in it?"

"Is that what Hoyt Bentley sent you to check out?"

Will skirted the question. "This is a sensitive case, Leo. Bentley plays golf with the governor. He sits on the board of half the charities in town. Wouldn't you be more surprised if we *weren't* here?"

Leo half shrugged, half nodded. Maybe there was something bothering him about the scene, too, because he kept talking. "There's defensive wounds on the mother. You can see signs of the struggle, what with all the broken shit and the walls being bashed in. Dead kid's got more of the same, including some bite marks on his fingers where the mother tried to get his hands off her. The girl upstairs—he had some time with her. Panties down, bra pushed up. Blood everywhere."

"Was there a struggle upstairs?"

"Some, but not like down here." He paused before offering, "You wanna see her?"

Will appreciated the gesture, but Amanda had made it more than clear that she didn't want

him to get involved in this unless it had the markings of a professional hit. If Will saw something upstairs, no matter how innocuous, he might end up having to testify about it later in court.

Still she couldn't fault him for being curious. "How was the girl killed?"

"Hard to tell."

Will glanced behind him at the open front door. The air-conditioning in the house was on full blast, trying to keep up with the heat coming in. "Did you already get pictures of everything in here?"

"Upstairs and down," Leo told him. "We'll dust for prints and the usual shit once the bodies are taken away. By the way, that's when I'll shut the door, since you seem to have a stick up your ass about it. I'm trying to keep the tourists down to a minimum here." He added, "Case like this, there are gonna be some heavy guns on it."

Will thought that was an understatement. No one had reported a strange car in the neighborhood. Unless Leo's public transportation theory held up, the kid was most likely a resident of Ansley Park. Knowing how these things worked, he probably came from a family of lawyers. Leo would need to do everything exactly by the book or he'd end up dangling by his short hairs the minute he took the stand.

Will rephrased his earlier question. "How did she die?"

"She's a fucking mess—face like raw hamburger, blood everywhere. I'm surprised the mother even recognized her." Leo paused, obviously seeing Will wanted a more concrete answer. "My guess? He beat her, then stabbed her to death."

Again, Will looked at the dead man on the floor. His palms were covered with dried blood, not what you would expect from a closed fist beating someone repeatedly, or, for that matter, a hand holding a knife. The knees of his black jeans looked dark, too, as if he had knelt in something wet. His T-shirt was bunched up just below his ribs. A fresh bruise spread down into the waist of his pants.

Will asked, "Was the mother injured?"

"Scratches on the back of her arms and hands, like I said before. There's a pretty deep cut on the palm from the glass on the floor." Leo catalogued, "Lots of bruises, busted lip, some blood in her ear. Maybe a sprained ankle. I thought it was broke, but she moved it." He rubbed his mouth, probably wishing there was a cigarette in it. "I called an ambulance, but she said she wasn't leaving until her daughter's removed."

"She say it like that, 'removed'?"

Leo mumbled a curse under his breath as he pulled a spiral-bound notebook out of his pocket. He flipped to the right page and showed it to Will.

Will frowned at the indecipherable scrawl. "Did you fingerprint a chicken?"

Leo turned the notebook back around and read aloud, " 'I will not leave my daughter here. I am not leaving this house until Emma leaves.' "

Will rolled the name around in his head, and the girl started to become a person to him rather than just another anonymous victim. She had been a baby once. Her parents had held her, protected her, given her a name. And now they had lost her.

He asked, "What's the mother saying?"

Leo flipped the notebook closed. "Just the bare facts. I'd bet my left one she was a lawyer before she got knocked up and gave it all up for the good life."

"Why is that?"

"She's being real careful about what she says, how she says it. Lots of 'I felt this' and 'I feared that.' "

Will nodded. A plea of self-defense relied solely on a person's perception that he or she was in imminent danger of death at the time of the attack. Campano was obviously laying the groundwork, but Will didn't know if that was because she was smart or because she was telling the truth. He looked down at the dead man again, the blood-caked palms, the soaked shirt. There was more here than met the eye.

Leo put his hand on Will's shoulder. "Listen, I gotta warn you—"

He stopped as the pocket doors slid open. Amanda stood beside a young woman. Behind them, Will could see another woman sitting on a deep couch. She was wearing a white tennis outfit. What must have been her injured foot was propped up on the coffee table. Her tennis shoes were on the floor underneath.

"Special Agent Trent," Amanda said, sliding the doors closed behind her. "This is Detective Faith Mitchell." Amanda looked Leo up and down like a bad piece of fish, then turned back to

the woman. "Special Agent Trent is at your disposal. The GBI is more than happy to offer you any and all help." She raised an eyebrow at Will, letting him know that the opposite was true. Then, maybe because she thought he was stupid, she added, "I need you back in the office within the hour."

The fact that Will had anticipated this very thing happening did not make him any more prepared. His car was parked back at city hall. Donnelly was going to be stuck on the scene until they cleared it and any one of the beat cops outside would love a chance to get Will Trent alone in the back of a squad car.

"Agent Trent?" Faith Mitchell seemed annoyed, which made Will think he'd missed something.

He asked, "I'm sorry?"

"Yeah, you are," she mumbled, and Will could only blink, wondering what he had missed.

Leo didn't seem to find anything unusual about the exchange. He asked the woman, "The mother say anything?"

"The daughter's got a best friend." Like Leo, Faith Mitchell carried a small spiral-bound notebook in her pocket. She paged through it to reference the name. "Kayla Alexander. The mother says we can probably find her at school. Westfield Academy."

Will recognized the expensive private high school on the outskirts of Atlanta. "Why wasn't Emma in school?"

Faith answered Leo, though Will had asked the question. "There've been some truancy issues in the past."

Will was hardly an expert, but he couldn't imagine a teenage girl skipping school without taking her best friend along with her. Unless she was meeting her boyfriend. He looked at the stairs again, wishing that he could go up and examine the scene. "Why wasn't the mom here today?"

Faith said, "She's got some weekly thing at her club. She usually doesn't get back until three."

"So, if someone was watching the house, they'd know that Emma was here alone."

Faith told Leo, "I need some air." She walked out the door and stood at the edge of the porch with her hands on her hips. She was young, probably in her early thirties, of average height, and pretty in the way that thin blond women were naturally thought to be pretty—but there was something that kept her from being attractive. Maybe it was the scowl that had been on her face or the flash of raw hatred in her eyes.

Leo mumbled an apology. "Sorry, man. I was trying to tell you—"

Across the foyer, the pocket doors slid open again. Abigail Campano stood at the entrance, leg bent at an angle so she wouldn't put weight on her hurt ankle. Unlike Faith, there was something radiant about her blond hair and perfect, milky white skin. Even though her eyes were swollen from crying, her lip still bleeding where it had been busted open, the woman was beautiful.

"Ms. Campano," Will began.

"Abigail," she softly interrupted. "You're the agent from the GBI?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'd like to offer my condolences."

She stared at him in confusion, probably because she still hadn't come to terms with her daughter's death.

"Can you tell me a little bit about your daughter?"

The blank stare did not go away.

Will tried, "You told Detective Donnelly that she had been skipping school lately?"

She nodded slowly. "Obviously, she managed to ..." Her voice trailed off as she looked at the dead man on the floor. "Kayla got her into skipping last year. She'd never done anything like that before. She was always a good girl. Always trying to do the right thing."

"There were other problems?"

"It all seems so inconsequential." Her lips trembled as she held back her emotions. "She started talking back, doing her own thing. She was trying to be her own person, and we still wanted her to be our little girl."

"Other than Kayla, did Emma have any friends? Boyfriends?"

Abigail shook her head, wrapping her arms around her waist. "She was so shy. She didn't make new friends easily. I don't know how this could have happened."

"Does Kayla have a brother?"

"No, she's an only child." Her voice caught. "Like Emma."

"Do you think you could make a list of the other kids she hung out with?"

"There were acquaintances, but Emma always picked one person to ..." Again, her voice

trailed off. "She had no one but Kayla, really." There was something to her tone that was so final, so certain about her daughter's aloneness in the world, that Will could not help but feel some of her sadness. He also hoped to God that Leo was making plans to talk to this Kayla. If she was as much an influence in Emma Campano's life as her mother indicated, then she probably knew a lot more about what had happened here today than anyone else did.

Will asked Abigail, "Is there anyone who might have a grudge against you or your husband?"

She kept shaking her head, transfixed by the sight of the dead man lying in her foyer. "It all happened so fast. I keep trying to think what I did ... what else I could have ..."

"I know you've been asked this before, but are you sure you don't recognize the man?"

Abigail's eyes closed, but he imagined that she could still see her daughter's murderer. "No," she finally answered. "He's a stranger to me."

Suddenly there was a man screaming from the front of the house. "Get the fuck out of my way!"

Will heard scuffling outside, cops yelling for someone to stop, then Paul Campano barreled up the front steps like a man on fire. He rammed Faith Mitchell out of his way as he burst into the house. A uniformed patrolman caught her as she stumbled back, perilously close to the edge of the porch. Neither of them looked happy, but Leo waved his hand, telling them to let it go.

Paul stood in the foyer, fists clenched. Will wondered if this was something genetic—that you were either the type of person who clenched your fists all the time or you weren't.

"Paul ..." Abigail whispered, rushing to him.

Even holding his wife, Paul kept his hands fisted.

Faith was obviously still bristling. Her tone was clipped. "Mr. Campano, I'm Detective Mitchell with the Atlanta Police Department. This is Detective Donnelly."

Paul wasn't interested in introductions. He was staring at the dead man over his wife's shoulder. "Is that the fucker who did this?" His voice turned to a growl. "Who is he? What's he doing in my house?"

Faith and Leo exchanged a look that Will would've missed if he hadn't been watching them for his own cues. They were partners; they obviously had a shorthand, and it looked like this time Faith was taking the short straw.

She suggested, "Mr. Campano, let's go out on the porch and talk about this."

"Who the fuck are you?" Paul glared at Will, his beady eyes almost swallowed by the extra weight on his face.

Will shouldn't have been surprised by the question, or even the way it was phrased. The last time Paul Campano had talked to him this way, Will was ten years old and they were both living in the Atlanta Children's Home. A lot had changed since then. Will had gotten taller and his hair had gotten darker. The only thing that changed about Paul was he seemed to have gotten heavier and meaner.

Leo supplied, "Mr. Campano, this is Agent Trent with the GBI."

Will tried to talk Paul down a little, to make him feel like he could help. "Do you know if your daughter had any enemies, Mr. Campano?"

"Emma?" he asked, glaring at Will. "Of course not. She was only seventeen years old."

"How about you?"

"No," he snapped. "No one who would do ..." He shook his head, unable to complete the sentence. He looked back at the dead killer. "Who is this bastard? What did Emma ever do to him?"

"Anything you can give us will help. Maybe you and your wife could—"

"She's up there, isn't she?" Paul interrupted, looking up. "My baby's upstairs."

No one answered him, but Leo took a couple of steps toward the stairs to block the way.

Paul said, "I want to see her."

"No," Abigail warned, her voice shaking. "You don't want to see her like that, Paul. You don't want to know."

"I need to see her."

"Listen to your wife, sir," Faith coaxed. "You'll get to see her soon. You just need to let us take care of her right now."

Paul barked at Leo, "Get the fuck out of my way."

"Sir, I don't think—"

Leo took the brunt of his anger. Paul slammed him into the wall as he bolted up the stairs. Will ran up after the man, almost knocking into him as Paul stopped cold at the top of the landing.

He stood frozen, staring at his daughter's lifeless form at the end of the hallway. The girl was at least fifteen feet away, but her presence filled the space as if she were right there beside them. All the fight seemed to drain out of Paul. Like most bullies, he could never sustain any one emotion.

"Your wife was right," Will told him. "You don't want to see her like this."

Paul went quiet, his labored breathing the only audible noise. His hand was to his chest, palm flat as if he was saying the pledge of allegiance. Tears brimmed in his eyes.

He swallowed hard. "There was this glass bowl on the table." His voice had gone flat, lifeless. "We got it in Paris."

"That's nice," Will said, thinking that never in a million years could he imagine Paul in Paris.

"It's a mess up here."

"There are people who can clean it up for you."

He went silent again, and Will followed his gaze, taking in the scene. Leo was right about downstairs being worse than up, but there was something even more sinister and unsettling in the air up here. The same bloody shoe prints were here, crisscrossing the white carpeting up and down the long hall. Streaks of blood slashed across the white walls where either the knife or a fist had arced over the body, repeatedly punching or plunging into the flesh. For some reason, the most troubling part to Will was the single red handprint on the wall directly over the victim's head where her attacker had obviously rested his weight as he raped her.

"Trashcan, right?"

Paul Campano wasn't looking for the garbage. He had called Will "Trashcan" when they were children. The memory put a lump in Will's throat. He had to swallow before he could answer. "Yeah."

"Tell me what happened to my daughter."

Will debated, but only for a moment. He had to turn sideways to get past Paul and go into the hallway. Careful not to disturb anything, he stepped into the crime scene. Emma's body was parallel to the walls, her head facing away from the stairs. As he walked toward her, Will's eyes kept going back to the handprint, the perfect formation of the palm and fingers. His gut roiled as he thought about what the guy had been doing when he left the impression.

Will stopped a few feet from the girl. "She was probably killed here," he told Paul, knowing from the pool of blood soaking into the carpet that the girl had not been moved. He crouched down by the body, resting his hands on his knees so that he wouldn't accidentally touch anything. Emma's shorts were bunched around one ankle, her feet bare. Her underwear and shirt had been yanked out of the way by her attacker. Teeth marks showed dark red against the white of her breasts. Scrapes and bruises trailed up the insides of her thighs, swollen welts showing the damage that had been done. She was thin, with shoulder-length blond hair like her mother and broad shoulders like her dad. There was no telling what she had looked like in life. Her face was beaten so severely that the skull had collapsed on itself, obscuring the eyes, the nose. The only point of reference was the mouth, which gaped open in a toothless, bloody hole.

Will checked on Paul. The man still stood frozen at the top of the stairs. His big, meaty hands were clasped in front of his chest like a nervous old woman waiting for bad news. Will didn't know what exactly he could see, if the distance softened some of the violence or made it worse.

Will told him, "She was beaten. I can see what looks like two knife wounds. One's just below her breast. The other is above her belly button."

"She got it pierced last year." Paul gave a strained laugh. Will looked back at him and Paul took this as a sign to continue. "She and her best friend went to Florida and came back with ..." He shook his head. "You think shit like that's funny when you're a kid, but when you're a parent and your daughter comes home with a ring in her belly ..." His face crumpled as he fought emotions.

Will turned his attention back to the girl. There was a silver ring looped through the skin of her belly button.

Paul asked, "Was she raped?"

"Probably." He'd said the word too fast. The sound hung in the stagnant air.

"Before or after?" Paul's voice shook. He was more than familiar with the dark deeds men were capable of.

The blood on her abdomen and chest was smeared, indicating someone had lain on top of her after the worst of the beating was over. Still, Will told him, "The coroner will have to answer that. I can't tell."

"Are you lying to me?"

"No," Will answered, trying not to look at the handprint, to let the guilt eat him up inside so that he ended up being the one to tell this man the horrible truth about his daughter's violent, degrading death.

Suddenly he felt Paul behind him.

Will stood, blocking him. "This is a crime scene. You need to—"

Paul's mouth dropped open. He slumped against Will like all the air had left his body. "It's not ..." His mouth worked, tears welling into his eyes. "It's not her."

Will tried to turn the man away from the sight of his daughter. "Let's go downstairs. You don't need to see any more of this."

"No," Paul countered, his fingers digging into Will's arm. "I mean it. It's not her." He shook his head back and forth, vehement. "It's not Emma."

"I know this is hard for you."

"Fuck you, with what you know!" Paul pushed himself away from Will. "Has anybody ever told you that your daughter is dead?" He kept shaking his head, staring at the girl. "That's not her."

Will tried to reason with him. "Her navel is pierced like you said."

He shook his head, his words choking in his throat. "It's not—"

"Come on," Will coaxed, pushing him back a few steps, trying to keep him from contaminating the scene any more than he already had.

Paul's words came out in an almost giddy rush. "Her hair, Trash. Emma's got longer hair than that. It goes down to her back almost. And she's got a birthmark on her right arm—Emma does. Look, there's nothing there. There's no birthmark."

Will checked the arm. Except for the blood, the skin was a perfect white.

"Right arm," Paul insisted, annoyed. He pointed to the other arm. "She's got a birthmark." When Will did not respond, he took out his wallet. Receipts and papers fell onto the floor as he dug around inside. "It's weird, shaped like a handprint. The skin's darker there." He found what he was looking for and handed Will a photograph. Emma was much younger in the picture. She was wearing a cheerleading outfit. One arm was cocked to her hip, holding a pom-pom. Paul was right; the birthmark looked as if someone had wrapped his hand around her arm and left a print.

Still, Will said, "Paul, let's not—"

"Abby! It's not her. It's not Emma!" Paul was laughing, elated. "Look at her arm, Trash. There's nothing there. This isn't Emma. It's gotta be Kayla. They look alike. They trade clothes all the time. It's got to be her!"

Abigail ran upstairs, Faith fast behind her.

"Stay back." Will blocked their way, holding out his arms like a crossing guard, physically pushing Paul back. The man was still smiling a fool's grin. All he was thinking was that his daughter wasn't dead. His mind hadn't made the next leap.

"Keep them here," Will told Faith. She nodded, stepping in front of the parents. Carefully, Will walked back toward the dead girl. He crouched down again, studying the shoe prints, the spray on the wall. Crossing the dead girl's body was a fine arc of blood that caught his attention. It went just under her breasts like a finely drawn line. Will hadn't noticed it the first time, but right now, he would have bet his pension that the blood had come from the kid downstairs.

"It's not her," Paul insisted. "It's not Emma."

Faith began, "It's hard sometimes when you lose someone you love. Denial is understandable."

Paul exploded. "Would you listen to me, you stupid bitch? I'm not going through the twelve steps of grief. I *know* what my fucking daughter looks like!"

Leo called, "Everything okay up there?"

"It's under control," Faith said, sounding like the exact opposite was true.

Will looked at the dead girl's bare feet. The soles were clean, seemingly the only part of her body that didn't have some pattern of blood on it.

He stood up, asking Abigail, "Tell me what happened."

She was shaking her head, unable to let herself hope. "Is it Emma? Is that her?"

Will took in the faint streaks of dark red on the skirt of Abigail's white tennis dress, the transfer patterns across her chest. He kept his voice firm, even though his heart was thumping hard enough to press against his ribs. "Tell me exactly what happened from the moment you got here."

"I was in my car—"

"From the stairs," Will interrupted. "You came up the stairs. Did you go to the body? Did you come into this area?"

"I stood here," she said, indicating the floor in front of her.

"What did you see?"

Tears streamed down her cheeks. Her mouth moved, trying to get out words as her eyes scanned the dead body. Finally, she said, "I saw him standing over her. He had a knife in his hand. I felt threatened."

"I know you felt like your life was in danger," Will assured her. "Just tell me what happened next."

Her throat worked. "I panicked. I stepped back and fell down the stairs."

"What did he do?"

"He came after me—came down the stairs."

"Did he have the knife in his hand?" She nodded. "Was it raised?"

She nodded again, then shook her head. "I don't know. No. It was at his side." She tightened her hand to her side to show him. "He was running down the stairs. It was at his side."

"Did he raise the knife when he got to the bottom of the stairs?"

"I kicked him before he got to the bottom. To throw him off balance."

"What happened to the knife?"

"He dropped it when he fell. I—He hit me in the head. I thought he was going to kill me."

Will turned around, looked at the shoe prints again. They were scattered, chaotic. Two people had stepped in the blood, walked back and forth, struggled. "Are you sure you didn't come into the hallway up here at all?"

She nodded her head.

"Listen to me very carefully. You didn't walk around up here? You didn't go to your daughter? You didn't step in any blood?"

"No. I was here. Right here. I stopped at the top of the stairs and he came toward me. I thought he was going to kill me. I thought ..." She put her hand to her mouth, unable to continue. Her voice cracked as she asked her husband, "It's not Em?"

Will told Faith, "Keep them both right here," as he headed down the stairs.

Leo was standing in the front doorway, talking to one of the uniformed patrolmen. He asked Will, "What's going on?"

"Don't wait for Pete," he ordered, stepping over the body. "I need an ID on this guy right now." He found Abigail Campano's shoes in the parlor under the coffee table. The tread was a court zigzag, not a waffle pattern. Except for a couple of scuff marks on the toes, there wasn't a trace of blood on them.

In the foyer, Leo was taking a pair of latex gloves from his pocket. "The nosy neighbor across the street says she saw a car parked in the driveway a couple of hours ago. Could be yellow, could be white. Could be four doors, could be two."

Will checked the dead man's sneakers. Waffle pattern, dried blood caked in the tread. He said, "Give me those." Leo handed him the gloves and Will put them on. "You got your pictures, right?"

"Yeah. What's going on?"

Carefully, Will peeled up the dead man's T-shirt. The material was still soaking wet where it had bunched up at the waist, and it left an odd, pinkish hue on the exposed skin.

Leo asked, "You wanna tell me what you're doing?"

There was so much blood that it was hard to see anything. Will gently pressed the abdomen, and a narrow slit opened up in the flesh, black liquid oozing out.

"Shit," Leo hissed. "Did the mother stab him?"

"No." Will saw how it must have happened. The young man kneeling beside the body upstairs, a knife plunged into his chest. He would have pulled out the knife, arterial blood spraying over the dead girl's body. The man would've tried to stand, staggering to get help even as his lung collapsed. That's when Abigail Campano had appeared at the top of the stairs. She saw the man who had killed her daughter. He saw the woman who could possibly save them all.

Leo looked up the stairs, then back at the dead kid, finally understanding. "Shit."

Will snapped off the gloves, trying not to think about all the lost time. He went to the bloody bare footprint, saw that the weight had been on the ball of the foot when it was made. There was a small cluster of blood droplets on the bottom stair—six of them.

Will talked it out for Leo's benefit as much as his own. "Emma was unconscious. The killer

carried her over his shoulder." Will narrowed his eyes, putting the pieces together. "He stopped here at the bottom of the stairs to catch his breath. Her head and arms were hanging down his back. The blood drops on the bottom tread are almost perfectly round, which means they fell straight down." Will pointed to the footprint. "He shifted her weight forward. Her foot touched the floor—that's why it's facing up the stairs instead of toward the door. After carrying her down the stairs, he had to readjust the body so that he could carry her out the front door."

Leo tried to cover himself. "The mother's story held up. There was no way I could—"

"It doesn't matter." Will glanced up. Abigail and Paul Campano were staring over the railing, watching, disbelieving. "Does Kayla have a car?"

Abigail spoke hesitantly. "She drives a white Prius."

Will took out his phone and hit the speed dial. He told Leo, "Try to nail down the old lady on the car—show her a photo array if you have to. Check all 9-1-1 calls coming out of the area in the last five hours. Get your guys to recanvass the neighborhood. There were a lot of joggers out earlier who are probably back home by now. I'll notify highway patrol; there's an on-ramp to the interstate less than a mile from here." Will put the phone to his ear just as Amanda picked up. He didn't waste time with pleasantries. "I need a team here. It looks like we've got a kidnapping."

CHAPTER TWO



Emma Campano's bedroom was almost as big as Will's entire house. He hadn't had his own room as a kid. He hadn't really had his own anything until he turned eighteen and the Atlanta Children's Home gave him a pat on the back and a check from the state. His first apartment was a box, but it was his box. Will could still remember what it felt like to leave his toothbrush and shampoo in the bathroom without having to worry someone else would swipe them—or worse. Even to this day, there was a certain joy he felt from opening the refrigerator and knowing that he could eat anything he wanted.

He wondered if Paul got a similar feeling when he walked through his multimillion-dollar home. Did his chest puff out with pride when he saw the dainty antique chairs and the obviously expensive canvases that hung on the walls? When he locked the front door at night, did he still get that sense of relief that no one had managed to take it all away from him? There was no arguing that the man had made a good life for his family. With the pool out back and the screening room in the basement, you'd never guess he had spent his early years perfecting the role of a juvenile delinquent.

Paul had never been quick, but he was street smart and even as a kid, he knew how to make a dollar. Abigail was obviously the brains in the family. She was right behind Will in figuring out what had really happened that morning in the Campano home. Will had never in his life seen someone so stricken with horror as when the woman realized that she had probably killed an innocent man—worse, an innocent man who might have been trying to help her daughter. She'd become hysterical. A doctor had been called to sedate her.

Typical Paul, he was working the angles before his wife's head hit the pillow. He'd taken out his cell phone and made two calls: one to his attorney and one to his influential father-in-law, Hoyt Bentley. Ten short minutes later, Will's own cell phone had started ringing. Once again, the governor had contacted the director of the Georgia Bureau of Investigation, who had pressed Amanda, and she in turn had pressed Will.

"Don't fuck this up," Amanda had told him in her usual supportive way.

The procedure in kidnapping cases was simple: have a cop with the family at all times and have the family by the phone for the ransom call. Even as the doctor stuck a needle in her arm, Abigail Campano had still refused to leave her home. There was a guest suite in the carriage house. After making sure the apartment was not part of the crime scene, Will had sent the parents there along with Hamish Patel, a GBI hostage negotiator. Paul had bristled about being assigned a babysitter, which meant he either had something to hide or thought he could control the situation without the police getting in his way.

Knowing the way Paul worked, it was probably a little of both. He had been so uncooperative during questioning that Will was actually looking forward to the lawyer showing up so the man could tell his client it was okay to give a straight answer. Or maybe Hamish Patel could work some of his magic. The hostage negotiator had been trained by Amanda Wagner when she'd led the GBI's rapid extraction team. He could pretty much talk the fleas off a dog.

Again following procedure, Will had put out an APB on Kayla Alexander's white Prius and issued a Levi's Call, Georgia's version of the Amber Alert, for Emma Campano. This meant that all the highway message boards in Atlanta as well as radios and television sets in Georgia would carry some sort of warning asking folks to come forward if they saw the car or the girl. Will had also set up traces on all the family telephones and cell phones, but he doubted there was a ransom call coming any time soon.

His gut told him that whoever had taken Emma Campano didn't want her for money. One look

at Kayla Alexander told that story. The young woman had been beaten and raped by a sadist who had probably enjoyed every minute of it. There was only one reason to take a hostage from the scene, and it wasn't for cash. All Will could do at this moment was hope that he found something—anything—that pointed the way to the man before he killed again.

Will stood out in the hallway as he watched the crime-scene tech taking photos of Emma Campano's bedroom. He was trying to get a sense of who she was, but nothing stood out except for the fact that she was a tidy young woman. Neatly folded clothes that were waiting to be put up lined the top of a velvet bench with silk tassels and the books on the shelves were stacked in straight rows. Some sort of floral air freshener gave the room a sickly sweet smell. Outside the window, a small wind chime tinkled from a rare summer wind.

Though Emma's personal mark did not stand out, there was no mistaking the space belonged to a very fortunate teenage girl. The four-poster bed had a bright pink coverlet with purple sheets and heart-shaped pillows. The walls were painted a soothing, light lilac that complemented the geometrically patterned shag rugs on the hardwood floor. There was a flat-panel television mounted over a large fireplace. Two comfortable-looking chairs were by the window. A book was pressed open on the arm of one—a romance from the look of it. Two purses had been thrown onto the other chair. A backpack was on the floor, stuffed with schoolbooks and loose papers. Two pairs of identical flip-flops had been kicked off by the door. One set was a larger size than the other.

That at least explained why the girls were barefoot.

The tech took a couple more photographs, the flash filling the room. He asked Will, "Anything specific you want me to cover?"

"Can you test the fluid on the bed?" The sheets were bunched up in a knot. The dark purple material made signs of sexual activity obvious.

"I need to get the kit out of my truck," the tech said. "You need anything else?"

Will shook his head and the man left. Outside, a heavy door slammed, making the familiar thumping sound that Will always associated with death. He walked to the window and saw Pete Hanson standing behind the coroner's van, hand flat to the back door as he took a moment to pay his respects to the dead bodies inside. Pete had given Will a preliminary rundown, but they wouldn't have hard facts until the autopsies were performed tomorrow morning.

The Atlanta Police Department had moved from a primary to supportive role now that there was a kidnapping involved. Leo Donnelly was probably calling his accountant at the moment, trying to figure out if he could take early retirement. Will had tossed him the task of tracking down Kayla Alexander's parents and telling them that their daughter had been murdered. That seemed punishment enough, though Amanda might have something to say about that.

Will tugged on a pair of latex gloves as he prepared to search Emma's room. He started with the two purses on one of the chairs. Methodically, Will searched each one. He found pens, tampons, candy, loose change at the bottom—exactly what you'd expect to find in any woman's handbag. The leather wallets in each were identical, both with the same designer logo on them, and he assumed the girls had bought them on a shopping trip together. They each had a Visa card with their name on it. Their driver's license photos showed images of two remarkably similar-looking girls: blond haired, blue eyed. Emma Campano had obviously been the prettier of the two, but there was a defiant tilt to Kayla Alexander's chin that made Will think she was the one who'd gotten all the attention.

Not anymore. The news crews were still swarming outside. Will was sure every station had broken into regular programming with the story. Thanks to the endless and annoying commercials, the Campano name was well-known to Atlantans. Will wondered if the family's notoriety would help or hinder the case. He also wondered what was happening to Emma Campano right now. Will looked at her picture again. Maybe he was reading too much into it, but there seemed to be an air of reticence about her, as if she expected the photographer to find fault instead of beauty.

"Adam David Humphrey," Faith Mitchell said. Like Will, she was wearing a pair of latex gloves. Also like Will, she was holding an open wallet and a driver's license in her hands. This one belonged to the dead man downstairs. "He's got an Oregon State license. No car registered in his name in either state. The principal at the girls' school has never heard of him and he was never a student there." She handed Will the plastic ID card. Will squinted his eyes at the tiny letters. "One of the guys back at the station is trying to get in touch with the local sheriff up there. The address makes it hard."

He patted his pockets, looking for his glasses. "Why is that?"

Her tone was almost as condescending as Amanda's. "Rural route?"

"Sorry, I left my reading glasses at the office." A rural route with a box number would not necessarily correspond with a physical address. Unless the Humphreys were well-known in town, this added another hoop to jump through before the dead boy's parents could be informed. Will sat back on his heels, studying the license photo of Adam Humphrey. He was a good-looking kid in a geeky sort of way. His mouth was twisted into a grin and his hair was longer in the photo, but there was no mistaking that Adam Humphrey was the man lying dead downstairs. "He's older than I thought."

"Nineteen is still young."

"What's he doing in Atlanta?" Will answered his own question. "College."

Faith checked through the wallet, calling out what she found. "Six dollars cash, a photograph of an older couple—probably grandparents. Wait a minute." The gloves were too long for her fingers, making it difficult for her to dig around. Will waited patiently until she pulled out a photograph. "Is this Emma?"

He compared the photo against the licenses he had found in the two purses. Emma was happier in the picture from the wallet, her mouth open in laughter. "It's her."

Faith looked at them both, then nodded her agreement. "She looks younger than seventeen."

Will said, "Adam's got a thing for Emma, not Kayla. So why is Kayla dead?"

She put the photo back into the wallet and dropped them both in a plastic evidence bag. "Maybe she got in the way."

Will nodded, though the vicious manner in which the girl had been raped and killed made him think there was more to it than that. "We'll know more when Pete does the autopsy. Do the parents want to see her body?"

"The parents don't even know yet." Will's mouth opened to ask why the hell not, but she talked over him. "The school principal told Leo that the Alexanders are on a three-week vacation in New Zealand and Australia. They left emergency contact numbers for their hotels. Leo called the manager at the Mercure Dunedin. He promised he'd get the parents to call as soon as they get back from sightseeing, whenever that might be. There's an eighteen-hour time difference, so it's already tomorrow morning for them." Faith added, "I sent a cruiser to their house on Paces Ferry. No one was home."

"They couldn't have left their daughter alone for three weeks."

"She was seventeen years old. She was old enough to take care of herself." Her face flushed as she seemed to realize that the exact opposite was true.

"Did Abigail Campano give you anything when you talked to her?"

"It was a different conversation. We both thought her daughter was dead."

Will recalled, "She's the one who told you that Kayla would probably be at school."

"Right. She even said, 'At least Kayla is safe.'"

"Did Leo ask the principal about the girls skipping?"

"She confirmed it's been a problem. Students aren't allowed off campus during lunch, but some of them sneak out and come back in before the bell rings. There's a hole in the security cameras behind the main class building and the kids take advantage of it."

"Send some extra cruisers to the school. Until we know there's no connection, I want to make sure we keep a close eye on the rest of the students. Also, let's try to get a dump on the Alexanders' phone. There has to be an aunt or a family friend who's been checking in on her. Send a uniform to knock on the neighbors' doors. It's coming on supertime. People should be getting home by now."

She had tucked the wallet under her arm as she wrote down his instructions in her notebook. "Anything else?"

He looked at the book bag, all the papers spilling out of it. "Send someone up here who can work fast to go through all these notes. Tell Leo to talk to the school principal again. I want a list of Kayla and Emma's known acquaintances. If any of the teachers are still at school, tell him to talk to them, see what the girls were like, who they hung out with, then I'll go back at them tomorrow after they've had the night to think about it. The girls were truants, so they might be hanging out with kids from other schools." He stopped, going back to the dead kid downstairs. Finding out who Adam was and what he was doing in Atlanta was the only tangible lead they could follow.

He took out one of his business cards and handed it to her. "Call back that sheriff in Oregon

and give him my cell number. Tell him to call me as soon as he gets anything on Adam Humphrey's parents. For now, I want you focused on finding out why Adam was in Atlanta. Track down the college angle first."

She shook her head. "He'd have a college ID on him if he was in school."

"If he came here all the way from Oregon, then it was probably for something specific: law, medicine, art. Start with the big schools first, then move on to the little ones. Emory, Georgia State, Georgia Tech, SCAD, Kennesaw ... There has to be a list online."

She was incredulous. "You want me to call every college and university in the city, track down the registrar who's probably already gone for the day, and ask them to tell me without a warrant whether or not they've got Adam Humphrey on their rolls?"

"I do."

The scowl she had given him before had nothing on her expression now.

Will was fed up with her attitude. "Detective Mitchell, I think your anger is commendable, but the fact that I banged up six of your guys for skimming off of drug dealers doesn't mean a hell of a lot to the parents who lost their kids today or the ones who are waiting to find out whether or not their daughter is still alive, and since the Atlanta Police Department mishandled this case from the get-go, and since the only reason you are still involved in this case is because I need people to do my scut work, I expect you to follow directions no matter how mundane or ludicrous my requests seem to you."

She pressed her lips together, fury burning in her eyes as she tucked the photograph back into the wallet. "I'll bag this as evidence and start calling the schools."

"Thank you."

She made to go, then stopped. "And it was seven."

"What?"

"The cops. It was seven that you banged up, not six."

"I stand corrected" was all Will could think to say. She turned on her heel and left the room.

Will let out a deep breath, wondering how long it was going to take before he kicked Faith Mitchell off this case. Then again, it wasn't like he had the whole police department behind him, so maybe he wasn't in a position to be choosy. Even though Faith seemed to despise him as much as the next cop, she was still following orders. There had to be something said for that.

Will stood in the middle of the room, trying to decide what to do next. He looked down at the rug, the circular patterns that resembled something out of a 1970s James Bond movie. Emma Campano should be his priority right now, but the confrontation with the Atlanta detective still nagged at him. Something rattled loose in his brain and he finally understood.

Seven, Faith Mitchell had said. She was right. Six cops had been fired, but one more had also been affected by the scandal. A police commander named Evelyn Mitchell had been forced to retire. Because Evelyn's daughter was a detective on the force, Faith Mitchell had naturally caught Will's attention. She had a fairly solid record, but her promotion five years ago to detective had raised a few eyebrows. Twenty-eight was a little young for the gold shield, but it was hard to prove that any favoritism had been shown. Nepotism aside, Will hadn't found anything warranting a deeper dig into Faith Mitchell's life, so he had never met the woman in person.

Until now.

"Crap," Will groaned. If there was anyone he'd met today who came by their hate honestly, it was Evelyn Mitchell's daughter. That must have been what Leo had been trying to tell Will when everything started to fall apart—or maybe he'd assumed Will already knew. The investigation had ended several months ago, but Will had worked on at least a dozen more cases since then. Other than being aware of the wall of hate surrounding him at the Campano house, his focus had been on the crime at hand, not the particulars of a case that had been resolved months before.

There was nothing Will could do about it now. He went back to his search, checking the drawers, the cabinets that held the sorts of things you would expect to find in a teenage girl's room. He checked under the bed, then between the mattress and the box spring. There were no secret notes or hidden diaries. All her underclothes were what you would expect, which was to say there was nothing overtly sexy that might indicate Emma Campano was exploring a wilder side of life.

Next, Will went to the closet. From all appearances, the Campano house was thoroughly modernized. You couldn't get blood from a stone, though, and the closet in Emma Campano's room was as the architect had originally intended, which was to say that it was roughly the size

of a coffin. Clothes hung packed so tightly that the rod was sagging. Shoes lined the floor, row after row—so many of them that they were double stacked in places.

Among the Mary Janes and tennis shoes were black knee-high boots and impossibly high heels. Likewise, the light-colored blouses were punctuated by dark black jackets and black shirts with strategically placed rips held together by safety pins. Altogether, they looked like something you'd wear in the military if you were stationed in Hell. Will had worked cases with teenagers before. He guessed Emma was going through some sort of stage that compelled her to dress as a vampire. The pastel sweater sets would indicate her parents were not pleased with the transformation.

Will checked the top shelves, feeling under sweaters, taking down boxes of more clothes and methodically searching through each one. He checked pockets and purses, finding blocks of cedar and sachets of lavender that made him sneeze.

He got down on his hands and knees to search the bottom of the closet. There were several rolled-up posters in the corner, and he opened each one. Marilyn Manson, Ween and Korn—not the sort of groups he would expect a wealthy blond teenager to be listening to. The corners were all ripped, as if someone had torn them down. Will rolled the posters back up then checked Emma's shoes, moving them around, making sure nothing was hidden inside or under them. He found nothing to report home about.

As he turned from the closet, he was struck by the faint smell of ammonia. There was a dog bed beside him, probably meant to serve the ancient Labrador that Leo had mentioned. There were no obvious stains on the yellow bed. Will unzipped the liner, pressing his gloved fingers into the stuffing. This yielded nothing, except for making his gloved hands smell faintly of dog and urine.

Will heard Amanda's voice downstairs as he was zipping up the bed. She was coming up the back stairs and, from the sound of it, she was talking on her cell phone.

He took off the dog-smelling gloves and changed into a fresh pair, then returned to the girls' purses, dumping them out on the floor, searching them again. Emma's cell phone had been located on a charger in the kitchen downstairs. Kayla had her own designer bag and Visa card. She certainly had a cell phone somewhere.

He sat back on his heels, feeling like he was missing something. Will had searched the room in a grid pattern, sectioning each piece, even digging his gloved fingers into the shag carpet under the bed and finding nothing more startling than a piece of Jolly Rancher watermelon candy that crinkled under his touch. He had checked under furniture and felt along the bottom of drawers. He'd flipped all the rugs over.

Nothing.

Where had Emma been while Kayla was being attacked? What had the girl been doing while her best friend was possibly being raped, certainly being beaten and murdered? Was Will looking at this the wrong way? Having often been on the receiving end of Paul's anger at the children's home, Will knew firsthand that the Campano blood ran pretty hot. Did that sort of thing skip a generation, or was it passed down directly? The mother had said that her daughter changed lately, that she had been acting out. Could she have been involved in Kayla's murder? Was Emma not a victim but a participant?

He looked around the room again—the stuffed teddy bears, the stars on the ceiling. Will would certainly not be the first man who had been fooled by the stereotype of an angelic young woman, but the scenario that called for Emma being one of the bad guys didn't feel right.

Suddenly, he realized what was missing. The walls were bare. Emma's room had obviously been professionally decorated, so where was the art, the photographs? He stood up and checked for nail holes where pictures had hung. He found five, as well as scratches where frames had scraped the paint. He also found several pieces of tape that on close inspection revealed torn pieces of the posters from the closet. He could easily imagine Abigail Campano being outraged to find a picture of a breast-augmented, genitalia-neutral Marilyn Manson marring this otherwise perfect girl's room. He could also see a teenage girl taking down all the framed art the decorator had chosen in retaliation.

"Trent? When you have a minute?"

Will stood, following the sound out into the hall.

Charlie Reed, a crime-scene tech who had worked for Amanda almost as long as Will, was at the end of the hallway. Now that the body had been removed, the man was cleared to go about the careful cataloguing of blood and evidence. Dressed in the special white body suit to prevent

cross-contamination of the scene, Charlie would spend the next several hours on his hands and knees going over every square inch of the scene. He was a good investigator, but his resemblance to the cop in the Village People tended to put people off. Will made a point of specifically requesting Charlie on all his cases. He understood what it meant to be an outsider, and how sometimes it made you work even harder to prove people wrong.

Charlie pulled down his mask, revealing a finely sculpted handlebar mustache. "This was under the body." He handed Will an evidence bag containing the broken, bloody guts of a cell phone. "There's a shoe print on the plastic that's similar to the print we found downstairs, but not the shoe we found on the second victim. I'd guess our abductor nailed it with his foot, then the girl fell on it."

"Was there a transfer pattern on the body?"

"The plastic cut open the skin on her back. Pete had to peel it off for me."

Through the bag, Will made out the shattered phone. Still, he pressed his thumb on the green button and waited. There was no power to the device.

"Switch out the SIM card in your phone," Charlie suggested.

"Sprint," Will told him, recognizing the silk-screened logo on the back of the silver phone. The phone didn't use a SIM card. The only way to access any information stored on the device would be to have a technician hook it up to a computer and pray. Will said, "It must belong to either the kid downstairs, Kayla or somebody else."

"I'll rush it through the lab once we get prints," Charlie offered, holding out his hand for the phone. "The IMEI has been scratched off."

The IMEI was the serial number that cell phone networks used to identify a particular phone on the grid. "Scratched off on purpose?"

Charlie studied the white sticker near the battery casing. "Looks rubbed off from use to me. It's an older model. There's duct tape residue on the sides. I'd guess it was falling apart long before it was crushed. Not what I'd expect a teenage girl to carry."

"Why is that?"

"It's not pink and it doesn't have Hello Kitty stickers all over it."

He had a point. Emma Campano's phone had a bunch of pink, plastic charms dangling from the case.

Will said, "Tell the lab this has priority over the computer." They had found a MacBook Pro downstairs that belonged to Emma Campano. The girl had enabled FileVault, encryption software so secure that not even Apple could unlock it without the password. Unless Emma had used something simple like the name of the family dog, nothing short of the NSA could break it open.

Charlie said, "I found this over by the table." He held up another plastic bag that contained a brass key. "Yale lock, pretty standard. No usable fingerprints on it."

"Was it wiped down?"

"Just used a lot. There aren't any prints to lift."

"No keychain?"

Charlie shook his head. "If you had it in your pocket and you were wearing baggy pants, it could easily come out during a struggle."

Will looked at the key, thinking that if it had a number or address on it, his job would be so much easier. "Mind if I hold on to this?"

"I've already catalogued it. Just make sure it gets back to evidence."

"Will?" Amanda had been hovering behind him. "I talked to Campano."

He pocketed the key Charlie had found, trying to hide his sense of dread along with it. "And?"

"He wants you off the case," she said, but didn't seem to think that was worth discussing. "He says that they've had some problems with Emma lately. She was a good girl, the perfect child, then she got mixed up with this Kayla Alexander sometime last year and everything went to hell."

"In what way?"

"She started skipping school, her grades started to fall, she started listening to the wrong music and dressing the wrong way."

He told her about what he'd found in Emma's room. "I'm guessing they made her take down the posters."

"Typical teenager stuff," Amanda said. "I wouldn't trust the father so much on where the blame lies. I have yet to meet a parent who admits that his own child is the bad apple." She tapped her watch, her signal that they were wasting time. "Tell me what progress we've made."

Will told her, "The deceased male is Adam Humphrey. He's got an Oregon driver's license."
"He's a student?"

"Detective Mitchell is calling local colleges to see if he's registered. We're still trying to track down Alexander's parents."

"You know the key to breaking this is going to be finding a second person who knows at least one of our victims."

"Yes, ma'am. We're running dumps on all the telephones. We just need a lead to follow."

"GHP is pulling a negative," she said, meaning the Georgia Highway Patrol. "White is a popular color for the Prius, but there aren't that many on the road. Unfortunately, we're heading into rush hour, so it's not going to get easier."

"I've got uniforms pulling video from every ATM and store-front on Peachtree as well as anything in the Ansley Mall area. If the Prius left either way, we might get an image we can work with."

"Let me know if you need more feet on the ground." She rolled her hand, meaning for him to continue.

"The knife doesn't match anything in the kitchen or the carriage house, which points to the killer bringing it with him. It's pretty cheap—wooden handle, fake gold grommets—but it's obviously sharp enough to do some damage. The brand is for commercial use only. It's the kind of thing you'd find at Waffle House or Morrison's. The local supplier says he sells millions of them a year just in the metro area."

Amanda always thought in terms of how she could frame a case for the prosecutor. "Bringing the knife to the crime scene shows intent. Go on."

"There's dried blood on the glass outside the front door. Whoever broke it already had blood on his or her hand—it's on the outside of the pane. I'd guess it would take someone with an arm that was around three feet long to reach in through that window and unlock the front door."

"So, no forced entry—the girls let their attacker into the house. Whoever busted the glass obviously wanted to make it look as if he broke in." Amanda mumbled, "I suppose we have *CSI* to thank for his stupidity."

"Or someone smart enough to make it look stupid."

She raised an eyebrow. "Possibly. Do you think we should be looking at the father more closely?"

"He sells cars and he's a jerk. I'm sure there's a long list of enemies, but this feels deeply personal. Look at Kayla Alexander. Whoever killed her was furious. If you're a hired gun, you go in, take out the target and leave. You don't spend time beating her and you don't use a knife."

"What was your conversation like with Paul Campano?"

"He doesn't seem to know a lot about her life," Will said. Thinking back on the interview, he realized that this fact seemed to be the genesis of Paul's anger. It was as if he had never met his own daughter. "The mother had to be sedated. I'll go back at her first thing tomorrow."

"Do we know if Alexander was raped?"

"Pete isn't sure yet. Bruising would indicate yes, and there's sperm in her vagina, but it's also on the crotch of her panties."

"So, she stood up and put on her underwear at some point after intercourse. Let's see if the sperm comes back to our other victim, if that's what we're calling corpse number two for the moment." Amanda pressed her finger to her lip as she thought this through. "What about the mother? Hysterics, sedation. Pretty dramatic stuff and it conveniently takes her out of the spotlight."

"I think she's genuinely horrified about what's happened and she's scared she's going to be arrested for killing someone in cold blood."

Amanda looked at the dark, congealed pool where the body had lain. "Good defense if you ask me. Let's go back to the father. Maybe he was molesting the daughter."

Will felt his body break out in a sudden cold sweat. "He wouldn't do that."

Amanda studied him. "Do you have a previous relationship with this person that I should know about?"

"What did he say?"

She gave him a sharp smile. "You don't have the luxury of not answering my question."

Will felt his jaw working and made himself stop. "It was a long time ago."

Amanda seemed to realize Charlie was at her feet, picking through carpet fibers with a pair of tweezers. She murmured to Will, "A discussion for another time."

"Yes, ma'am."

Amanda's tone went back to normal. "Charlie, can you walk me through this?"

Charlie finished what he was doing and stood up with a groan, rubbing one of his knees as if he needed to work some life back into it. He pulled down his mask again. "We lucked out with the blood. The female decedent is B-negative, the male decedent is O-negative. The carpet here"—he indicated the shoe prints—"shows almost exclusively B, indicating the female decedent."

"Charlie." Amanda stopped him. "Just paint me a story. Adam and Kayla. Go."

He allowed a smile at the situation. "This is all supposition, of course, but we might assume Kayla was chased down this hallway, toward the back staircase. The killer caught up with her about here." He indicated a distance of about three feet behind them. "We found a significant patch of hair, part of the scalp still attached, here." He pointed to another spot on the carpet. "From this we might conclude that she was jerked back by her hair and fell onto the floor. Possibly, this is the point at which she was raped—or not. The probability that she died here is very high."

Amanda looked at her watch again. Like Will, she hated the fact that forensics worked in the couched language of "possibly" and "most likely" instead of dead certainty. She asked, "Is this the part where we get past assumptions and down to hard science?"

"Yes, ma'am," Charlie answered. "As I said before, the blood types make it easier. Kayla was beaten and stabbed here. You can see the cast-off pattern on the wall." He indicated slashes of dark blood. "The killer was in a frenzy, probably furious from chasing her or maybe from seeing her with another man—Adam, you could suppose."

Will asked, "How long would the attack have taken?"

Charlie looked at the walls, the stained floor. "Forty to fifty seconds. Maybe a full minute or two if rape occurred."

"Does anything in the pattern suggest that someone tried to stop him?"

Charlie put his hand to his chin, studying the blood. "No, actually. These arcs are fairly perfect. If he'd been interrupted or someone tried to stop his arm from swinging, we would see more variation. This is extremely uniform, almost like a machine going up and down."

Will supplied, "The coroner says Kayla was stabbed at least twenty times, maybe more."

Charlie moved on to the footprints. "There was definitely a lot of activity after she was dead. You can see from the two sets of footprints that two people—one of them with shoes matching Adam's—walked back and forth here."

"Do you see signs that they struggled?"

Charlie shrugged. "It's hard to say because of the carpet. On a smoother surface, I could tell you where the weight of the foot was, if someone was caught off balance or pressing forward to fight with someone else."

Amanda said, "Best guess."

"Well ..." Charlie shrugged again. "It seems probable in the greater context of the scene that there was a struggle. What I can definitely tell you is that at some point, Adam was on his knees beside the body. We've got the blood pattern on his jeans as well as the tops of his shoes. I have a theory that he reached out"—Charlie stretched his arm out near the bloody handprint—"and leaned his hand against the wall as he put his ear to Kayla's mouth."

Will stopped him. "Why do you say that?"

"He's got a light spray of B-negative just around here." He indicated his own ear. "There's also that spray of O-negative on Kayla's abdomen, which you pointed out to me earlier. I'd draw the same conclusion as you—he removed the knife from his own chest while he was bending over her. In fact, we found a mixture of both blood types on the weapon."

"Any fingerprints?"

"Just one set. Preliminarily, we'll say they're Adam's, but they'll have to confirm that at the lab. There were also markings on the knife handle that look consistent with someone wearing latex gloves."

Amanda told Will, "Throw wearing surgical gloves in with him bringing the knife to the scene and we've got premeditated murder."

Will didn't point out that they would have to find the killer before they could charge him. "What about the footprint downstairs?"

"That's where it gets interesting," Charlie began. "Type O-positive."

Amanda said, "Different from the two victims."

"Exactly," Charlie confirmed. "We found several spots on the stairs, a couple more up here. My guess is that whoever the blood belongs to was unconscious. As Will and I suggested, she was carried down the stairs. Either the abductor had to stop at the bottom to reposition her or she came to and started to struggle. Somehow, her foot touched the ground at that one spot."

Will told Amanda, "I've asked Charlie to Lumenol the house top to bottom. I'm curious about where Emma Campano was while her friend was being attacked."

"It follows that she was unconscious somewhere."

"Not here," Charlie supplied. "At least, not by what the blood tells us."

Will said, "We've had a lot of mistakes made today. I want to make sure that footprint downstairs belongs to Emma Campano. She's got a ton of shoes in her closet. Maybe you can get a latent?"

"It's a long shot, but I can certainly try."

Amanda asked, "Did you find any sperm in this area?"

"Nothing."

"But Kayla Alexander had sperm on and in her person."

"Yes."

She told him, "I want a rush DNA comparison against both Adam Humphrey and Paul Campano. Check the master bathroom for hair or any tissue you can find that might belong to the father." She looked at Will, as if waiting for him to object. "I want to know who this girl has been having sex with, consensual or otherwise." She didn't wait for a response, turning on her heel after tossing a "Will?" over her shoulder.

He followed her down the back stairs and into the kitchen. Will tried to get ahead of her on the blame game. "Why didn't you tell me Faith Mitchell's mother was part of my investigation?"

She started opening and closing drawers. "I assumed you would use your brilliant detective skills to make a connection between the two last names."

She was right, but Evelyn Mitchell hadn't been a priority for him for a long time. "Mitchell is a common name."

"I'm glad we have that settled." Amanda found what she was looking for. She held up a kitchen knife, looked at the silver bee on the handle. "Laguiole. Nice."

"Amanda—"

She placed the knife back in the drawer. "Faith will be your partner going forward on this investigation. We've pissed off the Atlanta Police Department enough this year without pulling another major case from them, and I'd rather partner you with a goat than put Leo Donnelly on this."

"I don't want her."

"I don't care," she shot back. "Will, this is a major case I'm handing you. You're thirty-six years old now. You're never going to move up if—"

"We both know this is as far as I'm going to get." He didn't give her room to disagree. "I'm never going to do PowerPoint presentations or stand in front of a chalkboard filling in a timeline."

She pursed her lips, staring at him. He wondered why the disappointment in her eyes bothered him so much. As far as he knew, Amanda didn't have any children or even a family. She wore a wedding ring sometimes, but that seemed to be more for decoration than declaration. For all intents and purposes, she was as much an orphan as he was. Sometimes, he thought that she was like the dysfunctional, passive-aggressive mother he'd never had—a fact which made Will glad that he had grown up in the children's home.

She said, "It's dry erase now. You don't get chalk on your hands."

"Oh, well ... sign me up."

She smiled ruefully. "How do you know Paul Campano?"

"I knew him when I was ten years old. We didn't get along."

"Is that why he doesn't want to talk to you?"

"It could be," Will admitted. "But I think my knowing him might also be a way in."

"Hoyt Bentley has posted a fifty-thousand-dollar reward for information leading to his granddaughter's safe return. He wanted to come out of the gate with half a million, but I managed to talk him down."

Will didn't envy her the task. Men like Bentley were used to being able to buy their way out of anything. A more lucrative reward would have backfired in so many ways, including bringing out every fruitcake in the city.

"I bet you they're going to hire their own people to stick their noses into this."

Will recognized a sucker bet when he saw one. Atlanta's wealthy had a bevy of private security forces at their disposal. Hoyt Bentley had enough money to buy every last one of them. "I'm sure Paul and his father-in-law think they can take care of this themselves."

"I hope whoever they hire knows the difference between paying off a CEO's mistress and negotiating a ransom."

Surprised, Will said, "Do you think there will be a ransom demand?"

"I think there will be several—none of them from our kidnapper." She crossed her arms, leaning against the counter. "Tell me what's bothering you."

Will didn't have to think in order to answer her question. "Two teenage girls, at least one teenage boy, alone in a house during the middle of the day. The parents don't know where any of them are. They say their daughter has changed lately, that she's been acting out. Somebody had sex in that bed upstairs. Where were Emma and Adam when Kayla was being butchered? Where was Emma when Adam was stabbed? We have to ask whether or not Emma Campano is a victim or an offender."

Amanda let that sink in, considering the possibilities. "I'm not saying you're wrong," she finally told him. "But there's a big difference between being a rebellious teenager and being a cold-blooded killer. Nothing about the scene points to anything ritualistic. I'm not saying you're wrong to consider the possibility, but let's just treat this as a straight abduction until we find something that points to more nefarious origins."

Will nodded.

"What's your game plan?"

"Charlie's going to be here all night, so anything big forensic-wise should be on your desk first thing in the morning. We've got APD pulling parking tickets in the area for the last week. I've got a two-man unit checking storm drains to see if anything was ditched—another weapon, some clothing, whatever. I want to talk to some folks at the school where these girls went and see if they have any enemies—and spread that out to the Alexanders, too. I think it's sketchy they left their kid alone for three weeks while they're half a world away. Do you have an ETA on the dogs?"

"Barry Fielding was on a training run up in Ellijay when I called," she told him, referring to the director of the GBI canine unit. "He should be here with a team within the next half hour." She returned to something Will had said earlier. "Let's go back two months on those parking tickets in the area. Go ahead and pull 9-1-1 calls, too. There can't be that many, but touching on what you said about the kids being alone here today, if this has been an ongoing thing ..." She let Will fill in the blank: Don't stop questioning what Emma Campano's role was in all of this. "What are you going to be doing?"

"I'm going to go to the school myself to get a better idea of who these girls are. Were. I also want to talk to the mother. She was out of it today. Maybe she'll be more helpful tomorrow."

"She's a lot stronger than she looks."

"She strangled a man with her bare hands. I don't think you need to tell me to watch out for her."

Amanda looked around the kitchen, appraising the stainless steel gleaming from every corner, the granite countertops. "This is not going to turn out well, Will."

"You think the girl is already dead?"

"I think if she's lucky she is."

They were both silent. Will couldn't guess what was on Amanda's mind. For his part, he was thinking how ironic it was that Paul had everything they could only dream about when they were kids—family, wealth, security—and yet one violent intervention by fate had managed to sweep it all away. You expected that kind of thing to happen when you were living in an orphanage, kids stacked twelve to a room in a house that was no larger than a shoebox. You didn't expect it living smack-dab in the middle of Mayberry.

Movement outside the kitchen window caught Will's attention. Faith Mitchell looked grim as she walked along the back patio by the pool. She opened one of the French doors, asking, "Am I interrupting?"

Amanda demanded, "What've you got?"

The young woman closed the door and walked into the kitchen, looking almost contrite. "Adam Humphrey was a student at Georgia Tech. He lives in Towers Hall on campus."

Amanda pumped her fist in the air. "This is your break."

Will told Faith, "Call campus security. Have them check the room."

"I did," she answered. "The door was locked, but the room was empty. I've got a number to call when we get on campus. The dean wants to talk to legal before they give us access to the room, but he says that's just a formality."

"Let me know if I need to find a judge." Amanda glanced at her watch. "It's coming on four o'clock now. I'm late for a closed door with the mayor. Call me the minute you have anything."

Will crossed the room to leave. Then he realized that he still didn't have a car. He realized Amanda was still here, leaning against the counter, waiting for him to do exactly what she wanted.

Faith asked, "Do you want me to go wait outside the Alexander house to see if the parents have anyone checking in on Kayla?"

Will thought about Adam Humphrey's dorm room, all the papers and notes that would have to be catalogued, all the drawers and shelves that would have to be searched.

He said, "You're going to come to Tech with me."

Her expression turned from surprised to cautious. "I thought I was only doing scut work."

"You are." Will opened the door she'd just closed. "Let's go."

CHAPTER THREE



The literature on Faith's Mini Cooper claimed that the front seats could easily accommodate a passenger or driver over six feet tall. As with anything, a few extra inches made all the difference, and Faith had to admit that it brought her a small amount of pleasure watching the man who had helped force her mother off the job awkwardly trying to fold his long body into her car. Finally, Will moved the seat back so that it was almost touching the rear window and angled himself in.

"All right?" she asked.

He looked around the cab, his neatly parted, sandy blond hair brushing against the glass sunroof. She thought of a prairie dog poking its head outside its hole.

He gave a small nod. "Let's go."

She let off the clutch as he reached around for the seat belt. For months, even the thought of this man's name could invoke the kind of deeply felt hatred that made Faith feel like she should vomit just to get the taste out of her mouth. Evelyn Mitchell hadn't shared many details of the internal investigation with her daughter, but Faith had seen the toll the relentless questioning had taken. Day by day, her strong, impervious mother had been whittled into an old woman.

Will Trent was a key factor in that transformation.

Being honest, there was plenty of blame to go around. Faith was a cop, and she knew all about the blue code of silence, but she also knew that it was the betrayal of Evelyn's own men—those greedy bastards who thought it was okay to steal so long as it was drug money—that had finally taken all the fight out of her mother. Still, Evelyn had refused to testify against any of her team. That the city had let her keep her pension was a miracle of sorts, but Faith knew that her mother had friends in high places. You didn't become a captain with the Atlanta Police Department by shunning politics. Evelyn was a master at knowing how the game worked.

For her part, Faith had always assumed Will Trent was some kind of bumbling, rat squad jerk-off who loved to put his thumb on good cops and grind them out of the force. She hadn't anticipated that Trent would be the clean-cut, lanky man crammed into the car beside her. Nor had she considered that he might actually know his way around the job. His reading of the crime scene, the way he had been right about Humphrey being a college student—something that Faith, of all people, should have picked up on—had not been the detecting of some Bureau pencil pusher.

Like it or not, she was stuck with him, and somewhere out there was a missing girl, and two sets of parents who were about to get the worst news of their lives. Faith would do everything she could to help solve this case because at the end of the day, that was all that really mattered. Still, she didn't offer to turn up the Mini's air-conditioning, though Will must have been sweating to death in that ridiculous three-piece suit, and she certainly didn't offer him an olive branch by opening up the conversation. As far as she was concerned, he could sit there with his knees around his ears and boil in his own sweat.

Faith signaled as she pulled out onto Peachtree Street and accelerated into the far right lane, only to come to a complete stop behind a dirt-encrusted pickup truck. They were officially caught up in the hurry-up-and-wait game that was Atlanta's afternoon rush-hour traffic, which started around two-thirty and tapered off at eight. Add in all the construction, and this meant that the five-mile trip to Georgia Tech, which was just across the interstate, would take approximately half an hour. Gone were the Starsky and Hutch days of being able to slap a siren on your roof and blow through traffic. This was Will Trent's case, and if he'd wanted to bypass rush hour, he should have commandeered a cruiser to take them to Tech instead of a bright red

Mini with a peace sign on the bumper.

As they inched past the High Museum of Art and Atlanta Symphony Hall, Faith's mind kept going back to the crime scene. She had gotten to the Campano house about ten minutes behind Leo. Faith's mother had always said that the hardest scenes to come onto were the ones involving kids. Her advice was to forget your family, focus on the job and cry about it on your own time. Like every piece of good advice her mother had ever given her, Faith had pushed it aside. It wasn't until she'd walked into that house today that she had realized how true her mother's words had been.

Seeing Adam Humphrey's lifeless body, his sneakers the same brand and color as the ones Faith had bought her own son just the weekend before, had been a punch in the gut. She had stood in the foyer, the heat at her back, feeling as if all the air was gone from her lungs.

"Jeremy," Leo had said, invoking her son. He wasn't offering sympathy. He wanted Faith to form some kind of miraculous mother bond with Abigail Campano and make the woman tell them what the hell had happened.

The Mini shook as a bus rumbled by. They were in a long line of traffic, waiting to take a right turn, when she noticed Will was sniffing his hand. Faith stared out the window as if this was some sort of normal human behavior.

He held out his sleeve. "Does this smell like urine to you?"

She inhaled without thinking, the way you smell bad milk if someone holds it under your nose. "Yes."

He bumped his head against the roof as he leaned up to get his cell phone out of his back pocket. He dialed a number, waited a few seconds, then without preamble told the person at the end of the line, "I think there's urine in the back of Emma's closet. I thought it might be from the dog bed, but I'm pretty sure it was fresh." He nodded as if the other person could see him. "I'll hold."

Faith waited silently. Will's hand was on his knee, his fingers playing with the sharp crease in his pants. He was an average-looking man, probably a few years older than her, which would put him in his mid-thirties. Back at the crime scene, she had noticed a faint scar where his upper lip had been split open and stitched back together in a slightly crooked line. Now, with the late-afternoon sun coming in through the glass roof, she could see another scar jagging from his ear down his neck, following the jugular and disappearing into the collar of his shirt. Faith was no forensics expert, but she would have guessed that someone had come at him with a serrated knife.

Will put his hand up to his face, scratching his jaw, and Faith quickly looked back at the road.

"Good," he said into the phone. "Is there a way to compare it to the O-negative at the bottom of the stairs?" He paused, listening. "Thank you. I appreciate the effort."

Will snapped the phone closed and dropped it in his pocket. Faith waited for an explanation, but he seemed content to keep his thoughts to himself. Maybe he just saw her as his personal driver. Maybe he associated her too closely with Leo Donnelly's mistake. She could not fault him for painting her with the same brush. Faith had been at the scene, had stood by chewing the fat with the mother while all the clues at the scene were waiting to be put together. She was Leo's partner, not his underling. Everything he had missed, Faith had missed, too.

Still, curiosity began to nag at her, then anger started to take hold. She was a detective on the Atlanta police force, not a lackey. Because of her mother's rank, rumors had always followed every promotion Faith received, but everyone on the homicide squad had quickly figured out that she was there because she was a damn good cop. Faith had stopped having to prove herself years ago, and she didn't like being left out now.

She tried to keep her tone even, asking, "Are you going to tell me what that was about?"

"Oh." He seemed surprised, as if he had forgotten she was there. "I'm sorry. I'm not used to working with other people." He turned his body as much as he could to face her. "I think Emma was hiding in the closet. She must have urinated on herself. Charlie said most of it was absorbed by the shoes, but it puddled a little on the floor in the back of the closet. I must've transferred it with my gloves when I searched the dog bed and not realized they were wet."

Faith tried to catch up. "They're going to try to match the DNA in the urine to the blood you think came from Emma at the bottom of the step?"

"If she's a secretor, then they can do a surface match in about an hour."

About eighty percent of the population was categorized as secretors, meaning their blood type showed up in body fluids like saliva and semen. If Emma Campano was a secretor, they could

easily tell her blood type by testing the urine.

Faith said, "They'll have to confirm it with DNA, but it's a good start."

"Exactly." He seemed to be waiting for more questions, but Faith didn't have any. Finally he turned back around in his seat.

Faith edged up on the clutch as the light changed. They moved about six feet before the light changed back and traffic stopped. She thought about Emma Campano, kidnapped, reeking of her own urine, her last image that of her best friend lying slaughtered on the ground. It made her want to call her son, even if he would be annoyed to hear from his overprotective mother.

Will started to move around again. She realized he was trying to take off his jacket, bumping his head against the windshield and sideswiping the rearview mirror in the process.

She said, "We're going to be at this light for a while. Just get out of the car and take it off."

He put his hand on the door handle, then stopped, giving a forced chuckle. "You're not going to drive away, are you?"

Faith stared at him in response. He moved with some speed as he got out of the car, removed the jacket and returned to his seat just as the light changed.

"That's better," he said, carefully folding the jacket. "Thank you."

"Put it on the backseat."

He did as he was told, and she rolled the car forward another six feet before the light changed again. Faith had never been good at hating anyone face-to-face. Even with some of the criminals she arrested, she found herself understanding, though certainly not condoning, their actions. The man who had come home to find his wife in bed with his brother and killed them both. The woman who shot the husband who had been abusing her for years. People were not that complicated when it came down to it. Everyone had a reason for everything they did, even if that reason was sometimes stupidity.

This line of thought brought her back to Emma Campano, Kayla Alexander and Adam Humphrey. Were they all somehow involved with each other, or were they strangers until today? Adam was a freshman at Georgia Tech. The girls were seniors at an ultra-exclusive private school in a neighboring city about ten miles away. There had to be some kind of connection. There had to be a reason they were all in that house today. There had to be a reason Emma was taken.

Faith let off the clutch, easing up the car. There was a construction flagman in the opposite lane, directing cars to detour. Sweat poured off his body, his orange caution vest sticking to his chest like a piece of wet toilet paper. Like every other major American city, Atlanta's infrastructure was falling apart. It seemed like nothing was ever done until disaster struck. You couldn't leave the house without running into a construction crew. The whole city was a mess.

Despite her earlier vow, Faith turned up the air-conditioning. Just looking at the construction worker made her feel the heat more. She tried to think about cold things like ice cream and beer as she stared blankly at the truck ahead of them—the dirt hanging off the mud flaps, the American flag on the back window.

"Is your brother still overseas?"

Faith was so taken by surprise, all she could say was, "What?"

"Your brother—he's a surgeon, right? In the military?"

She felt violated, though of course Will's investigation into her mother had given him leave to mine her children's lives, as well. He would know that Zeke was in the Air Force, serving at Brandenburg. He would also have had access to Faith's psych evaluations, her school records, her marital history, her child's history—everything.

She was incredulous. "You've got to be kidding me."

"It would be disingenuous of me to pretend I know nothing about you." His tone was completely unreadable, which just annoyed her even more.

"Disingenuous," she echoed, thinking there was a reason this man had been assigned to investigate the narcotics squad. Will Trent didn't act like any cop Faith had ever met. He didn't dress like one, he didn't walk like one and he sure as hell didn't talk like one. It probably meant nothing to him to ruin the lives of men and women who belonged to a family that he could never be a part of.

Up ahead, the light changed, and she popped the clutch, swerving around the truck and turning right from the left-hand lane. Will's hands didn't even move off his knees as she performed this highly illegal maneuver.

She said, "I have been trying to be civil to you, but my brother, my mother—my whole family—is off-limits. You got that?"

He didn't acknowledge her remarks so much as skirt around them. "Do you know your way around Georgia Tech?"

"You know damn well that I do. You subpoenaed my bank records to make sure I could afford the tuition."

The patient way he explained himself set her teeth on edge. "It's been almost four hours since Adam died, more than that since Emma Campano was taken. Ideally, we would go straight to his room instead of waiting for the legal department to okay our access."

"The dean said that was just a formality."

"People tend to change their minds about things after they talk to lawyers."

She certainly couldn't argue with that. "We can't get into the room without a key."

He reached around to his jacket in the backseat and pulled out a plastic evidence bag. She could see a key inside. "Charlie found this in the upstairs hallway. We'll call your contact when we get there, but I see no reason why we shouldn't try the key while we're waiting."

Faith slowed at another red light, wondering what else he had been holding back. It annoyed her that he didn't trust her, but then again, she hadn't really given him a reason to. She allowed, "I know where Towers Hall is."

"Thank you."

Her hands were hurting from clutching the steering wheel too hard. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. One by one, she released her fingers from the wheel. "I know I sound like a bitch, but my family is off-limits."

"That's a fair request, and you don't sound that way at all."

He stared silently out the window as the car crawled down Tenth Street toward Georgia Tech. Faith turned on the radio and searched for the traffic report. As they crossed over the interstate, she looked down onto I-75, which more closely resembled a parking lot. Over half a million cars used this corridor in and out of the city every day. Emma Campano could have been in any one of them.

The commuters around them followed the on-ramps to 75/85, so that by the time the Mini was on the other side of the bridge, traffic had returned to a more manageable level. Faith exited Tenth Street to Fowler, following familiar roads winding through the campus.

The Georgia Institute of Technology occupied around four hundred acres of prime downtown Atlanta real estate. Georgia residents could attend tuition-free thanks to the lottery-funded HOPE scholarship, but academic requirements barred the way for a large chunk of them. Add to that the financial burden of housing, textbooks and lab fees and even more students dropped to the wayside. If you were lucky, you got a full scholarship to take up the slack. If you weren't, you'd better hope your mother could take out a second mortgage on her house. Tech consistently ranked in the top ten of most college lists and was considered, along with Emory University, to be part of the chain of schools belonging to the Ivy League of the South. You could easily pay your mother back when you graduated.

Faith slowed the car along Techwood Drive for the students who didn't seem to understand the purpose of a crosswalk. A group of young men whooped at the sight of a blonde in a Mini, the combination of hormones and the natural lack of social graces inherent in math and science majors causing several of them to stumble over their own feet. Faith ignored them, scanning the streets for a place to park. Campus parking was a nightmare even at the best of times. Finally, she gave up and pulled the Mini into a handicapped parking space. She flipped down the visor to show her police parking permit, hoping local security chose to honor it.

Will said, "Go ahead and call your contact."

Faith talked to the dean's secretary as Will extricated himself from the car. She ended the call, got out and locked the doors. "Dean Martinez is still talking to legal. We're supposed to wait here. He'll join us as soon as he's off the phone." Faith pointed to a large, four-story brick building. "That's Glenn Hall. Towers is right behind it."

Will nodded for her to lead the way, but Faith's gait was considerably shorter than his and they ended up walking side by side. She had never thought of herself as short, but at five-eight, she felt dwarfed by him.

Classes were still in session, small clusters of students milling around. Though Will was still wearing his vest, his paddle holster and gun were in full view without his jacket. Faith was wearing a short-sleeved cotton shirt and dress pants—sensible considering the hundred-plus temperature, but hardly the best way to conceal the gold shield on her left hip and the gun on her right. The two of them caused quite a stir as they walked toward the quad between Glenn

and Towers Hall.

Still, walking through the campus, seeing all those young faces, Faith realized how badly she wanted to work this case. Setting aside that being partnered with Leo Donnelly was not exactly hitching her wagon to a star, Faith could not fathom what it felt like to lose a child. Talking to Abigail Campano had been one of the hardest things she'd ever done in her life. All the mother could remember were the fights they'd had, the horrible things they'd said to each other. The fact that the woman's daughter was missing rather than dead didn't take away any of the horror. Faith wanted to do everything she could to help get Emma back home. Inexplicably, she also felt the need to let Will Trent know that despite today's screwups, she wasn't completely useless.

She started by telling him what little she knew about this part of the Tech campus. "These are both freshman dorms, not coed, about six hundred students between them. They're the closest to the stadium and the loudest. Parking for freshmen is heavily restricted so not many of them have cars, at least not on campus." Her feet sunk into the soft grass, and she looked down to check her footing, saying, "Most classes will be over in half an hour—"

"What are you doing here?"

She recognized the shoes first. They were the same brand and color she'd seen on Adam Humphrey's feet just a few hours ago. Two thin legs stuck out of the top of the sneakers like hairy sticks. His shorts hung around his narrow hips, the top of his boxers showing. He was wearing a torn, faded T-shirt—his Air Force-captain uncle's least favorite—that read "No Blood for Oil."

In retrospect, it seemed likely that she might run into Jeremy, who had been living at Glenn Hall for the last week and a half. Though she knew for a fact that her son was supposed to be in class right now. She had helped him sign up his schedule weeks ago.

She told him as much. "What happened to intro to biomechanics?"

"The professor let us out early," he shot back. "Why are you here?"

Faith glanced at Will Trent, who stood impassively beside her. She supposed one of the few benefits of his investigation into her mother was his lack of shock over a thirty-three-year-old woman having an eighteen-year-old son.

Will said, "One of your classmates has been in an accident."

Jeremy had been raised by two generations of cops. He knew the language. "You mean he's dead?"

Faith didn't lie to her son. "Yes. I need you to keep this between us for a while. His name was Adam Humphrey. Do you know him?"

Jeremy shook his head. "Is he a Goatman?" For reasons unknown, residents of Glenn Hall referred to themselves by this title.

"No," she told him. "He's at Towers."

"Classes just started. Fartley's the only guy I know." Another nickname, this one for his dorm mate. "I can ask around."

"Don't worry about it," she said, fighting the urge to reach up and tuck his hair behind his ear. Since his thirteenth birthday, he had been taller than her. On the few occasions when Jeremy allowed public displays of affection, she had to stand on her toes to kiss his forehead. "I'll come by later."

He shrugged. "Don't, okay? The MILF shit's getting pretty bad."

"Don't say 'shit.'"

"Mom."

She nodded, a tacit understanding. Jeremy ambled away, his brand-new sixty-dollar book bag dragging in the grass. When Faith was sixteen and lugging her one-year-old son around on her hip, she had blushed furiously when people had referred to him as her little brother. At the age of twenty-five, she would bristle angrily when men assumed that her son's age had a direct correlation to her level of wantonness. By thirty, she had become comfortable enough with her past to own up to it. Everyone made mistakes, and the truth was that she loved her son. Life had certainly not been easy, but having him with her made all the gawking and disapproval worthwhile.

Unfortunately, this peace had been quickly shattered when, during freshman orientation last month, Jeremy's new dormmate had taken one look at Faith and said, "Dude, your girlfriend is hot."

Will pointed to the red brick building opposite Glenn Hall. "This is Towers?"

"Yes," she said, leading him across the empty quad. "When I spoke with Martinez, the dean of

student relations, he told me that Adam's dormmate is named Harold Nestor, but Nestor hasn't shown up for classes yet. Martinez said there was some sort of family situation—a sick parent, he thought. It's doubtful whether the kid will still attend.”

“Does Nestor have a key to the room?”

“No. The kid hasn't even picked up his housing packet yet. As far as Martinez knows, Nestor has never even met Adam.”

“Let's confirm that,” Will said. “Does anyone else have a key to the room?”

“Campus security has a passkey, I would imagine. They don't really have house masters here—student government runs everything and they haven't had elections yet.”

Will tried the front door to the building, but it wouldn't open.

Faith pointed to the large red sign warning students not to let strangers into the dorm. She had forgotten about this part. “You need a security card to get in.”

“Right.” He pressed his face to the glass, checking the lobby. “Empty.”

“Adam didn't have a security card in his wallet.” She glanced back at the quad, hoping for a wandering student who could help out, but the field was empty. “I guess we'll have to wait for Martinez and the lawyers after all.”

Will had his hands in his pockets as he stared at the many signs on the door. In addition to the red one, there was a blue plaque that had instructions for the handicapped to press the plate on the wall to engage the automatic door as well as a laminated piece of green notebook paper advising students of numbers to call in cases of nonemergencies.

Will stared straight ahead, brow furrowed in concentration, as if he could open the door with his mind.

Faith had given up trying to figure him out since the urine incident. She walked over to the building intercom system, which contained a directory of all the student names. Someone had taped a handwritten note over the buzzers that read, “BROKEN!! DO NOT TOUCH!!” Out of curiosity, she scanned the names. Humphrey, A. was beside the number 310.

Will stood beside her. She thought he was reading the names until he asked, “What's a MILF?”

She felt herself blush. “That was a private conversation.”

“Sorry.”

He reached for the directory and she pointed out, “It's broken.”

He gave her an awkward half-smile. “I can see that.” He pressed the blue handicap plate below the directory. There was a buzz, then an audible click as a lock released and the front door groaned open.

She waited for a well-earned sarcastic comment. All he did was indicate that she should go into the building ahead of him.

The lobby was empty, but the smell of young men was overpowering. Faith didn't know what happened to boys between the ages of fifteen and twenty, but whatever it was made them smell like gym socks and Tiger Balm. How on earth she had never noticed this when she was a teenager herself was one of life's great mysteries.

“Cameras,” Will said, pointing them out. “What was the room number again?”

“Three-ten.”

He headed for the stairs and Faith followed. The way Will moved made her think he was probably a runner. That would certainly explain why he seemed to have less body fat than a greyhound. Faith quickened her step to follow him, but by the time she reached the top floor, Will was already trying the key in the lock, using the plastic bag to keep his prints off the metal.

He opened the door, but didn't go in. Instead, he walked down the hallway. Three-ten was conveniently located next to the kitchen and across from the bathrooms. Will knocked on the door to 311. He waited, but there was no answer. He went down the hall and tried the next door.

Faith turned her attention to Adam's room, hearing distant knocks as Will tried each closed door. Like Jeremy's, the room was around fifteen feet by eleven, basically the size of a prison cell. A bed was on either side with desks at their respective ends. There was a wardrobe and closet for each student. Only one bed had sheets, but the other had a pillow on the end opposite the television. It looked as if Adam had been using both sides of the room in the hopes that Harold Nestor would never show up.

Will said, “Nobody seems to be home right now.”

She checked her watch. “Give it about twenty minutes. What do you want me to do?”

“My gloves are in my jacket. Do you have an extra pair?”

Faith shook her head. She had long ago gotten out of the habit of carrying a purse on the job

and the one pair of gloves she normally kept in her front pocket had been used at the Campano crime scene. "I have a box in my trunk. I can—"

"I'll get it," he said, patting his pockets, a gesture that was quickly becoming familiar. "I left my phone in the pocket, too. I'm batting a thousand today."

She handed him the keys. "I'll make sure no one touches anything."

He sprinted back down the hall toward the stairs.

Faith decided she might as well see what they were up against. She walked over to the first desk, which was overflowing with scraps of paper, used textbooks, mechanical pencils and a small pile of magazines. They were all back issues of *Get Out*, which seemed to specialize in hiking. The other desk held what would be considered college necessities: an LCD television, a PlayStation console, several games and a stack of DVDs with handwritten labels. She recognized the titles of some recent Hollywood blockbusters as well as several that were simply labeled "porn" with stars to indicate, she supposed, their level of pornography.

One of the desk drawers was partially open, and Faith used a pencil from the other desk to pry it the rest of the way. Inside was a *Playboy* magazine, two foil-wrapped condoms and a stack of well-thumbed baseball trading cards. The juxtaposition made Faith sad. Adam Humphrey would forever be caught in the stages between being a boy and being a man.

She knelt down. Nothing was taped under the Formica desktop or shoved between the drawers. Faith checked the other desk, too. She saw the corners of a plastic bag hanging down. She craned her neck, holding back her hair as she went in for a closer look.

Adam Humphrey probably wasn't the only boy at Tech who had a bag of pot taped under his desk. Hell, he probably wasn't the only boy on this floor who had one.

She stood back up, scanning the room—the Radiohead poster on the wall, the dirty socks and sneakers bunched in the corner, the stack of graphic novels by the bed. His mother must have been feeling indulgent when she let him pick out the black throw rug on the floor and the matching bedspread and sheets.

Faith imagined what it would be like for the Humphreys to pack up their son's meager belongings and take them back to Oregon. Was this all that they would have left of their son? Worse for Faith, who would have to tell them that their child was gone? Will had assigned the Kayla Alexander notification to Leo. Was he going to put Faith in the unenviable position of telling the Humphreys that their son had been murdered?

God, she did not want to do that.

"Who are you?"

Same accusatory tone, different boy. This one stood in the doorway, a hard look on his face. Faith turned toward him, giving him the full benefit of her gun and badge, but his expression did not change.

She asked, "What's your name?"

"None of your fucking business."

"That's a really long name. Were you adopted?"

Obviously, the joke fell flat. "Do you have a warrant?" He rested his left hand on the doorknob. The other one was covered in a cast that stopped just below his elbow. "Does campus security know you broke into his room?"

Strange way to put it, she thought, but told the kid, "I had a key."

"Good for you." He crossed his arms as best he could with the cast. "Now show me a warrant or get the fuck out of my friend's room."

She made herself laugh because she knew it would irritate him. He was a good-looking kid—dark hair, brown eyes, well built and obviously used to getting his way. "Or what?"

Apparently, he hadn't thought that far in advance. His voice wasn't so sure when he said, "I'll call campus security."

"Use the phone in a different room," Faith told him, turning back to the desk. She used the pencil to push through some of the papers, which were filled with mathematical equations and notes from class. She could feel the kid staring at her. Faith persevered. This wasn't exactly the first time she'd had an eighteen-year-old stare at her with burning daggers of hate.

"This is so wrong," he said, more for attention than effect.

Faith sighed, as if she was annoyed that he was still there. "Listen, this isn't about the pot, or the porn or the illegal downloads or whatever else you guys have been up to, so get your head out of your ass, understand that your friend must be in serious trouble if an Atlanta police detective is going through his things and tell me what your name is."

He was quiet, and she felt like she could hear his brain working as he tried to think of a way around answering her question. Finally he relented. "Gabriel Cohen."

"You go by Gabe?"

He shrugged.

"When was the last time you saw Adam?"

"This morning."

"In the hall? At class?"

"Here, maybe eight o'clock this morning." Again, he shrugged. "Tommy, my roommate, he snores. He's kind of an asshole. So I've been sleeping over here to get away from him." His eyes widened, and he seemed to realize that he'd put himself right in the middle of things.

"It's all right," she assured him. "I told you, Gabe, I'm not here because of two ounces of weed and a bootleg of *The Bourne Ultimatum*."

He chewed his lip, staring at her, probably trying to figure out whether or not he could trust her.

For her part, Faith was wondering what was taking Will Trent so long. Though she wasn't sure if his presence would help or hinder the situation.

She asked, "How long have you known Adam?"

"About a week, I guess. I met him on move-in day."

"You seemed pretty eager to take up for him."

She was getting better at reading his shrugs. His main concern had been the illegal bounty—probably the downloads more than the drugs, considering that ripping off movie studios carried a much stiffer penalty.

Faith asked, "Does Adam have a car?"

He shook his head. "His family's pretty weird. They kind of live off the grid. Real eco-minded."

That would explain the rural route. "What about this?" She pointed to the expensive television, the game console.

"They're mine," Gabe admitted. "I didn't want Tommy, my dormmate, fucking with them." He added, "But Adam plays, too. I mean, he likes to be outside and all, but he's a gamer, too."

"Does he have a computer?"

"Somebody swiped it," he responded, and Faith wasn't as surprised as she should have been. Theft was a rampant problem with this generation. Jeremy had had so many scientific calculators stolen from him at school that she had threatened to bolt one to his hand.

She asked, "Where does Adam check his e-mail?"

"I let him use mine. Sometimes he goes to the computer lab."

"What's his major?"

"Same as me. Polymers with a focus on spray adhesives."

That must have impressed the ladies. "Does he have a girlfriend or anyone he hangs out with?"

Gabe's shoulder went up in a slightly defensive manner. "We all just got here, you know? Not much time to hook up."

"Are you from out of state?"

He shook his head. "I went to Grady."

Grady was a magnet school, which meant they drew the top students from other schools in the Atlanta system. "Have you ever met Kayla Alexander or Emma Campano?"

"Are they at Grady?"

"Westfield."

He shook his head. "That's in Decatur, right? I think my girlfriend went there. Julie. She's been kicked out of a lot of schools."

"Why is that?"

He gave a shy half-smile. "We share a distrust for authority."

Faith smiled back. "Does Julie go to Tech?"

He shook his head again. "She went to State a few quarters, then dropped that, too. She tends bar nights in Buckhead."

Buckhead was a wealthy section of Atlanta known for its nightlife. Faith gathered Julie was at least twenty-one if she was allowed to serve alcohol. The four-year age difference between her and Emma Campano would have meant the girls would not likely have crossed paths.

Faith asked Gabe, "How'd you hurt your wrist?"

He colored slightly. "Stupid stuff. I slipped and fell on my hand."

"That must've hurt."

He held up the cast, as if he still couldn't believe he'd injured himself. "Like a mofo."
"Which bar does Julie work at?"

He dropped his arm but his guard went back up. "Why?"

Faith guessed he'd been cooperative enough to warrant an explanation. "Gabe, I need to tell you what happened to Adam today."

There was something like a loud "woof" echoing in the hallway. Gabe whispered, "Fuck."

Two seconds later, Faith met the reason behind the expletive.

Gabe reluctantly made introductions. "This is Tommy Albertson, my dormmate."

He was as pasty as Gabe was dark, and Faith knew instantly that Gabe's assessment had been right on the money: the kid was an asshole. As if to prove it, Tommy's tongue practically hung out of his mouth as he stared at her. "Yowza. Me likes a woman with a gun."

Gabe hissed, "Shut up, man. Adam's in trouble."

"I was about to tell Gabe ..." Faith directed her words to the young man. "Adam was killed this morning."

"Killed?" Tommy rocked onto the balls of his feet as he pointed his fingers at Faith. "Shit, dude, it was him, right? They said it was a Tech student. Fuck me—that was Adam?"

Gabe's confusion was obvious. "He was killed? As in murdered?"

Tommy became even more excited. "Dude, some crazy bitch strangled him to death. To *death*, man. With her bare hands. Seriously, it was all over the news. Where've you been all day, bro?"

Gabe's throat worked. His eyes moistened and his sense of betrayal was profound as he looked at Faith for confirmation. "Is it true?"

She nodded her head once, furious that someone in the department had leaked out that Adam had gone to Tech. "It's more complicated than that, but, yes, Adam is dead."

"How?"

"I can't really talk about details with you, Gabe. I can say that Adam acted heroically, that he was trying to help someone, and then things went very wrong. A girl was kidnapped, and we're looking for her, but we need your help."

His lower lip quivered as he tried to control his emotions.

By contrast, Tommy seemed almost exhilarated. "Are you here to question me?" he asked. "Bring it on. I've got all kinds of information."

Faith asked, "What kind of information?"

"Well, nothing, like, concrete or anything. He was a quiet dude, but you know, there was that intensity underneath. Like ... danger."

Faith struggled to remain passive, though she would have loved to take Tommy Albertson to the morgue and ask him what exactly was so exciting about his friend being dead. "Did Adam have a girlfriend? Did he hang around with anyone in particular?"

As with everything else, Tommy found this extremely entertaining. He clamped his hands on Gabe's shoulders. "Two questions, one answer!"

Gabe squirmed away from him. "Fuck off, asshole. You never even talked to Adam. He hated your guts."

She tried, "Gabe—"

"Fuck you, too." He left the room. A few moments later, she heard a door slam.

Faith narrowed her eyes at Tommy, resisting the urge to tear him down to size. He'd stepped a few feet into the room, and she didn't like the way he was crowding her space. She knew that she would need to establish control or there would be a problem. "Maybe you'd like to answer these questions at the station?"

He showed a toothy grin, coming closer. "My dad's a lawyer, lady. Unless it gets you wet slapping the cuffs on a virile young stud such as myself, no way am I getting into the back of your car."

Faith kept her tone even. "Then I guess we have nothing to talk about."

He smiled smugly, closing the space between them. "Guess so."

"Could you leave now?" When he didn't move, she shouldered him back into the hall. He was taken off guard, or maybe she was madder than she thought, but the push turned into more of a shove, and he landed flat on his ass.

"Jesus," he whined, sitting up. "What is wrong with you?"

She turned the thumb latch on the inside doorknob and pulled the door firmly closed. "Your friend is dead, a girl is missing, and your reaction to all this is to laugh and make jokes about it. What do you think is wrong with me?"

Her words hit their mark, but they didn't have the desired effect. "Why are you such a bitch?" "Because I have to deal with assholes like you every day."

"Is there a problem here?" A well-dressed Hispanic man was coming up the stairs. He sounded slightly out of breath and a bit concerned that a student was on the floor.

Tommy scrambled to stand. He had the look of a spoiled child who was relishing the prospect of tattling. Faith dealt with it the only way she knew how, admitting, "He got aggressive and I pushed him out of my way."

The man had reached them by now. There was something familiar about his face, and Faith realized he was one of the many nameless administrators she'd seen at Jeremy's freshman orientation the month before.

There was no recognition in his eyes as Victor Martinez looked from Tommy to Faith, then back again. "Mr. Albertson, we have over eighteen thousand students enrolled in this school. It doesn't bode well for you that we are barely out of our first week and I already know your name and student ID number by heart."

"I didn't—"

He turned his attention to Faith. "I'm Dean Martinez," he said, offering his hand. "You're here about Adam Humphries?"

She shook his hand. "Humphrey," she corrected.

"I'm sorry we had to meet under these circumstances." He kept ignoring Tommy, who muttered an insult under his breath before he skulked away. "Maybe you could walk with me? I'm sorry that it seems like I'm not giving this the attention I should, but the first week of school is grueling and I'm between meetings."

"Of course." She caught the scent of his cologne as she followed him toward the stairs. Though it was late in the day, he was clean-shaven and his suit was still neatly pressed. Not counting Will Trent—and why would she?—it had been a long time since Faith had been around a man who paid attention to basic hygiene.

"Here," Victor said, reaching into the breast pocket of his jacket. "This is the master key to his room, his class schedule and his contact details." His hand brushed hers as he gave her the paper, and Faith was so surprised by the sensation it brought that she dropped the paper.

"Whoops," he said, kneeling down to retrieve it. The moment could have been awkward—Victor on one knee in front of her—but he managed to make it look graceful, scooping up the page and standing in one fluid motion.

"Thank you," Faith managed, trying not to sound as stupid as she felt.

"I'm sorry it took so long to clear this through legal, but the university has to cover its ass."

She scanned the paper, a familiar-looking student application with all the pertinent information. "Your candor is refreshing."

He smiled, lightly holding the railing as they walked down the stairs. "Can you tell me a little bit about what's going on? I've heard the news, of course. It's extraordinary."

"It is," she agreed. "I don't know what they're saying, but I really can't comment on an ongoing investigation."

"I understand," he responded. "The police department has an ass, too."

She laughed. "That could be taken two different ways, Dean Martinez."

He stopped on the next landing. "Victor, please."

She stopped, too. "Faith."

"I love the old-fashioned names," he told her, his eyes crinkling as he smiled.

"I'm named after my grandmother."

"Beautiful," he said, and she got the distinct impression he wasn't commenting on the tradition of passing down family names. "Do you mind my asking why you look so familiar to me?"

Despite the circumstances, there had definitely been some sort of flirting banter between them. Faith took a moment to mourn the loss of it before saying, "You probably saw me at freshman orientation. My son is a student here."

He did a terrific impression of a deer staring down an eighteen-wheeler. "Our youngest student is sixteen."

"My son is eighteen."

His throat moved as he swallowed, then came the forced chuckle. "Eighteen."

"Yep." There was nothing to do with the awkward moment but talk over it. "Thank you for the key. I'll make sure it's returned to your office. I'm sure my boss will want to interview some of the students tonight. We'll be as respectful as we can, but I would appreciate your informing

campus security so we don't have any problems. You might get some angry phone calls from parents. I'm sure you're used to dealing with that."

"Certainly. I'll be glad to run interference." He started down the stairs. "I really must get to that meeting."

"One more thing?" Faith was only doing her job, but she had to admit it was somewhat rewarding seeing the fear in his eyes as he waited. "Can you tell me why Tommy Albertson is already on your radar?"

"Oh." The dean was obviously relieved it was that easy. "Towers and Glenn have a running rivalry. There are usually some good-natured pranks back and forth, but Mr. Albertson took it a bit far. They're sketchy on the details, but knowing how these things work, I assume water balloons were involved. The floor was wet. People were injured. One boy had to be taken to the hospital."

That would explain the cast on Gabe's arm.

"Thank you." Faith shook his hand again. This time, his eyes didn't crinkle when he smiled, and he let her go down the stairs ahead of him. He seemed to hesitate when they got outside, but once he figured out she was going right, he took a quick left toward the back of the quad.

Faith made her way toward her car, wondering what the hell had happened to Will Trent. She found him leaning over her Mini, his elbows resting on the roof. He had his head in his hands, the phone to his ear. His jacket was draped across the hood.

As Faith drew closer, she could make out what he was saying. "Yes, sir. I'll make sure someone is there to meet you at the airport tomorrow. Just call me back with your flight information." He glanced up, and there was so much pain in his expression that she made herself look away.

"Thank you, sir. I'll do everything I can."

She heard the phone snap closed. He cleared his throat. "Sorry, the sheriff called back with a number for the Humphreys. I wanted to get that over with as soon as possible." He cleared his throat. "They're about six hours from a major airport. They're going to drive down tonight and try to get the first flight out tomorrow morning, but it lays over in Salt Lake. Depending on whether or not they get routed through Dallas, it could take them anywhere from seven to twelve hours to get here." He cleared his throat. "I told them to call the airline directly, explain their situation, and see what can be done."

Faith could not imagine what sitting in a car, waiting around at all those airports would feel like. Maddening, she guessed; the most painful day of any parent's life. She chanced a look at Will. His usual passive expression had returned. "Did they have anything?"

He shook his head. "Adam doesn't have a car here. He's been to Atlanta twice. The first time, he flew down with his father for orientation, stayed three days, then flew back. Both parents drove him down two weeks ago to help him settle into the dorm."

"From Oregon?" she asked, surprised. "How many days did that take?"

"The mom said they took a week, but they stopped to see things along the way. Apparently, they're into camping."

"That jibes with the outdoor magazines I found in his room," Faith said, thinking she would just as soon slit her wrists as drive across America. Add Jeremy into the road trip, and they would be looking at a murder/suicide. "So, he's been in Atlanta for fourteen days."

"Right," Will said. "They've never heard of either Kayla Alexander or Emma Campano. As far as they know, Adam wasn't seeing anyone. He had a girlfriend back home, but she moved to New York last year—she's some kind of dancer. It was a mutual split and he's dated off and on since then, but nothing serious. They have no idea why Emma's picture was in his wallet." He rubbed his jaw, his fingers finding the line of the scar. "The mother said that his laptop was stolen last week. They reported it to campus security, but she didn't think it was taken seriously."

Faith figured that was her cue. She told him about Gabe and Tommy, the girlfriend who might have gone to Westfield. As she spoke, she figured she should come clean and told him about shouldering Tommy into the hallway. She also told him about Victor Martinez's comments, though she held back the embarrassing parts for the sake of her own dignity.

Instead of railing her for assault and battery against Albertson, Will asked, "What are there, around fifty bars in Buckhead?"

"At least."

"I guess it's worth a try calling around to see if we can find her," he said. "I hate to say it, but at this point, a girlfriend who might have gone to the same school as Emma and Kayla and who's dating a friend of Adam's is the only lead we've got to follow."

Neither one of them had to vocalize the obvious: every hour that ticked by made it harder to find the killer, and less likely that they would find Emma alive.

He started pressing numbers on his phone. "Someone called while I was talking to the parents," he explained. "Put the incident with Albertson in your report, then put it out of your mind. We've got much bigger problems to deal with right now."

A cream-colored Lexus sedan pulled up while he was listening to his messages. Faith saw Amanda Wagner behind the wheel. She must have been the one who left the message, because Will told Faith, "They found Kayla Alexander's Prius at a copy center on Peachtree. There's blood in the trunk, but no sign of Emma. Security camera's fuzzy, but at least it was working."

He pocketed the phone as he walked toward Amanda's car, rattling off orders for Faith. "Call in a couple of units to help you canvass the dorms. Maybe somebody else knows more about Adam. Search his things, see if there are any more pictures of Emma. Take out anything his parents don't need to see. Go back at that Gabe kid if you think it'll work. If not, give him the night to stew. We can both hit him tomorrow."

She tried to process all of this. "What time do we start?"

"Is seven too early?"

"No."

"Meet me at Westfield Academy. I want to screen the staff."

"Wasn't Leo—"

"He's not on this anymore." Will opened the car door. "I'll see you in the morning."

Faith opened her mouth to ask him what the hell happened to Leo, but Amanda started to pull away before his butt hit the seat. Faith saw that Will's jacket was still on the Mini's hood and waved for them to stop, but Amanda either didn't see her or didn't care. Faith supposed the good news was that she was still on the case. The bad news was that she was definitely still at the scut-work level. She was probably going to be here until three in the morning.

Leo was the first casualty. Faith would be damned if she'd be the second.

She checked Will's jacket and found a handful of latex gloves. She also found something far more curious: a digital voice recorder. Faith turned over the small device in her hand. All the letters had been rubbed off from use. The screen said there were sixteen messages. She guessed the red button was record, so the one beside it would have to be play.

Her cell phone rang and Faith almost dropped the recorder. She recognized Jeremy's number and looked up at the second floor of Glenn Hall. She counted five spaces over and found him standing at his window, watching her.

He said, "Isn't it illegal to go through somebody's pockets like that?"

She put the recorder back in the jacket. "I'm getting really tired of dealing with smart-aleck kids who know their legal rights."

He snorted.

"Answer a question for me: if you didn't have your key card, how would you get into the building?"

"Press the handicap button."

Faith shook her head at the situation. So much for tracking people who'd been in and out of the dorm. "So, do you need pizza money or your laundry done or are you just making sure I don't come up there and embarrass you in front of your friends?"

"I heard about that kid," he said. "It's all over the dorm."

"What are they saying?"

"Not a lot," Jeremy admitted. "Nobody really knew him, you know? He was just some guy you passed in the hall on the way to the toilet."

She heard the sympathy in his voice, and Faith felt a tinge of pride that her son showed such humanity. She had met the alternative and it wasn't pretty.

He asked, "Do you think you'll find that girl?"

"I hope so."

"I can keep my ear to the ground."

"No, you will not," she countered. "You're going to school to learn how to be an engineer, not a cop."

"There's nothing wrong with being a cop."

Faith could think of several things, but she didn't want him to know. "I should go, honey. I'm going to be here late."

He didn't hang up. "If you wanted to do some laundry ..."

She smiled. "I'll call you before I leave."

"Hey, Mom?"

"Yeah?"

He was silent, and she wondered if he was going to tell her that he loved her. That was how they trapped you, after all. You walked the floor with them and cleaned up after them and took all the grief and the noise and the swarthy Latin men who looked at you as if you had horns, and then they hooked you back in with those three simple words.

Not this time, though. Jeremy asked, "Who was that guy you were with? He didn't look like a cop."

Her son was right about that. She picked up Will Trent's jacket to lock it back in the car. "Nobody. Just a guy who works for your aunt Amanda."

CHAPTER FOUR



The Copy Right copy center was on the street-level floor of an ancient three-story building. It was one of the few structures on Peachtree Street yet to be torn down and replaced by a skyscraper, and the entire building had an air of resignation, as if at any moment it expected to be razed. The high-volume copy machines, made visible through the plate-glass windows by harsh, fluorescent lights, gave the place a dystopic, science fiction feel. *Bladerunner* meets Kinko's.

"Shit," Amanda hissed as the uneven road scraped against the bottom of her car. The asphalt was patched with heavy metal plates that overlapped like thick Band-Aids. Pylons and signs blocked off an entire lane on Peachtree, but the construction workers were long gone.

She sat up, gripping the wheel as the car bounced onto the ramp leading to the parking deck. Amanda pulled up behind a crime-scene van and put the car in park.

"Seven hours," she said. That was how long Emma had been missing.

Will got out of the car, adjusting his vest, wishing that he had his jacket even though the promise of night had done nothing to alleviate the sweltering heat. One of the employees of the Copy Right had seen the abduction alert on television. He had spotted the car while taking a cigarette break and made the call.

Will followed Amanda down the gently sloping ramp that led to the parking garage behind the building. The space was small by Atlanta standards, maybe fifty feet wide and just as deep. Overhead, the ceiling was low, the concrete beams hanging down less than a foot from the top of Will's head. The second-story ramp was blocked off with concrete barriers that looked as if they had been there a while. A service road ran off the back, and he saw that it was connected to the adjacent buildings. Three cars were in a blocked-off area, he assumed for employee parking. The floodlights were yellow to help keep mosquitoes at bay. Will put his hand to his face, feeling the scar there, then made himself stop the nervous habit.

There was no gate for the parking lot, no booth with an attendant. Whoever owned the lot relied on the honesty of strangers. The honor box by the entrance had numbers corresponding to the spaces. Visitors were expected to fold four single dollar bills into a tight wad and shove them through tiny slits by way of payment. A slim, sharp piece of metal hung on a wire to help people cram in the money.

Amanda's heels clicked across the concrete as they walked toward Kayla Alexander's white Prius. A team had already surrounded the car. Cameras flashed, evidence was sifted, plastic bags were filled. The techs were all suited up, sweating from the unrelenting heat. The humidity made Will feel like he was breathing through a wet piece of cotton.

Amanda looked up, surveying the area. Will followed her gaze. There was one lone security camera up on the wall. The angle was more for catching people going into the building than watching cars parked in the lot.

"What have we got?" Amanda asked.

She spoke softly, but this was her team and they all had been waiting for her to ask the question.

Charlie Reed stepped forward, two plastic evidence bags in his hands. "Rope and duct tape," he explained, indicating each. "We found these in the trunk."

Will took the bag of rope, which appeared to be unused clothesline; there was a plastic tie around the neatly folded line. One side was faintly red where the fibers had wicked up blood. "Was it coiled up like this when you found it?"

Charlie gave him a look that asked if Will really thought he was that stupid. "Just like that," he

said. "No fingerprints on either one."

Amanda surmised, "He came prepared."

Will handed back the rope and Charlie continued, "There was a patch of blood in the trunk that matched Emma Campano's blood type. We'll have to check with a doc, but the injury doesn't seem life threatening." He pointed to a semicircle of dark blood in the trunk. Will guessed it was about the same size as a seventeen-year-old girl's head. "Based on the volume of blood, I'd say it was a nasty cut. The head bleeds a lot. Oh—" He directed this toward Will. "We found microscopic sprays of blood in Emma Campano's closet above the urine you found. My guess is she was either kicked or punched in the head, causing the spray. We cut out the Sheetrock, but I'm not sure there's enough to test." He added, "Maybe that's why he didn't need to use the rope and tape. He knocked her out before removing her from the closet."

Amanda apparently already assumed this. "Next."

Charlie walked around the car, pointing to different spots. "The steering wheel, door panels and trunk latch show faint streaks of the same blood we found in the trunk. This is classic glove transfer." He meant the abductor had been wearing latex gloves. "As for the trash, we're assuming it came from the owner."

Will looked inside the car. The keys dangled from the ignition slot just beside what looked like a toggle knob that served as the gearshift. There were go-cups and empty fast-food bags and schoolbooks and papers and melted makeup and sticky spots of spilled soda and other items that indicated Kayla Alexander had been too lazy to find a trashcan, but nothing else that stuck out.

Charlie continued, "We got a positive on body fluids in the seats. Could be blood, urine, sperm, sweat, sputum. The seat material is dark and there's not much, but it's something. I'm going to cut out the patches and see if we can soak something out of them back at the lab."

Will asked him, "The blood on the outside of the car was Emma's only?"

"That's right."

"So he would've changed his gloves from the time he was in the Campano house?"

Charlie considered his answer. "That would make sense. If he was using the same gloves, then Adam and Kayla's blood would also be on the car."

Amanda asked, "Wouldn't it have dried in the heat?"

"Possibly, but the new wet blood would release the dried blood. I would expect to see some cross-contamination."

"How are you sure the blood is Emma's?"

"I'm not, really," Charlie admitted. He found a roll of paper towels and tore off a strip so he could wipe the sweat off his face. "All I can go by is type. The blood we found on the car is O-positive. Emma was the only one in the house that we know of who had that type."

"Not to question your methods," Will began, then did exactly that. "How do you know for sure that it's only type O-positive?"

"Blood types don't get along well," Charlie explained. "If you put O-pos with any type A or B, then you get a violent reaction. It's why they type you at the hospital before they give you a transfusion. It's a simple test—takes only a few minutes."

Amanda piped in. "I thought O-positive was universal?"

"That's O-negative," Charlie told her. "It has to do with antigens. If the blood types aren't compatible, then red blood cells clump together. In the body, this can cause clots that block vessels and bring about death."

Amanda's impatience was clear. "I don't need a science lesson, Charlie, just the facts. What else have you found?"

He looked back at the car, the team collecting evidence and putting it into bags, the photographer documenting each empty McDonald's cup and candy wrapper. "Not much," he admitted.

"What about the building?"

"The top two floors are empty. We cleared them first thing. I'd guess no one's stepped foot up there in six months, maybe a year. Same with the parking area upstairs. The concrete barricade has been there for a while. My guess is that this place is so old, it wasn't built to handle newer, larger cars so they closed it off to prevent collapse."

Amanda nodded. "Find me if anything else comes up."

She headed toward the building, Will trailing behind her. "Barry didn't find any discarded gloves," she told him, referring to the chief of the canine unit. "This afternoon, the dogs were able to find a trail from the Campano house to the woods at the end of their street, but there

were too many scents and they lost the trail.” She pointed to an area directly behind the garage. “There’s another path back there that goes into those same woods. It would take ten minutes to get to the Campanos from here if you knew what you were doing.”

Will remembered what Leo had told him earlier. “The girls were skipping last year until the neighbor across the street told Abigail that Emma’s car was in the driveway. They could’ve started parking here to avoid being told on.”

“But Kayla’s car was parked in the driveway today,” Amanda pointed out.

“Should we recanvass the neighbors, see if they remember anything?”

“You mean for a third time?” She didn’t say no, but reminded him, “It’s all over the news now. I’m surprised no one has talked themselves into seeing something.”

Will knew that was often a problem with eyewitness testimony, especially when the crime involved children. People wanted to help so much that their brains often came up with scenarios that didn’t actually happen. “What’s the kid’s name—the one who called in the Prius?”

“Lionel Petty.” She pressed a red button by the door. A few seconds passed, then there was a buzz and click.

Will opened the door for her and followed Amanda down a long hallway that led to the Copy Right. The air-conditioning was a welcome relief from the stagnant heat in the garage. Inside the store, signs hung from the ceiling with cartoon smiling pens writing out helpful directions. The front counter was covered with reams of paper. Machines whirled in the background, swirling out sheets of paper at incredible speeds. Will glanced around, but couldn’t see anyone. There was a bell on the counter and he rang it.

A kid poked up his head from behind one of the machines. His hair was a mess, as if he’d just rolled out of bed, though his goatee was neatly trimmed. “Are you the cops?” He walked toward them, and Will saw that he wasn’t really a kid. Will would have put him in his late twenties, but he was dressed like a teen and he had the round, open face of a child. Except for the receding hairline, he could have passed for fifteen. He repeated his question. “Are you guys with the cops?”

Will spoke first because he knew from experience that Amanda’s style of rattling off questions and demanding quick answers didn’t exactly lend itself to eliciting information from strangers. He had to raise his voice to be heard above the machines. “You’re Lionel Petty?”

“Yeah,” he answered, smiling nervously at Amanda. “Is this going to crack the case?” The slow cadence of his voice had a slight lilt to it, and Will couldn’t tell if the man was just that laid-back or had smoked a little too much weed. “I’ve been watching it on the news all day, and they’ve been showing the car, like, every five minutes. I couldn’t believe when I checked out for a smoke and looked up and there it was. I thought maybe my brain was making it up because what’re the odds, right?”

“Petty,” a disembodied voice called. Will moved down the counter. He saw the lower half of a body sticking out from a copy machine. “Did you clock out like I told you?”

Petty smiled, and Will saw the crookedest set of teeth he’d ever seen on a man. “So, not to be crass or anything, but is there a reward? ‘We can’t say no at Campano.’ They live in Ansley Park. The family must be loaded.”

“No,” Amanda answered. She had figured out who was in charge. She asked the kid under the copier, “Where’s the tape for the security cameras?”

He crawled out of the machine. There was a splotch of ink on his forehead, but his hair was neatly combed, his face clean-shaven. He was about the same age as Petty, but he lacked the other man’s boyish features and stoner charm. He wiped his hands on his pants, leaving a faint trail of ink. “I’m sorry, we’ve got a ten-thousand-booklet run due first thing in the morning and my machine just jammed up.”

Will glanced at the guts of the copier, thinking that its gears and cogs reminded him of a wristwatch.

“I’m Warren Grier,” the man offered. “I pulled the tape as soon as your guys got here. You’re lucky. We swap out the same two cassettes every day. If you’d shown up tomorrow, it probably would’ve been recorded over.”

Will asked, “Do you have a problem with theft around here?”

“Not really. The construction makes it hard to get in and out of the building. About ninety percent of our clients never see us. We deliver out to them.”

“Why the security camera?”

“Mostly to see who’s at the door and to keep out the homeless people. We don’t keep a lot of

cash here, but the junkies don't need a lot, you know? Twenty bucks is a score for them."

"Is it just you and Lionel?"

"There's a girl who works mornings. Monique. She's seven to noon. We use a courier for deliveries. They're in and out all day." He leaned his hand on the counter. "Sandy and Frieda should be in soon. They work the evening shift."

"Who uses the offices upstairs?"

"There used to be some lawyers, but they cleared out maybe a year ago?" He was asking Petty, and the other man nodded confirmation. "They were immigration lawyers. I think they were running some kind of scam."

"Lots of shifty people," Petty provided.

"Here." Warren dug a set of keys out of his pants pocket and handed them to Petty. "Take them to my office. I stopped the tapes when your guys got here. The one on the top is from today. It hasn't been rewound yet, so you can probably find the time frame you need pretty easily." He apologized to Will. "I'm sorry, but I've got to get this machine back up. Just holler if you have any problems and I'll come back and help you."

"Thank you," Will told him. "Can I ask—have you noticed someone using the parking garage a lot lately? Maybe not the Prius, but another car?"

Warren shook his head as he walked back to the machine. "I'm usually chained to the store. The only time I go back through that door is usually when it's time to go home."

Will stopped him before he ducked into the copier. "Have you seen any suspicious characters in the area?"

Warren shrugged. "This is Peachtree Street. It's kind of hard not to."

Petty said, "I keep a lookout, you know?" He motioned for them to follow him to the back of the store. "It's not just like with the car. I called the cops on some homeless people who were crashing in the alley."

Amanda asked, "When was this?"

"Year, maybe two years ago?"

Will waited for her to say something sarcastic, but she held her tongue.

He asked Petty, "Have you ever seen the Prius parked back there before?"

He shook his head.

"What about any other cars?" Will pressed. "Is there one in particular that you've seen back there a lot?"

"Not that I remember, but I'm usually inside to catch the phones."

"What about your cigarette breaks?"

"Stupid, huh?" He blushed slightly. "I quit, like, two years ago, but then I met this girl at the Yacht Club a couple of days ago, and she smokes like freakin' Cruella de Vil. I picked it back up like—" He snapped his fingers.

The Euclid Avenue Yacht Club was a dive in Little Five Points. It was just the kind of place you expected to find a twenty-something-year-old copy store worker with the ambition of a snail.

Will asked, "What about the construction workers outside?"

"They've been there off and on for about six months. At first, they were trying to use the garage during lunch. You know, for shade and all. But Warren got mad because they were leaving all kinds of trash back there—cigarette butts, coffee cups, all kinds of shit. He had a talk with the foreman, all cool about it, just, like, 'show some common courtesy, man. Put litter in its place.' The next day, we get here, and there's fucking steel plates all over the road and they haven't been back since."

"When was this?"

"A week ago? I don't remember. Warren will know."

"Did you have any other trouble with them before this?"

"Nah, they weren't on the job long enough to give a shit. They come and go all the time, usually different crews, different bosses." Petty stopped in front of a closed door. He kept talking as he slipped the key into the lock. "I don't want you to think I'm some kind of greedy bastard asking about a reward."

"Of course not," Will said, glancing around the office. The space was small but well organized, with what must have been thousands of CDs neatly stacked on metal shelves from floor to ceiling. A battered chair sat beside a metal desk, papers stacked on the top. The time clock ticked loudly. A shelf on the opposite wall held a tiny black-and-white television. Hooked up to the front jacks was an array of cables leading to two VCRs.

Petty said, "It's pretty crappy. Warren's right about the tapes being recorded over. I've been working here seven years and he's bought new ones maybe twice."

"What about all these CDs?"

"Customer files, artwork and stuff," he explained, tracing his fingers along the multicolored jewel cases. "Most of the projects are e-mailed now, but sometimes, we get repeats and have to pull them."

Will stared at the television, spotting the top of Charlie's head as he cut a patch of material from the passenger seat of the Prius. Two tapes were beside the set, numbers labeling them one and two. Will checked one of the VCRs, which looked pretty straightforward. The big button was always play. The smaller ones on either side would be rewind and fast-forward.

He told Petty, "I think we've got this."

"I can—"

"Thank you," Amanda said, practically pushing him out the door.

Will went to work, sliding the top tape into the player. The television screen blinked, and the image of the parking garage came up.

Amanda said, "They turned it off two hours ago."

"I can see that," he mumbled, holding down the rewind key, watching the date and time code count backward. Will stopped the tape and hit rewind again, knowing the machine would go faster without having to show the image. The VCR whirled. The clock ticked.

"Try now," Amanda told him.

Will pressed the play button, and the garage flipped back up again. They saw the Prius again, parked in the same space. The time code read 1:24:33.

"Close," she said. Because of her husband's 9-1-1 call, they knew Abigail Campano had arrived at her home sometime around twelve-thirty.

Will kept the VCR in play mode and held down the rewind button with his thumb. The scene was pretty static, just the Prius and the empty garage. The quality of the tape was exactly as you would expect, and Will doubted he would have guessed the car's make from the film alone. Because the camera was angled more toward the door, the parking garage was only captured in a pie-shaped section. Everything on the tape played in reverse, so when the Prius backed out at 12:21:03, that meant that the car had actually arrived at that time. This was good information to have, but what really caught their attention was the second car the Prius had been blocking from the camera's eye.

"What make is that?" Amanda asked.

The grainy film showed the generic front side panel and partial front wheel of a red or blue or black sedan pulling into a parking space. Will could see part of the windshield, the slope of the hood, a side blinker light, but nothing more. Toyota? Ford? Chevy?

He finally admitted, "I can't tell."

"So," Amanda said, "we know that the Prius entered the garage at 12:21. Go back to when the second car first showed up."

Will did as he was told, going back almost an hour, stopping at eleven-fifteen that morning. He pressed play, and the footage slowly played out. The dark-colored car pulled into the space. The image of the driver revealed nothing more than that he was of average build. As he got out of the car, you could see that he had dark hair and wore a dark shirt and jeans. Having the benefit of comparison, Will surmised this was Adam Humphrey. Adam closed the car door, then tossed something—the keys?—across the roof of the car to the passenger, who was out of the camera's eye but for a hand and the upper part of a forearm as the second person caught the keys. The passenger wore no watch. There were no tattoos or other identifying marks. Both driver and passenger left the scene, and Will fast-forwarded the tape until Kayla Alexander's car showed up.

To Will's relief, the events unfolded chronologically now. At exactly 12:21:44, the white Prius parked beside the sedan, blocking the camera's view of the second sedan. The driver got out of the passenger's side door of the Prius, away from the angle of the camera, and opened the trunk. The second sedan's trunk popped open briefly, putting it into the frame. It closed a few seconds later. There was a blur that looked like the top of the abductor's head as he crouched around the sedan, getting in on the passenger's side. There was nothing else on camera after that. They had to assume that the sedan had pulled away.

Will took his hand off the VCR.

Amanda leaned her hip on the desk. "He knew the sedan was here. He knew to change cars because we would be looking for the Prius."

"We've been looking for the wrong car all afternoon."

Amanda said, "Let's have Charlie send the tape to Quantico," meaning the FBI lab in Virginia. "I'm sure they have an expert on front car panels."

Will ejected the tape from the machine. The TV flickered and showed the Prius again. Charlie was on his knees, combing through the driver's-side floorboard. The time stamp read 20:41:52.

Amanda saw it, too. "We've lost another thirty minutes."



Amanda was uncharacteristically silent when she dropped Will off at city hall. As he walked toward his car, she had only said, "We'll have more information to go on tomorrow." Forensics, she meant. The lab was working overtime to process materials. Amanda knew Will had done everything he could. They both knew that was not enough.

Will drove aimlessly down North Avenue, so caught up in his thoughts that he missed his turn. He lived less than five minutes from City Hall East, but lately, he'd found himself wishing the distance were greater. He had lived alone since he was eighteen years old, and was used to having a lot of time to himself. Coming home to Angie was a big adjustment. Especially on a night like tonight, when Will was so caught up in a case that his head hurt, he craved time alone to just sit and think.

He tried to come up with anything positive that had been achieved today. Kayla Alexander's parents had been reached. Because of the time difference in New Zealand, they would lose a whole day in the air. Still, Leo Donnelly had managed to do one thing right, after all. Well, two, if you counted his sudden medical leave. Will guessed scheduling emergency surgery to have your prostate removed was better than facing Amanda Wagner, though both procedures ran the risk of castration.

Will parked on the street because Angie's Monte Carlo was blocking the driveway. The trashcan was still on the curb, so he dragged it up to the garage. The motion lights came on, blinding him. Will held up his hand to block the light as he unlocked the front door.

"Hey," Angie said. She was lying on the couch in front of the television, wearing a pair of cotton boxer shorts and a tank top. She didn't take her eyes off the set as Will let his gaze travel along her bare leg. He felt the urge to climb onto the couch and go to sleep beside her, or maybe something else. That wasn't how their relationship worked, though. Angie had never been the nurturing type and Will was pathologically incapable of asking for anything he needed. The first time they had met at the children's home, she had smacked him on the side of the head and told him to stop gawking. Will was eight and Angie was eleven. Their relationship hadn't changed much since then.

He dropped his keys onto the table by the door, unwittingly doing a catalogue of the things she had moved or disturbed today while he was gone. Her purse was on the pinball machine, lady crap spilling onto the glass. Her shoes were under the piano bench alongside the pair from yesterday and the day before. The flowers on the deck had been chewed, but Will couldn't really blame her for that. Betty, his dog, had developed a passion for daisies lately. They were all finding their own passive-aggressive ways to act out against the newness of the situation.

He asked, "Are they still running the Levi Alert?"

Angie muted the television and finally turned her attention to him. "Yeah. Any leads?"

He shook his head, taking off his gun and putting it by his keys. "How'd you know it was my case?"

"I made a phone call."

Will wondered why she hadn't just called him directly. He was too tired to pursue it, though. "Anything good on TV?"

"*The Man with Three Wives.*"

"What's it about?"

"Ship building."

Will felt something close to panic as he realized the dog hadn't greeted him at the door. "Did you accidentally lock Betty in the closet again?" Angie wasn't a fan of the Chihuahua, and though Will had only taken in the little thing because no one else would, he felt very protective of her. "Angie?"

She smiled innocently, which ratcheted up his alarm. He still wasn't sure the closet incident had been accidental.

He whistled, calling, "Betty?" Her little bat-head poked out from the kitchen doorway, and he

felt a wave of relief as her tiny nails clip-clopped across the hardwood floor. "That wasn't funny," he told Angie, sitting down in the chair.

The day caught up with him quickly. All the muscles in his body felt like they were melting. There was nothing he could do right now, but he felt guilty for being home, sitting in his chair, while the killer was out there. The digital clock on the cable box said 1:33. Will hadn't realized how late it was, and the knowledge brought on something like a slow ache. When Betty jumped into his lap, he could barely move to pet her.

Angie said, "I wish you knew how ridiculous you look with that thing on your knee."

He stared at the coffee table, the fingerprints on the polished wood. There was an empty glass of wine beside an open bag of Doritos. His stomach rumbled at the sight of the chips, but he was too tired to reach down and get one. "You didn't tighten the lid on the garbage last night," he told her. "A dog or something got into it. Trash was all over the yard this morning."

"You should've woken me up."

"It's no big deal." He paused, letting her know that it was. "Aren't you going to ask me about Paul?"

"That soon?" she asked. "I was at least going to give you time to settle."

When Paul had first come to the children's home, Will had idolized him. He was everything Will wasn't: charming, popular, circumcised. It all seemed to come so naturally to him—even Angie. Though honestly, Angie was easy for everybody. Well, everybody at that point but Will. He still didn't know why Paul had hated him so much. It took about a week of tension before the older boy started openly picking on him, then another week before Paul started using his fists.

Will told Angie, "He's still calling me Trashcan."

"You *were* found in a trashcan."

"That was a long time ago."

She shrugged, like it was easy. "Start calling him cocksucker."

"That'd be a little cruel considering what his daughter probably went through." Will amended, "Is still going through."

They both stared silently at the television. A diet pill commercial was on—the before and afters. It seemed like everybody wanted to change something about their lives. He wished there was a pill he could take that would get Emma back. No matter who her father was, the girl was still just an innocent child. Even Paul didn't deserve to lose his daughter. No one did.

Will glanced at Angie, then back at the TV. "What kind of parents do you think we'd be?"

She nearly choked on her own tongue. "Where the hell did that come from?"

"I dunno." He stroked Betty's head, picking at her ears. "I was just wondering."

Angie's mouth worked as she dealt with the shock. "Wondering what, whether he'd be a drug addict like my mother or a psychopath like your father?"

Will shrugged.

She sat up on the couch. "What would we tell him about how we met? Just give him a copy of *Flowers in the Attic* and hope for the best?"

He shrugged again, tugging at Betty's ears. "Assuming he can read."

Angie didn't laugh. "What are we going to tell him about why we got married? Normal kids ask about that kind of shit all the time, Will. Did you know that?"

"Is there a book about a daddy giving a mommy an ultimatum after she gives him syphilis?"

Will looked up when she did not answer. The corner of Angie's lip curled into a smile. "That's actually the next movie after this one."

"Yeah?"

"Meryl Streep plays the mother."

"Some of her best work has been with syphilis." He felt Angie staring at him and kept his attention on Betty, scratching her head until her back foot started to thump.

Angie smoothly steered the subject back to something easier. "What's Paul's wife look like?"

"Pretty," he said, jerking back his hand as Betty gave him a nip. "Actually, she's beautiful."

"I'd bet you my left one he's cheating on her."

Will shook his head. "She's the whole package. Tall, blond, smart, classy."

Her eyebrow went up, but they both knew Will's type leaned more toward gutter-mouthed brunettes with the self-destructive habit of saying exactly what was on their minds. Natalie Maines in a wig would be a concern. Abigail Campano was nothing more than a curiosity.

"Be that as it may," Angie said, "men don't cheat on their wives because they aren't pretty or smart or sexy enough. They cheat because they want an uncomplicated fuck, or because they're

bored, or because their wives don't put up with their bullshit anymore."

Betty jumped onto the floor and shook herself out. "I'll keep that in mind."

"Do that." Angie used her foot to block Betty from getting on the couch. He could easily see her doing the same thing with a toddler. Will stared at Angie's toenails, which were painted a bright red. He couldn't imagine her sitting around with a little girl getting a pedicure. Of course, three months ago, he couldn't imagine Angie ever settling down, either.

When she'd called him to say that he had to go to the free clinic to get tested, he'd been so furious he'd thrown the telephone through a kitchen window. There had been a lot of fighting after that—something Will hated and Angie fed off of. For almost thirty years, they had followed this pattern. Angie would cheat on him, he would send her away, she would come back a few weeks or months later and it would all start over again.

Will was sick of being on that treadmill. He wanted to settle down, to have some semblance of a normal life. There was hardly a long line of women waiting to sign up for the job. Will had so much baggage that he needed a claim check every time he left the house.

Angie knew about his life. She knew about the scar on the back of his head where he'd been whacked with a shovel. She knew how his face had gotten torn up and why he got nervous every time he saw the glow of a cigarette. He loved her—there was no question about that. Maybe he didn't love her with passion, maybe he wasn't really *in love* with her at all, but Will felt safe with her, and sometimes, that was the one thing that mattered the most.

Out of nowhere, she said, "Faith Mitchell's a good cop."

"That was a mighty informative phone call you made today," Will commented, wondering who at the Atlanta Police Department had been so chatty. "I investigated her mother."

"She didn't do it," Angie said, but Will knew her defense was the automatic type that cops used, sort of like a *gesundheit* when somebody sneezed.

"She's got an eighteen-year-old kid."

"I'm hardly in a position to denigrate teenage slutdom," Angie added, "Be careful around Faith. She's going to figure you out in about ten seconds flat."

Will sighed, feeling it deep in his chest. He stared at the kitchen doorway. The light had been left on. He could see the bread was on the counter, an open jar of Duke's beside it. He had just bought that mayonnaise. Was she that wasteful or was she trying to send him some kind of message?

A shadow crossed over him, and he looked up to see Angie. She got in the chair, straddling him, her arms resting on his shoulders. Will ran his hands along her legs, but she stopped him from going any farther. Angie never gave anything for free, which she proved by saying, "Why did you ask about kids?"

"Just making conversation."

"Pretty strange conversation."

He tried to kiss her, but she pulled away.

"Come on," she prodded. "Tell me why you asked."

He shrugged. "No reason."

"Are you trying to tell me you want kids?"

"I didn't say that."

"What—you want to adopt?"

He stopped her with two simple words. "Do you?"

She sat back, her hands in her lap. He had known her for pretty much his entire life. In all that time, a direct question had never gotten a direct answer, and he knew that wasn't going to change any time soon.

"You remember the Doors?" she asked. She didn't mean the band. When they were growing up, there were certain kids who came and went in the system so many times that it was like the children's home was a revolving door for them. She put her lips close to his ear. "When you're drowning, you don't stop to teach somebody else how to swim."

"Come on." He patted her leg. "I need to take Betty for her walk and I've got an early morning."

Angie had never taken well to being told she couldn't have something. "You can't spare me thirty-two seconds?"

"You leave out a new jar of mayonnaise and you expect foreplay?"

She smiled, taking that as an invitation.

"You know," he began, "you've been living here for two and a half weeks and the only places

we've had sex are this chair and that couch."

"You realize that you're probably the only man on earth who would complain about something like that?"

"I bow to your extensive market research."

The corner of her mouth went up, but she wasn't smiling. "It's gonna be like that, huh?"

"Did you call the real estate agent yet?"

"It's on my list," she told him, but they both knew she wasn't going to put her house on the market any time soon.

Will didn't have the strength to continue the conversation. "Angie, come on. Let's not do this."

She put her hands on his shoulders and did something extremely effective with her hips. Will felt like a lab rat as she looked down at him, watching his every move, adjusting the rhythm according to his reaction. He tried to kiss her, but she kept pulling just out of his reach. Her hand went into her shorts, and he felt the back of her fingers pressing against him as she stroked herself. Will's heart started pounding as he watched her eyes close, her tongue dart out between her lips. He nearly lost it when she finally turned her hand around and started using it on him.

"Are you still tired?" she whispered. "You want me to stop?"

Will didn't want to talk. He lifted her up and pushed her back onto the coffee table. His last thought as he thrust into her was at least it wasn't the couch or the chair.



Will scooped up Betty and held her to his chest as he started jogging down the street. She pressed her face into his neck, her tongue lolling happily as they left the neighborhood. He didn't slow his pace until he could see the streetlights from Ponce de Leon. Though Betty protested, he put her down on the sidewalk and made her walk the rest of the way to the drugstore.

At two in the morning, the place was surprisingly busy. Will grabbed a basket and headed toward the back of the store, guessing he'd find what he needed near the pharmacy. He walked down two different aisles before he spotted the right section.

Will scanned the boxes, his eyes blurring on the letters. He could make out numbers okay, but had never been able to read well. There was a teacher early on who had suggested dyslexia, but Will had never been diagnosed so there was no telling if he had a real disorder or if he was just painfully stupid—something subsequent teachers agreed was the issue. The only thing he knew for certain was that no matter how hard he tried, printed words worked against him. The letters transposed and skipped around. They lost their meaning by the time they went from his eyes to his brain. They turned backward and sometimes disappeared off the page altogether. He couldn't tell left from right. He couldn't focus on a page of text for more than an hour without getting a blinding headache. On good days, he could read on a second-grade level. Bad days were unbearable. If he was tired or upset, the words swirled like quicksand.

The year before, Amanda Wagner had found out about his problem. Will wasn't sure how she had found out, but asking her would only open up a conversation he didn't want to have. He used voice recognition software to do his reports. Maybe he relied on the computer spell-check too much. Or maybe Amanda had wondered why he used a digital recorder to take notes instead of the old-fashioned spiral notebook every other cop used. The fact existed that she knew and it made his job that much harder because he was constantly having to prove to her that he wasn't a hindrance.

He still wasn't sure if she had assigned Faith Mitchell to him to help or because Mitchell, of all people, would be looking for something wrong with him. If it got out that Will was functionally illiterate, he would never be able to lead a case again. He would probably lose his job.

He couldn't even think about what he'd do if that happened.

Will put the basket on the floor, rubbing Betty's chin to let her know he hadn't forgotten about her. He looked back at the shelf. Will had thought it would be easier than this, but there were at least ten different brands to choose from. All the boxes were the same except for varying shades of pink or blue. He recognized some of the logos from television commercials, but he hadn't seen the box among the trash strewn across the yard, he had only seen the little stick you pee on. Whatever dog had gotten into the garbage had destroyed the packaging, so this morning, all Will could do was stand in the middle of the driveway holding up what was obviously a home pregnancy test.

There were two lines on it, but what did that mean? Some of the commercials on TV showed smiley faces. Some of them showed pluses. Wouldn't it follow that some would have a minus?

Had his eyes blurred and he'd seen two lines instead of a single minus? Or was he so freaked out that he'd read a word as a symbol? Did the test actually say something as simple as "no" and Will couldn't read it?

He would get one of each type, he decided. When the Campano case resolved, he would lock his office door and go through each kit, comparing it to the wand from the trash, until he found the right brand, then he would take however many hours he needed to figure out the directions so he'd know one way or the other what exactly was going on.

Betty had jumped into the basket, so Will loaded the boxes in around her. He carried it against his chest to keep her from spilling out. Betty's tongue lolled again as he headed to the front checkout, her little paws on the edge of the basket so she looked more like a hood ornament. People stared, though Will doubted this was the first time this Midtown store had seen a grown man in a business suit carrying a Chihuahua with a pink leash. On the other hand, he could pretty much guarantee that he was the first one to be carrying a basket full of home pregnancy tests.

More stares came as he waited in line. Will scanned the images on the newspapers. The *Atlanta Journal* had already printed the early edition. As with just about every other paper in the nation this morning, Emma Campano's face was above the fold. Will had plenty of time waiting in line to decipher the bold, block letters over the photograph. MISSING.

He tried to breathe through the tightness in his chest as he thought about all the bad things that people could do to each other. The Doors, the kids who came back from foster care or couldn't make it with their adopted family, told that story. Time and time again, they would be sent out, only to come back with a deadness in their eyes. Abuse, neglect, assault. The only thing harder to look at was the mirror when you came back yourself.

Betty licked his face. The line moved up. The clock over the register said two-fifteen.

Amanda was right. If she was lucky, Emma Campano was dead.

DAY TWO



CHAPTER FIVE



Abigail Campano felt like her daughter was still alive. Was that possible? Or was she making a connection that wasn't there, like an amputee who still feels a missing arm or leg long after it's gone?

If Emma was dead, it was Abigail's fault. She had taken a life—not just any life, but that of a man who had tried to save her daughter. Adam Humphrey, a stranger to Abigail and Paul, a boy they had never seen or heard of until yesterday, was dead by her own hands. There had to be a price for that. There had to be some sort of justice. If only Abigail could offer herself up to the altar. She would gladly switch places with Emma right now. The torture, the pain, the terror—even the cold embrace of a shallow grave would be better than this constant state of unknowing.

Or would it? What were Kayla's parents thinking right now? Abigail couldn't stand the couple, hated their permissiveness and the mouthy daughter it had produced. Emma was certainly no saint, but she had been different before she met Kayla. She had never failed a class or missed a homework assignment or skipped school. And yet, what would Abigail say to the girl's parents? "Your daughter would still be alive if you had kept her away from mine?"

Or—daughters.

"Our daughters would be alive if you had listened to me."

Abigail forced herself to move, to try to get out of bed. Except for going to the bathroom, she had lain here for the last eighteen hours. She felt foolish for having to be sedated—some latter-day Aunt Pittypat who felt the vapors coming on. Everyone was being so careful around her. Abigail had not felt so handled in ages. Even her mother had been gentle on the telephone. Beatrice Bentley had lived in Italy since she'd divorced Abigail's father ten years ago. She was on a plane somewhere over the North Atlantic right now, her beautiful mother rushing to her side.

Adam Humphrey's parents would be coming, too. What awaited them was not a bedside, but a graveside. What would it feel like to bury your child? How would you feel as the coffin lowered into the earth, the earth covered your baby in darkness?

Abigail often wondered what it would have been like to have a son. Granted, she was an outsider, but mothers and sons seemed to have such uncomplicated relationships. Boys were easy to read. With one glance, you could tell whether they were angry or sad or happy. They appreciated simple things, like pizza and video games, and when they fought with their friends, it was never for blood, or worse, for sport. You never heard about boys writing slam notes or spreading rumors about each other at school. A boy never came home crying because someone called him fat. Well, maybe he did, but his mother could make everything better by stroking his head, baking some cookies. He would not sulk for weeks over the slightest perceived insult.

In Abigail's experience, women certainly loved their mothers, but there was always some kind of thing that lived between them. Envy? History? Hate? This *thing*, whatever it was, made girls gravitate toward their fathers. For his part, Hoyt Bentley had relished spoiling his only child. Beatrice, Abigail's mother, had resented the lost attention. Beautiful women did not like competition, even if it was from their own daughters. To Abigail's recollection, she was the only thing her parents ever fought about.

"You've spoiled her rotten," Beatrice would scream at Hoyt, her milk-white complexion seeming to take on the green pallor of envy.

In college, Abigail had met a fellow student named Stewart Bradley who, from all appearances, was just the type of man she was meant to marry. He was of the old money stock that her father approved of, and had enough new money to please her mother in the process. Stewart was smart, easygoing and about as interesting as a jar of pickled beets.

Abigail had been ripe for stealing the day she took her BMW into the dealership for servicing. Paul Campano wore a cheap suit that was too tight in the shoulders. He was loud and unpolished and even days later, just thinking about him would bring on a rush of heat straight between her legs. Three weeks later, she gave up the life of Mrs. Pickled Beets and moved in with Paul Campano, an adopted Jew with Italian parents and a chip on his shoulder the size of Rhode Island.

Beatrice didn't approve, which sealed the deal. Her mother claimed that Paul's lack of money and family name were not the problem. She saw that there was something deep in Paul that would never be satisfied. Even on Abigail's wedding day, Beatrice had told her daughter to be careful, that men were selfish creatures at their core, and there were only a handful of them who managed to overcome that natural inclination. Paul Campano, with his pinky ring and hundred-dollar haircut, was not one of them. Hoyt had for all intents and purposes moved in with his mistress by then, and Abigail had assumed that her mother's warning was the result of her own miserably isolated life.

"Darling," Beatrice had confided, "you cannot fight a man's history."

Undeniably, Abigail and Paul loved each other passionately. He had worshipped her—a role that Abigail, ever the daddy's girl, was more comfortable with than she wanted to admit. Every new milestone, whether it was becoming manager of the dealership, buying his own franchise, then adding another and another, he would run to her for praise. Her approval meant so much to him that it was almost comical.

There came a time, though, when she got sick of being worshipped, and she saw she was not so much on a pedestal as locked in a fairy-tale tower. Paul really meant it when he said that he wasn't good enough for her. His self-deprecating jokes that had seemed so charming in the beginning suddenly weren't so funny. Behind all the bluster and bravado was a need so deep that Abigail wasn't sure she would ever find the bottom.

Paul's adoptive parents were lovely people—Marie and Marty were a rare combination of patience and contentment—but years went by before Marie let it slip that Paul had been twelve when he came to live with them. Abigail had had this image in her mind of a perfect, pink baby being delivered straight into Marie's arms, but the reality of Paul's adoption was more Dickensian than anyone wanted to admit. Abigail had questions, though no one would answer them. Paul would not open up and his parents obviously felt it would be a betrayal to talk about their son, even if the person asking was his own wife.

The affairs started around that time, or maybe they had been going on all along and she'd just then started to notice. It was so much easier to keep your head in the sand, to maintain the status quo while the world crumbled around you. Why was Abigail surprised by his infidelities? She had taken a different route, but the path she was on already showed the familiar footsteps of her own mother.

At first, Abigail had welcomed the expensive gifts Paul brought back from business trips and conferences. Then she had grown to understand that they were payoffs, get-out-of-guilt free cards that he fanned like a croupier. As the years went by, Abigail's smile was not so bright, her bed not so welcoming, when he returned from California or Germany with diamond bracelets and gold watches.

So, Paul had started bringing back gifts for Emma. Their daughter had responded as expected to the lavish gifts. Young girls are built to crave attention, and Emma had stepped into the role of daddy's girl as easily as her mother before her. Paul would give her an iPod or a computer or a car, and she would blissfully throw her arms around his neck while Abigail admonished him about spoiling her.

Abigail's transformation from her self to her mother was that simple. As with any change, there was revelation. She hated seeing Emma so easily swayed by Paul's gifts and unconditional love. He saw her as perfect and she returned the favor in spades. Everything was made so easy for his girl. Paul bought Emma out of every bad mood, every sad day. When she lost her English textbook the second day of school, he bought her a new one, no questions asked. When she misplaced her homework or forgot an assignment, he made excuses for her. Whether it was checking the closet for monsters or getting her sold-out concert tickets or making sure she had the latest style of jeans, Paul was there for her. Why would Abigail begrudge this? Shouldn't a woman be thrilled that her only child was so loved?

No. Sometimes she wanted to grab Emma by the shoulders and shake her, to tell her not to be so reliant on her father, that she needed to learn how to fend for herself. Abigail didn't want her

daughter to grow up thinking that the only way to get anything was through a man. Emma was smart and funny and beautiful and she could have everything she wanted so long as she worked for it. Unfortunately, Paul jumping every time Emma snapped her fingers was too alluring. He had built a world for her where everything was perfect and nothing could go wrong.

Until now.

There was a knock on the door. Abigail realized she was still lying in bed, that she had only imagined that she'd managed to sit up. She moved her arms and legs to see if she could feel them.

"Abby?" Paul looked exhausted. He hadn't shaved. His lips were chapped. His eyes were sunken in his head. She had slapped him last night—her hand stinging against his cheek. Until yesterday, Abigail had never raised her hand to another human being in her life. Now, in the course of twenty-four hours, she had killed a teenage boy and slapped her own husband.

Paul had told her that if they hadn't taken away Emma's car, she might be safe now. Maybe men were not so easy, after all.

He said, "No news yet."

She knew this just from looking at him.

"Your mom's flight is gonna be in around three. Okay?"

She swallowed, her throat dry. She had cried so much that she didn't have any tears left. The words came out of her mouth before she knew what she was saying. "Where's my father?"

Paul seemed disappointed that she asked for someone else. "He went out to get some coffee."

She didn't believe him. Her father didn't go out to get coffee. He had people who did those kinds of things for him.

"Babe," Paul said, but there was nothing else. She could feel the need in him, but Abigail was numb. Still, he came into the room, sat by her on the bed. "We'll get through this."

"What if we don't?" she asked, her voice sounding dead in her own ears. "What if we can't get through this, Paul?"

Tears came into his eyes. He had always been an easy crier. Emma had worked him so easily with the car. When they'd told her they were taking it away from her, she had screamed, thrown a tantrum. "I hate you!" she had yelled, first at Abigail, then at Paul. "I hate your guts!" He had stood there with his mouth open long after his little angel had flounced out of the room.

Now, Abigail asked the question that had been on her mind all night. "Paul, tell me. Did you do something ... did you make somebody ..." Abigail tried to get her thoughts together. Everything was rushing in on her. "Paul, did you piss somebody off? Is that why she was taken?"

He looked as if she had spat on him. "Of course not," he whispered, his voice raspy. "Do you think I would keep that from you? Do you think I'd be sitting on my hands like this if I knew who had taken our baby?"

She felt awful, but deep down she also felt some kind of vindication that she had hurt him so easily.

"That woman I was with ... I shouldn't have done it, Abby. I don't know why I did. She didn't mean anything, babe. I just ... needed."

He didn't say what he needed. They both knew the answer to that: he needed everything.

She asked, "Tell me the truth. Where's Dad?"

"He's talking to some people."

"We've got half the police department in the house and the rest of them a phone call away. Who's he talking to?"

"Private security. They've handled things for him before."

"Does he know who did this? Is there someone who's trying to get back at him for something?"

Paul shook his head. "I don't know, babe. Your dad doesn't exactly confide in me. I think he's right not to leave this to the GBI."

"That one cop seemed like he knew what he was doing."

"Yeah, well, I wouldn't trust that freak cocksucker as far as I could throw him."

His words were so sharp that she didn't know how to respond.

"I should've never said that to you about the car," he whispered. "It had nothing to do with the car. She just ... She didn't listen. You were right. I should've been tougher on her. I should have been her father instead of her friend."

How long had she waited for him to see this? And now, it meant nothing. "It doesn't matter."

"I want her back so bad, Abby. I want another chance to do everything right." His shoulders shook as he cried. "You and Emma are my world. I've built my whole life around both of you. I

don't think I could live with myself if something ... if something happened."

Abigail sat up, cupping her hands around his face. He leaned into her and she kissed his neck, his cheek, his lips. When he gently pushed her back onto the bed, she didn't protest. There was no passion, no desire except for release. This was simply the only way they had left to console each other.

CHAPTER SIX



At six forty-five in the morning, Will parked his car in the teachers' parking lot of Westfield Academy. Rent-a-cops stood sentry in front of the buildings, their short-sleeved uniforms and matching shorts pressed into sharp creases. Well-marked security cars rolled through the campus. Will was glad to find the school on high alert. He knew that Amanda had requested the DeKalb County police send cruisers out to the area every two hours, but he also knew that DeKalb was overburdened and understaffed. The private security team would take up the gap. At the very least, they might help quell some of the sense of panic that was building—which was sure to get worse, judging by the news vans and cameramen setting up across the street.

Will had turned off the television this morning because he couldn't take the hype. The press had even less to go on than the police, but the talking heads were analyzing every scrap of rumor and innuendo they could find. There were "secret sources" and conspiracy theories galore. Girls from the school had been on the national morning shows, their teary-eyed pleas for their dear friend's return somewhat undercut by their perfectly coiffed hair and expertly applied makeup. It took the focus off Emma Campano and put it squarely on the melodrama.

This time yesterday morning, Kayla and Emma had probably been getting ready for school. Maybe Adam Humphrey had slept in because he had a later class. Abigail Campano had been getting ready for her day of tennis and spa treatments. Paul had been on his way to work. None of them had known how little time they had left before their lives were forever changed or—worse—stolen.

Will could still remember the first case he had worked that involved a child. The girl was ten. She had been taken from her home in the middle of the night in a fake abduction staged by her father. The man had used his daughter to his satisfaction, snapped her neck and tossed her down a ravine in the woods behind the family's church. It takes only a few minutes for flies to find a corpse. They start laying their eggs immediately. Twenty-four hours later, the larvae hatch and begin to devour the organs and tissue. The body bloats. The skin turns waxen, almost incandescently blue. The smell is like rotten eggs and battery acid.

This was the state in which Will had found her.

He prayed to God this was not how he would find Emma Campano.

There was laughter from a few teachers as they made their way up the stairs to the main school building. He watched them go through the doors, smiles still on their faces. Will hated schools the way some people hated prison. That was really how Will had thought of school when he was a child: some kind of prison where the wardens could do whatever they liked. Other kids who had parents at least had some kind of buffer, but Will only had the state to look after him, and it wasn't exactly in the state's interest to go after a city's school system.

Will would be the one questioning the teachers today, and he broke out into a cold sweat every time he thought about it. These were educated people—and not educated at the crap correspondence schools where Will had gotten his dubious degrees. They would probably see right through him. For the first time since this all started, he was glad that Faith Mitchell was going to be with him. At least she would be able to deflect some of the attention, and the fact was that Westfield Academy had one dead student and one missing. Maybe the teachers would be too focused on the tragedy to scrutinize Will. At any rate, there were still a lot of questions that needed to be answered.

Because Westfield only offered high school level courses, all of the students were between the ages of fourteen and eighteen. Leo Donnelly had spent most of yesterday talking to most of the

student body and come up with the sort of information you would expect from teenagers who've just found out that one classmate was brutally murdered and one was missing: both Kayla and Emma were well-loved, good girls.

If you could go back a week, however, the story might be different. Will wanted to talk to the teachers and find out what their take was on the two girls. He still wasn't getting a clear image of Emma Campano. You didn't turn into a school-skipper overnight. There were generally smaller transgressions that led to bigger ones. No one liked to speak ill of the dead, but in Will's experience, teachers didn't walk on eggshells when there was something that needed to be said.

Will glanced out the window, looking at the buildings. The private school was impressive, the sort of local school with a national reputation that Atlanta was known for. Before the Civil War, only the wealthiest Atlantans could afford to educate their offspring, and most of them sent their children to Europe for the luxury of a well-rounded education. After the war, the money dried up but the desire to educate was still there. Recently impoverished debutantes realized that they actually had marketable skills and started opening up private schools along Ponce de Leon Avenue. People may have bartered tuition with family silver and priceless heirlooms, but pretty soon the classrooms were full. Even after the Atlanta Public School System was established in 1872, wealthy Atlantans preferred to keep their children away from the riffraff.

The Westfield Academy was one of those private schools. It was currently housed in a series of old buildings that dated back to the early 1900s. The original schoolhouse was a clapboard-style structure that resembled a barn more than anything else. Most of the later buildings were red brick and looming. The centerpiece was a marble-sided gothic cathedral that looked as out of place as Will's 1979 Porsche 911 did among the late-model Toyotas and Hondas in the teachers' parking lot.

Will was used to the car standing out. Nine years ago, he had spotted the burned-out shell of the 911 in an abandoned lot on his street. This was back when most of the houses in his neighborhood were of the crack variety and Will had slept with his gun under his pillow in case people knocked on the wrong door. No one had protested when he'd put wheels on the car and rolled it into his garage. He'd even found a homeless man who helped him push it up the hill for ten bucks and a drink from the hose.

By the time the crack houses were torn down and families had started to move in, Will had completely rebuilt the car. On weekends and holidays, he scoured junkyards and body shops looking for the right parts. He taught himself about pistons and cylinders, exhaust manifolds and brake calipers. He learned how to weld and bondo and paint. Without the benefit of anyone's expertise, Will managed to return the car to its original glory. He knew that this was an accomplishment to be proud of, but somewhere in the back of his head, Will couldn't help but think if he'd been able to understand a clutch schematic or an engine diagram, he could have fixed the car in six months instead of six years.

It was the same with the Campano case. Was there something out there—something important—Will couldn't see because he was too stubborn to admit to his own weakness?

Will spread the morning newspaper over the steering wheel, taking another go at the Emma Campano story. Adam Humphrey's and Kayla Alexander's pictures were just below Emma's, all under the headline "ANSLEY PARK TRAGEDY." There was a special pull-out section on the families and the neighborhood along with interviews from people claiming to be close friends. Actual news was sparse, and carefully hidden among the hyperbole. Will had started reading the paper at home, but his head, already aching from lack of sleep, nearly exploded from trying to decipher the tiny print.

Now, Will didn't have a choice in the matter. He had to know what was being said about the case, what details were in the public domain. Routinely, the police held back certain pieces of information that only the killer would know. Because so many Atlanta cops had been on the crime scene, there had been the inevitable leaks. Emma's hiding in the closet. The rope and duct tape in the car. The broken cell phone, crushed under Kayla Alexander's back. Of course, the big story was that the Atlanta Police Department had screwed it all up. The press, an organization known for routinely getting facts wrong, was not so forgiving where the police were concerned.

As Will held his finger under each word, trying to isolate it so he could understand the meaning, he was keenly aware that whoever had taken Emma Campano was probably reading the same story right now. Maybe the killer was getting a charge out of having his crimes on the front page of the *Atlanta Journal*. Maybe he was sweating over each word as much as Will, trying to see if there were any clues he had left behind.

Or maybe the man was so arrogant that he knew there was no way to link him to the crimes. Maybe he was out right now, trolling for his next victim even as Emma Campano's body rotted in a shallow grave.

There was a tap on the glass. Faith Mitchell was standing on the passenger's side of the car. She had his jacket in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other. Will reached over and unlocked the door for her.

"Can you believe that?" She angrily indicated the newspaper.

"What?" he asked, folding up the paper. "I just started reading it."

She shut the car door to keep in the air-conditioning. "A 'highly placed Atlanta police officer' is quoted as saying that we botched the investigation and the GBI had to be called in." She seemed to realize who she was talking to and said, "I know we fucked up, but you don't talk about that sort of thing to the press. It doesn't exactly engender respect from the taxpayers."

"No," he agreed, though he thought it was curious she believed the source was from the APD. Will had actually made it that far into the story and assumed that the source was in the GBI and went by the name of Amanda Wagner.

"It would have been nice if they'd left out how wealthy the parents are, but I suppose you could figure that out from the name. Those car commercials are the most annoying thing on TV right now." She stared at him as if she was waiting for him to say something.

He said, "Yeah, they're pretty annoying. The commercials."

"Whatever." She held up his jacket. "You left this on my car."

He found his digital recorder, relieved to have it back. "These are great," he told Faith, knowing she had probably found it curious. "You wouldn't believe how bad my handwriting is."

She just stared at him again, and he felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up as he tucked the recorder into his pocket. Had she figured it out? If she listened to the recorder, all she would hear was Will's voice cataloguing information about the case so he could later dictate it into his computer and generate a report. Angie had said to watch out for Faith Mitchell. Had he already given himself away?

Faith's lips pressed together in a tight line. "I need to ask you something. You don't have to answer it, but I wish you would."

Will stared straight ahead. He could see teachers going into the main building with large thermoses of coffee and stacks of papers in their hands. "Sure."

"Do you think she's dead?"

His mouth opened, but more from relief than anything else. "Honestly, I don't know." He took his time putting his jacket on the backseat with the newspaper, trying to get some of his composure back. "I take it you didn't find anything earth-shattering last night in the dorm?" He had told her to call him if there were any leads.

She hesitated, as if she had to switch gears, then answered, "Not really. Nothing of interest in Adam's things except the pot, which I think we can agree is not very interesting?" Will nodded, and she continued, "We talked to every student in both halls. No one really knew Adam except for Gabe Cohen and Tommy Albertson, and considering the positive impression I made on both of them, they were reluctant to give any more information. I sent Ivan Sambor to talk to them—you know who he is?" Will shook his head. "Big Polish guy, doesn't take shit from anybody. Frankly, he scares the bejeezus out of me. He got the same story I got: they barely knew Adam, Gabe was crashing at his place because Tommy is an asshole. Even Tommy agreed with this, by the way."

She took out her spiral-bound notebook and flipped through the pages. "Most of the freshmen in Adam's dorm are in the same classes, but we can always go to each class and look for new faces. I reached all of his teachers but one, and all of them said the same thing: first week of class/nobody knows anybody/sorry he's dead/I don't even remember what he looks like. The one I couldn't get in touch with—Jerry Favre—is supposed to call me back today."

She slipped to another page. "Nuts and bolts: The security camera shows Adam leaving the dorm around seven forty-five yesterday morning. He's got an eight-o'clock class; the teacher verified he was there. Adam gave some kind of report the whole period, so there was no sneaking out. The card reader, which doesn't mean jack, by the way—you're not the only genius who figured out the handicap door trick—has him returning to the dorm at ten-eighteen a.m., which jibes with his class ending at ten. We have what's probably the back of his head on the camera. He changed clothes, then left again at exactly ten thirty-two. That's the last we have of him, unless you're holding something back."

Will felt surprise register on his face. "What would I hold back?"

"I don't know, Will. The last time I saw you, you were rushing to the copy center to go over Kayla Alexander's Prius. That's a pretty key piece of evidence, but we've been talking for almost ten minutes about everything but the weather and you haven't told me one damn thing."

"I'm sorry," Will answered, knowing that wasn't much of a consolation. "You're right. I should have told you. I'm not used to—"

"Working with a partner," she finished, her tone telling him that the excuse was getting old.

He could not blame her for being annoyed. She was working just as hard on this case as he was, and leaving her out was unfair. In as much detail as he could muster, Will told her about the Copy Right's security camera footage, the rope and duct tape Charlie had found. "According to the video, the dark car showed up at the parking garage at exactly eleven-fifteen yesterday morning. Two passengers got out—Adam and a stranger. Kayla Alexander's Prius drove up at twelve twenty-one. We can assume Emma was taken out of the trunk and transferred to the dark car. He was gone a little over a minute later." He summed up, "So, the last time we know Adam's whereabouts is eleven-fifteen a.m. in the parking deck of the Copy Right building."

Faith had been writing the times down in her notebook, but she stopped on this last point, looking up at Will. "Why there?"

"It's cheap, it's convenient to the house. There's no full-time attendant."

Faith provided, "The nosy neighbor told on them last year when they parked in the driveway. Using the garage was a good way to get around her."

"That was my guess," Will agreed. "We're doing background checks on all the Copy Right employees. The two girls came in for the evening shift while we were there—Frieda and Sandy. They really don't go into the garage. It's dark and they don't think it's particularly safe, which is probably true, especially considering the lack of any real security."

"What about the construction workers?"

"Amanda is going to spend today tracking them down. It's not just a matter of calling up the city and asking them for a list. Apparently, the workers just show up in the morning and they're told which fire to put out first. There are all kinds of subcontractors who use subcontractors, and before you know it, you've got day laborers and undocumented workers ... it's a mess."

"Has anyone seen the car there before?"

"The parking deck is in the back of the building. Unless the Copy Right people happen to be looking at the security camera, they have no idea who's coming and going, and of course the tape is reused, so we don't have old footage to compare." He turned to face her. "I want to talk about our suspect. I think we need to get a clearer picture in our heads about who he is."

"You mean like a profile? A loner between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five who lives with his mother?"

Will allowed a smile. "This was well coordinated. He brought the knife, the rope, the duct tape to the house. Someone let him in."

"So, you think this was really a kidnapping and Kayla and Adam got in the way?"

"It feels more personal than that," Will said. "I know I'm contradicting myself, but the scene was sloppy. Whoever killed Kayla wasn't in control. He felt real fury toward her."

"Maybe she said the wrong thing and it got out of hand."

"You have to have a conversation with someone to say the wrong thing."

"What about the second person on the Copy Right tape? Do you think that's the killer? It would make more sense if one of our victims knew him."

"Maybe," Will allowed, but that didn't feel quite right. "Adam left the dorm at ten thirty-two a.m. Somewhere between ten thirty-two and eleven-fifteen, he picked up both a car and a passenger. We've got a gap in the timeline where he's unaccounted for. That's ..." Will tried to wrap his brain around the math, but he was too tired and his head was hurting so badly that his stomach ached. "I need more coffee. How many minutes is that?"

"Forty-five," Faith supplied. "We need to know where and how he got the car. No one we spoke with in the dorms last night either let Adam borrow a car or knows where he got access to one. I guess we could look at the security card reader again, cross-reference it with the times Adam was in the dorm?"

"It's something to consider." He nodded at her notebook. "Let's come up with some questions. Number one, where is Adam's student ID?"

She started writing. "He might've left it in the car."

"What if the killer took it as a souvenir?"

"Or to use it to get into the dorm," she countered. "We need to alert campus security to cancel his card."

"See if there's a way they can leave it active but flag it somehow so we know if someone tries to use it."

"Good point." She kept writing. "Question number two, where did he get the car?"

"Campus is the obvious answer. Check to see if there were any stolen cars. Does Gabe Cohen or Tommy Albertson have a car?"

"Freshmen can't really park on campus, and it's impossible to find a safe place in the city to park, so if they have a vehicle, they tend to leave it at home. That being said, Gabe has a black VW with yellow stripes that his father drives. Albertson has a green Mazda Miata that he left back in Connecticut."

"Neither one of those fits the car on the video."

She stopped writing. "Adam could have a car we don't know about."

"He'd be keeping it from his parents, too. They said he didn't have one." Will thought about something Leo Donnelly had said yesterday. "Maybe he went off campus to get a car. Public transportation is in and out of there all day. Let's put a team on tracking down security cameras from buses. What's the nearest MARTA station?" he asked, referring to the city's bus and train system.

Faith closed her eyes, obviously thinking. "Midtown Station," she finally remembered.

Will stared out the window at the school parking lot. More faculty had shown up, and a few students were straggling in. "It'd take about twenty minutes to drive *here*, though. Then another twenty, twenty-five minutes to the parking garage."

"There's our forty-five minutes. Adam drove here to pick up Emma, then took her to the parking garage."

"The arm in the videotape," he said. "It was pretty small. I suppose it could have been a girl's hand that reached out and caught the keys."

"I've been assuming that Kayla drove Emma from school to the house in her Prius, and that Adam somehow met them there."

"Me, too," Will admitted. "Do you think it's possible Adam drove Emma to the garage, and then they both walked to the house?"

"The killer could've walked from Tech."

"He knew Adam's car was in the garage." Will turned to Faith.

"If he knew he was going to take Emma Campano from the scene, he would have to have a place to keep her. Somewhere quiet and isolated—not in the city because the neighbors would hear. Not a dorm room."

"If he didn't dump the body."

"Why take her just to dump her?" Will asked, and the question was one that gave him pause. This was why he had wanted to talk through a profile of the suspect. "The killer came to the house with gloves, rope, tape and a knife. He had a plan. He went there to subdue someone. He left Adam's and Kayla's bodies at the house. If the goal was to kill Emma, he would have killed her there. If the goal was to abduct her, to take her away so that he could spend more time with her, then he accomplished his goal."

"And APD gave him plenty of time to do it," Faith added ruefully.

Will felt a sense of urgency building up at the thought. Less than twenty-four hours had passed since the girl had been taken. If her abductor had removed her from the scene so that he could take his time with her, then maybe Emma Campano was still alive. The question was, how much longer did she have?

He checked his cell phone, noting the time. "I've got to be at the Campanos at nine."

"Do you think they know something?"

"No," he admitted. "But I'm going to have to ask Paul for a DNA sample."

Faith's uneasy expression probably mimicked his own, but Amanda had told him to do it and Will really didn't have a choice.

He said, "Let's talk to the teachers, get a general sense of the girls. If they think there's anyone else in particular we need to talk to—a student or janitor—I'll leave you to do that. If nothing turns up, then I want you to go sit in on the autopsies. Adam Humphrey's parents will be in later this evening. We need to have some answers for them."

Her expression changed, and Will thought he was getting to know her well enough to see when Faith Mitchell was upset about something. He knew that her son was the same age as Adam

Humphrey. Watching the eighteen-year-old being dissected would be horrible for anyone, but a parent would bring a special kind of pain to the experience.

He tried to be gentle, asking, "Do you think you can handle it?"

She riled, taking his question the wrong way. "You know, I got up this morning and I told myself that I was going to work with you and keep up a good attitude, and then you have the nerve to question me—a detective on the God damn homicide squad who steps over dead bodies almost every day of her life—about whether or not I can handle one of the basic requirements of my job." She put her hand on the door latch. "And while we're at it, asshole, where the hell do you get off driving a Porsche and investigating my mother for stealing?"

"I just—"

"Let's just do our jobs, okay?" She threw open the door. "You think you can do me that professional courtesy?"

"Yes, of course, but—" She turned to face him, and Will felt his mouth moving but there were no words coming out. "I apologize," he finally said, not knowing exactly what he was apologizing for, but knowing it couldn't possibly make things worse.

She exhaled slowly, staring at the coffee cup in her hand, obviously trying to decide how to respond.

Will said, "Please don't throw hot coffee at me."

She looked up at him, incredulous, but his request had worked to break the tension. Will took the time to give himself some credit. This wasn't the first time he'd had to extricate himself from a tenuous situation with an angry woman.

Faith shook her head. "You are the strangest man I have ever met in my life."

She got out before he could respond. Will took it as a positive sign that she didn't slam the door.

CHAPTER SEVEN



The heat outside was so intense that Faith couldn't finish her coffee. She dropped the cup in the waste can before heading toward the administration building. She had spent more time in schools over the past two days than she had her entire junior year.

"Ma'am," one of the hired security men said, tipping his hat to her.

Faith nodded, feeling sorry for the man. She could still remember what it felt like to wear her full uniform in the Atlanta heat. It was like rolling yourself in honey and then walking into a kiln. Because this was a school zone, no weapons were allowed on campus unless they had a police badge accompanying them. Despite the baton on one side of the man's belt and a can of Mace on the other, he looked about as harmless as a flea. Fortunately, only a cop would notice these things. The rentals were here to give the parents and kids a feeling of safety. In a crazy, mixed-up world where rich white girls could be killed or kidnapped, the show of force was pretty much expected.

At the very least, they were giving something for the press to focus on. Across the street, Faith spotted three photographers adjusting their lenses, going in for the kill. The news had gotten hold of the name of the school sometime last night. Faith hoped the rental cops were capable of forcefully reminding the reporters that the school was on private property.

Faith pressed the buzzer beside the door, looking up at the camera mounted on the wall. The speaker sputtered to life, and an irritated woman's voice said, "Yes?"

"I'm Faith Mitchell with the—"

"First left, down the hallway."

The door buzzed and Faith opened it. There was an awkward shuffling where Will made it clear he wasn't going to let her hold the door for him. Faith finally went in. They stood at the top of a long hallway with branches off to the left and right. Closed doors were probably schoolrooms. She looked up, counting six more security cameras. The place certainly had its bases covered, but the principal had told Leo yesterday there was a gap in coverage behind one of the main classroom buildings. Yesterday morning, Kayla and Emma had apparently taken advantage of it to their own cost.

Will cleared his throat, looking around nervously. Except for the fact that he was wearing yet another three-piece suit in the middle of summer, he had the worried look of an errant student hoping to avoid a trip to the principal's office.

He asked, "Which way did she say?" Even without the woman telling them where to go two seconds ago, he was standing beside a large sign that directed visitors to go to the front office down the hallway.

Faith crossed her arms, recognizing this as a very lame attempt to make her feel useful. "It's all right," she said. "You're a good cop, Will, but you have the social skills of a feral monkey."

He frowned over the description. "Well, I suppose that's fair."

Faith really wasn't the type of person who rolled her eyes, but she felt a pulling at her optic nerve that she hadn't experienced since puberty. "This way," she said, heading down a side hallway. She found the front office behind several stacked cardboard boxes. As a parent, Faith instantly recognized the chocolate bars that schools pawned off onto helpless children and their parents every year. Taking advantage of forced child labor, the administration would send out the kids to sell candy in hopes of raising money for various school improvements. Faith had eaten so many of the bars when Jeremy was growing up that her stomach trembled at the sight of them.

A bank of video monitors showing various scenes around the school was behind the woman at

the front desk, but her attention was on the phone system, which was ringing off the hook. She took in Faith and Will with a practiced glance, asking three different callers to please hold before finally directing her words toward Faith. "Mr. Bernard is running late, but everyone else is in the conference room. Back out the door to your left."

Will opened the door and Faith led him down the hallway to the appropriately marked door. She knocked twice, and someone called, "Enter."

Faith had been to her share of parent-teacher conferences, so she shouldn't have been surprised to find all ten of them seated in a half-circle with two empty chairs at the center waiting to be filled. As was befitting a progressive school specializing in the communicative arts, the teachers were a multicultural bunch representing just about every part of the rainbow: Chinese-American, African-American, Muslim-American, and—just to mix things up—Native American. There was one lone Caucasian in the bunch. With her hemp sandals, batik dress and the long, gray ponytail hanging down her back, she radiated white guilt like a cheap space heater.

She held out her hand, offering, "I'm Dr. Olivia McFaden, principal of Westfield."

"Detective Faith Mitchell, Special Agent Will Trent," Faith provided, taking a seat. Will hesitated, and for a moment she thought he looked nervous. Maybe he was having a bad student flashback, or perhaps the tension in the room was getting to him. The security guards outside were meant to make people feel safe, but Faith got the distinct impression that they were doing the exact opposite. Everyone seemed to be on edge, especially the principal.

Still, McFaden went around the room, introducing the teachers, the subjects they taught and which girl was in their classes. As Westfield was a small school, there was a considerable overlap; most teachers were familiar with both girls. Faith carefully recorded their names in her notebook, easily recognizing the cast of characters: the hip one, the nerdy one, the gay one, the one hanging on by her fingernails as she prayed for retirement.

"Understandably, we're all extremely upset about this tragedy," McFaden said. Faith didn't know why she took such an instant dislike to the woman. Maybe she was having some bad school flashbacks herself. Or maybe it was because of all the faculty in the room, McFaden was the only one who hadn't obviously been crying. Some of the women and one of the men actually had tissues in their hands.

Faith told the teachers, "I'll convey your sympathies to the parents."

Will answered the obvious question. "We can't entirely rule out a connection between what happened yesterday and the school. There's no need to be overly alarmed, but it's a good idea for you all to take precautions. Be alert to your surroundings, make sure you know where students are at all times, report any unexplained absences."

Faith wondered if he could have phrased that any differently to freak them out even more. Glancing around the room, she thought not. Faith stopped, going through the teachers' faces again. She remembered what the front-office secretary had said. "Is someone missing?"

McFaden supplied, "That would be Mr. Bernard. He had a previously scheduled meeting with a parent that couldn't be moved on such short notice. He'll be here shortly." She glanced at her watch. "I'm afraid we're a bit tight for time before the assembly starts."

"Assembly?" Faith gave Will a sharp glance.

He had the sense to look ashamed. "Amanda wants one of us to attend the assembly."

Faith guessed she knew which one was going to draw that short straw. She shot him a look of utter hatred.

McFaden seemed oblivious. "We thought it would be best to call all of the students together and assure them that their safety is our number one priority." Her smile was of the megawatt variety, the kind meant to encourage a reluctant student to accept a foregone conclusion. "We really appreciate your help in this matter."

"I'm happy to help out," Faith told the woman, forcing her own smile. She didn't think an assembly was a bad idea, but she was furious that the task fell to her, not least of all because Faith was terrified of public speaking. She could very well imagine what the assembly would be like: myriad teenage girls in various stages of hysteria demanding that their hands be held, their fears be assuaged, and all the while Faith would be trying to keep the tremble out of her voice. This was something more suited to a school counselor than a homicide detective who had thrown up before her oral comps on her detective's exam.

The principal leaned forward, clasping her hands together. "Now, tell me, how can we be of help to you?"

Faith waited for Will to speak, but he just sat ramrod straight in the chair beside her. She took over, asking, "Could you give us an impression of Emma and Kayla—socially, academically?"

Matthew Levy, the math teacher, took the lead. "I spoke to your colleague about this yesterday, but I suppose I need to say it again. The girls didn't really fit into any one social group. I had both Kayla and Emma in my classroom. They tended to keep to themselves."

Faith asked, "Did they have enemies?"

There was a series of exchanged looks. Levy replied, "They were picked on. I know the first question that comes to mind is how we could be aware of that and still let it continue, but you have to understand the dynamics of the school situation."

Faith let them know that she did. "Kids don't tend to report bullies for fear of reprisal. Teachers can't punish activity they don't see."

Levy shook his head. "It's more than that." He paused, as if to gather his thoughts. "I taught Emma for two years. Her aptitude wasn't math, but she was a good student—really, a lovely girl. She worked hard, she didn't make trouble. She was on the fringe of one of our popular groups. She seemed to get along well with other kids."

One of the Asian women, Daniella Park, added, "Until Kayla showed up."

Faith was startled by the teacher's sharp tone of voice. Park seemed unfazed by the fact that the girl had been savagely murdered. "Why is that?"

Park explained, "We see it all the time. Kayla was a bad influence." Confirming nods rippled around the room. "For a long time, Emma was friends with a girl named Sheila Gill. They were very close, but Sheila's father was transferred to Saudi Arabia at the beginning of term last year. He works for one of those soulless multinational oil companies." She dismissed this with a wave of her hand. "Anyway, Emma didn't have anyone else in her group to turn to. There are some girls who gravitate toward one particular person rather than a group, and without Sheila, she didn't have a group. Emma became more introverted, less likely to participate in class. Her grades didn't slip, they actually improved slightly, but you could tell that she was lonely."

"Enter Kayla Alexander," Levy interjected with the same rueful tone of voice as Park. "Smack in the middle of the school year. She's the type who needs an audience, and she knew precisely who to pick."

"Emma Campano," Faith supplied. "Why did Kayla transfer in during the middle of term?"

McFaden chimed in, "She came to us through another school. Kayla was a challenge, but at Westfield, we meet challenges head-on."

Faith deciphered the code. She directed her next question toward Levy, who seemed to have no problem criticizing the dead girl. "Kayla was kicked out of her last school?"

McFaden tried to keep spinning. "I believe she was asked to leave. Her old school was not equipped to meet her special needs." She straightened her shoulders. "Here at Westfield, we pride ourselves on nurturing the special needs of what society labels more difficult children."

For the second time that day, Faith fought the urge to roll her eyes. Jeremy had been on the cusp of the disorder movement: ADD, ADHD, social disorder, personality disorder. It was getting to be so ridiculous, she was surprised there weren't special schools for the boring, average children. "Can you tell us what she was being treated for?"

"ADHD," McFaden supplied. "Kayla has—had, I'm sorry—a very hard time concentrating on her schoolwork. She was more focused on socializing than studying."

That must have made her stick out like a sore thumb from the rest of the teenagers. "What about Emma?"

Park spoke again, none of the earlier sharpness in her tone. "Emma is a wonderful girl."

More nods came, and she could feel the sadness sweeping through the room. Faith wondered what exactly Kayla Alexander had done that made these teachers choose sides against her.

The door opened, and a man wearing a wrinkled sports jacket and holding an armful of papers came into the room. He looked up at the crowd, seemingly surprised they were all there.

"Mr. Bernard," McFaden began, "let me introduce you to Detectives Mitchell and Trent." She turned to Faith and Will. "This is Evan Bernard, English department."

He nodded, blinking behind his wire-rimmed glasses. Bernard was a nice-looking man, probably in his mid-forties. Faith supposed he could easily fit a stereotype with his scruffy beard and generally disheveled appearance, but something about the wariness in his eyes made her think that there was more to him than that.

Bernard said, "I'm sorry I'm late. I had a parent meeting." He pulled a chair up beside McFaden and sat down, a stack of papers in his lap. "Do you have any news?"

Faith realized that he was the first person to ask the question. “No,” she said. “We’re following all investigative leads. Anything you could tell us about the two girls will help.”

Underneath his beard, he bit his bottom lip, and she could tell that he had seen right through her bullshit as easily as Faith had seen through McFaden’s.

Will picked this moment to speak up. He directed his words toward Bernard. “We’re doing everything we can to find out who killed Kayla and to bring Emma home safely. I know that doesn’t sound like much of a comfort, but please know that this case has the full focus of every member of the Atlanta Police Department and every agent with the Georgia Bureau of Investigation.”

Bernard nodded, gripping the papers in his lap. “What can I do to help?”

Will didn’t answer. Faith gathered she was to take the lead again. “We were just talking about Kayla Alexander’s influence over Emma.”

“I can’t tell you anything about Kayla. I only had Emma, but not for class. I’m the reading tutor at Westfield.”

McFaden provided, “Mr. Bernard does one-on-one sessions with our reading-challenged students. Emma is mildly dyslexic.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. Can you tell me—”

“How so?” Will interrupted. He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, to look at Bernard.

Bernard sounded puzzled. “I’m not sure I understand the question.”

“I mean ...” Will seemed at a loss for words. “I don’t quite understand what you mean by mild dyslexia.”

“‘Mild’ isn’t really a term that I would use,” Bernard countered. “Generally speaking, it’s a reading disorder. As with autism, dyslexia has a full spectrum of symptoms. To classify someone as mild would be to put them at the top level, which is more commonly called high functioning. Most of the kids I see tend to be at either one end or the other. There are various symptomatic iterations, but the key identifier is an inability to read, write or spell at grade level.”

Will nodded, and Faith saw him put his hand in his jacket pocket. She heard a click, and had to struggle to keep her expression neutral. She’d seen him transfer the digital recorder to that same pocket in the car. While it was perfectly legal in the state of Georgia for a person to secretly record a conversation, it was highly illegal for a cop to do so.

Will asked Bernard, “Would you characterize Emma as slow or ...” He seemed hesitant to use the word. “Retarded?”

Bernard appeared as shocked as Faith felt. “Of course not,” the man replied. “As a matter of fact, Emma has an exceptionally high IQ. A lot of dyslexics are incredibly gifted.”

“Gifted in what ways?”

He rambled off some examples. “Keen observational skills, highly organized, exceptional memory for details, athletically talented, mechanically inclined. I don’t doubt Emma will make a fine architect one day. She has an amazing aptitude with building structures. I’ve taught here at Westfield for twelve years and never seen anyone quite like her.”

Will sounded a little skeptical. “But she still had problems.”

“I wouldn’t call them problems. Challenges, maybe, but all kids have challenges.”

“It’s still a disease, though.”

“A disorder,” he corrected.

Will took a breath, and Faith realized that he was getting irritated with the runaround. Still, he pressed, “So, what are some of the problems associated with the disorder?”

The teacher ticked them off. “Deficiencies in math, reading, spelling and comprehension, immaturity, spatial problems, stuttering, poor motor skills, an inability to grasp rhyming meter ... It’s a mixed bag, really, and every child is different. You might have a math whiz, or you might have someone who can’t perform simple addition; hyper-athletic or a total klutz. Emma was lucky enough to be diagnosed early. Dyslexics are very adept at hiding the disorder. Unfortunately, computers make it much easier for them to fool people. Reading is such a fundamental skill, and they tend to be ashamed when they can’t grasp the basics. Most dyslexics don’t test well unless it’s orally, so they tend to do very poorly at school. I don’t think I’m alone in saying that some teachers misconstrue this as laziness or behavioral related.” Bernard let his words hang in the air, as if they were directed at a specific teacher in the room. “Adding to the problem is that Emma is extremely shy. She doesn’t like attention. She’s willing to put up with a lot of bullshit in order to fly under the radar. She’s certainly had her moments of immaturity, but mostly, she’s just a naturally introverted kid who has to try extra hard to fit in.”

Will was leaning so far forward he was practically off his chair. "How did her parents react to this information?"

"I've never met the father, but the mother's very proactive."

"Is there a cure for it?"

"As I said before, dyslexia is not a disease, Mr. Trent. It's a wiring problem in the brain. You would just as soon expect a diabetic to spontaneously produce insulin as you would a dyslexic to wake up and suddenly be able to tell you the difference between left and right and over and under."

Finally, Faith thought she understood where Will was going with his questions. She asked, "So, if someone like Emma was being chased, would she be likely to take the wrong route—go up the stairs instead of down, where she could get away?"

"It doesn't work like that. She would probably be more likely than you or I to intuitively know the best route, but if you asked her, 'How did you get out of there?' she wouldn't be able to tell you, 'I hid under the coffee table, then I took a left down the stairway.' She would simply say, 'I ran away.' The most fascinating thing about this disorder is the mind seems to recognize the deficit and create new thinking pathways that result in coping mechanisms that the typical child would not otherwise consider."

Will cleared his throat. "You said that she would be more observant than a normal person."

"We don't really use the word 'normal' around here," Bernard told him. "But, yes. In Emma's case, I would think that she would have better observational skills." He took it a step farther. "You know, in my experience, dyslexics are far more keyed in than most people. We see this with abused children sometimes, where, as a form of self-defense, they've learned to read mood and nuance better than the typical child. They absorb an incredible amount of blame to keep the peace. They are the ultimate survivors."

Faith took some comfort in his words. A glance around the room told her that she wasn't alone in this feeling.

Will stood up. "I'm sorry," he told the group. "I've got another meeting. Detective Mitchell has a few more questions for you." He reached into his pocket, she assumed to turn off the recorder. "Faith, call me when you get to city hall." He meant the morgue. "I want to sit in with you."

"Okay."

He made his excuses and quickly left. Faith glanced at her watch, wondering where he was going. He didn't have to be at the Campanos for another hour.

Faith looked around the room, all the eyes that were on her. She decided to get it over with. "I'm wondering if there was something specific that happened with Kayla Alexander. There doesn't seem to be a lot of sympathy for her considering what happened."

There were some shrugs. Most of them looked at their hands or the floor. Even Daniella Park didn't have a response.

The principal took over. "As I said, Detective Mitchell, Kayla was a challenge."

Bernard let out a heavy sigh, as if he resented having to be the one to clarify. "Kayla liked to cause trouble."

"In what way?"

"The way girls do," he said, though that was hardly an explanation.

"She picked fights?" Faith guessed.

"She spread rumors," Bernard provided. "She got the other girls into a tizzy. I'm sure you remember what it was like to be that age."

Faith had tried her damndest to forget. Being the only pregnant fourteen-year-old in your school was not exactly a walk in the park.

Bernard's tone turned dismissive. "It wasn't that bad."

Matthew Levy agreed. "These spats are always cyclical. They tear into each other one week, then the next week they're best friends and they hate someone else. You see it all the time."

All the women in the room seemed to think otherwise. Park spoke for them. "It was bad," she said. "I'd say that within a month of enrolling, Kayla Alexander had crossed just about everybody here. She split the school in two."

"Was she popular with the boys?"

"And how," Park said. "She used them like toilet paper."

"Was there anyone in particular?"

There was a series of shrugs and head shaking.

"The list is probably endless," Bernard supplied. "But the boys didn't rile up. They knew what

they were getting.”

Faith addressed Daniella Park. “Earlier, you made it sound like Emma was her only friend.”

Park answered, “Kayla was Emma’s friend. Emma was all Kayla had left.”

The distinction was an important one. “Why did Emma stick by her?”

“Only Emma knows the answer to that, but I would guess that she understood what it meant to be an outsider. The more things turned against Kayla, the closer they seemed to get.”

“You said the school was divided in two. What exactly happened?”

Silence filled the room. No one seemed to want to volunteer the information. Faith was about to ask the question again when Paolo Wolf, an economics teacher who had been quiet until this point, said, “Mary Clark would know more about that.”

The silence became more pronounced until Evan Bernard mumbled something under his breath.

Faith asked, “I’m sorry, Mr. Bernard, I didn’t catch what you said.”

His eyes darted around the room, as if to dare anyone to challenge him. “Mary Clark barely knows the time of day.”

“Is Mary a student here?”

McFaden, the principal, explained, “Mrs. Clark is one of our English teachers. She had Kayla in her class last year.”

Faith didn’t bother to ask why the woman wasn’t here. She would find out for herself in person. “Can I speak with her?”

McFaden opened her mouth to respond, but the bell rang. The principal waited until the ringing had stopped. “That’s the assembly bell,” she told Faith. “We should head over to the auditorium.”

“I really need to talk to Mary Clark.”

There was just a second of equivocation before McFaden gave a bright smile that would rival the world record for fakeness. “I’d be happy to point her out to you.”



Faith walked across the courtyard behind the main school building, following Olivia McFaden and the other teachers to the auditorium. Oddly, they were all in a single line, as were all the students following their respective teachers to the assembly. The building was the most modern looking of all the structures on the Westfield campus, probably built on the backs of hapless parents shilling candy bars, magazine subscriptions and wrapping paper to unsuspecting neighbors and grandparents.

One line of students in particular was getting a bit too rowdy. McFaden’s head swiveled around as if it was on a turret, her gaze pinpointing the loudest culprits. The noise quickly drained like water down a sink.

Faith should not have been surprised by the auditorium, which was really more like what you would find housing a small community theater in a wealthy suburb. Rows of plush velvet red seats led to a large stage with state-of-the-art lighting hanging overhead. The barrel-vaulted ceiling was painted in a very convincing homage to the Sistine Chapel. Intricate bas-relief around the stage depicted the gods in various states of excitement. The carpet underfoot was thick enough to make Faith glance down every few steps for fear of falling.

McFaden gave the tour as she walked, students hushing in her wake. “We built the auditorium in 1995 with an eye toward hosting overflow events during the Olympics.”

So, the parents had hustled their candy, then the school had charged the state to rent the auditorium.

“Daphne, no gum,” McFaden told one of the girls as she passed. She directed her words back to Faith. “Our art director, Mrs. Meyers, suggested the ceiling motif.”

Faith glanced up, mumbling, “Nice.”

There was more about the building, but Faith tuned out McFaden’s voice as she walked down the steps toward the stage. There was a certain frisson that overtook the auditorium as it began filling with students. Some were crying, some were simply staring at the stage, a look of expectancy in their eyes. A handful were with their parents, which somehow made the situation even more tense. Faith saw more than one child with a mother’s arm around his or her shoulders. She could not help but think about Abigail Campano when she saw them, remember the way the mother had so fiercely fought the man she assumed had killed her daughter. The hair on the back of her neck rose, an ancient genetic response to the sense of collective fear that permeated the

room.

Doing a quick count with some multiplication, Faith figured that, including the empty balcony, there were around a thousand seats in the auditorium. The bottom level was almost completely full. Most of the Westfield students were young girls. The majority of them were very thin, very well-heeled and very pretty. They ate organic produce and wore organic cotton and drove their BMWs and Minis to Pilates after school. Their parents weren't stopping at McDonald's on the way home to pick up dinner before they went to do their second job on the night shift. These girls probably lived a life very similar to Emma Campano's: shiny iPhones, new cars, beach vacations and big-screen televisions.

Faith caught herself, knowing that the small part of her who had lost so many things when Jeremy came along was acting up. It wasn't these girls' fault that they had been born into wealthy families. They certainly didn't force their parents to buy them things. They were very lucky, and from the looks of them, very frightened. One of their schoolmates had been brutally murdered—more brutally than perhaps any of them would ever know. Another classmate was missing, probably being sadistically used by a monster. Between *CSI* and Thomas Harris, these kids could probably guess what was happening to Emma Campano.

The closer Faith got to the stage, the more she could hear crying. There was nothing more emotional than a teenage girl. Whereas ten minutes ago, she had felt something akin to disdain for them, now Faith could only feel pity.

McFaden took Faith by the arm. "That's Mrs. Clark," she said, pointing to a woman leaning against the far wall. Most of the teachers were standing in the aisle, diligently reprimanding students, keeping the peace in the large crowd, but Mary Clark seemed to be in her own little world. She was young, probably not long out of college, and bordering on beautiful. Her strawberry blond hair hung to her shoulders and freckles dotted her nose. Incongruously, she was dressed in a conservative black jacket, pressed white shirt and matching skirt that hit just below the knee—an outfit much more suitable for a matronly older woman.

McFaden said, "If you could just say a few words to the students?"

Faith felt a surge of panic. She told herself that she was only speaking to a room full of kids, that it didn't matter if she made an ass of herself, but her hands were still shaking by the time they reached the front of the auditorium. The room was efficiently chilled by the air-conditioning, but Faith found herself sweating.

McFaden climbed the steps to the stage. Faith followed her, feeling the same age as the kids she was supposed to be assuring. While McFaden went straight to the podium, Faith stayed in the wings, desperate for any excuse not to have to do this. The lights were bright, so much so that Faith could only see the students sitting in the front row. Their uniforms were probably custom tailored—schoolgirl skirts and matching starched white tops. The boys had fared better with dark pants and white shirts with blue striped ties. It must have been an uphill battle every day to make them tuck in their shirts and keep their ties straightened.

There were six chairs behind the podium. Four of the chairs were filled with teachers, the last with a large hairy man wearing spandex shorts and clutching a wrinkled piece of paper in his obviously sweaty hand. His gut rolled over the waist of his shorts and sitting made it hard for him to breathe; his mouth was open, his lips moving like a fish. Faith studied him, trying to figure out what he was doing, and realized that he was going over the lines from a script in his beefy hand. Faith guessed by the whistle around his neck that he was head coach for the physical education department.

Beside him was Evan Bernard, sitting in the last chair on the left. Daniella Park was in the last chair on the opposite end. Faith noted the distance between the two teachers and guessed from the way they were studiously avoiding each other's gaze that there was some tension between them. She glanced out at Mary Clark, who was still standing in the aisle, and guessed that might be the reason.

McFaden was checking the mic. Hushes went around the room, then the usual feedback through the sound system and the predictable murmur through the crowd. The principal waited for the noise to die down. "We are all aware of the tragedy that struck two of our students and one of their friends yesterday. This is a trying time for all of us, but as a whole, we can—we will—overcome this tragedy and make something good of it. Our shared sense of community, our love for our fellow students, our respect for life and the common good, will help all of us at Westfield persevere." There was a scattering of applause, mostly from the parents. She turned to Faith. "A detective from the Atlanta Police Department is here to take some of your questions. I

would remind students to please be respectful to our guest.”

McFaden sat down, and Faith felt every eye in the room scrutinize her as she walked across the stage. The podium seemed to get farther away with each step, and by the time she reached it, her hands were sweaty enough to leave marks on the polished wood.

“Thank you,” Faith said, her voice sounding thin and girlish as it echoed through the speakers. “I’m Detective Faith Mitchell. I want to assure you that the police are doing everything they can to find Emma, to find out who committed these crimes.” She threw in “And the Georgia Bureau of Investigation” too late, realizing that her sentence did not make much sense. She tried again. “As I said, I’m a detective with the Atlanta Police Department. Your principal has my direct phone number. If any of you saw anything, heard anything or have any information that might help the case, then please contact me.” Faith realized her lungs were out of air. She tried to take a breath without making it obvious. Briefly, she wondered if this was what it felt like to have a heart attack.

“Ma’am?” someone called.

Faith shielded her eyes against the bright stage lights. She saw that several hands were up. She pointed to the closest girl, concentrating all of her attention on the one person instead of the crowd of onlookers. “Yes?”

The student stood, and then Faith noticed her long blond hair and creamy white skin. The question came to Faith’s mind before the girl got it out. “Do you think we should cut our hair?”

Faith swallowed, trying to think of the best way to answer. There were all kinds of urban legends about women with long hair being more likely to be targeted by rapists, but as far as Faith’s practical experience had shown, the men who committed these crimes only cared about one thing on a woman’s body, and it was not whether or not she had short or long hair. On the other hand, Kayla and Emma looked so much alike that it could certainly point to a trend.

Faith skirted the question. “You don’t need to cut your hair, you don’t need to change your appearance.”

“How about—” someone began, then stopped, remembering protocol and raising her hand.

“Yes?” Faith asked.

The girl stood. She was tall and pretty, her dark hair hanging around her shoulders. There was a slight tremble to her voice when she asked, “Emma and Kayla were both blond. I mean, doesn’t that mean that the guy has an MO?”

Faith felt caught out by the question. She thought about Jeremy and the way that he could always tell when she was not being honest with him. “I’m not going to lie to you,” she told the girl, then looked up at the group as a whole, her stage fright dissipating, her voice feeling stronger. “Yes, both Emma and Kayla had long blond hair. If it makes you feel more comfortable to wear your hair up for a while, then do it. Don’t let yourself believe, though, that this means you are perfectly safe. You still need to take precautions when you’re out. You need to make sure your parents know where you are at all times.” There were whispers of protest. Faith held up her hands, feeling like a preacher. “I know that sounds trite, but you guys aren’t living in the suburbs. You know the basic rules of safety. Don’t talk to strangers. Don’t go to unfamiliar places alone. Don’t go off on your own without letting someone—anyone—know where you are going and when you will be back.”

That seemed to mollify them. Most of the hands went down. Faith called on a boy sitting with his mother.

He spoke timidly. “Is there anything we can do for Emma?”

The room went completely silent. The fear started to creep back in. “As I said ...” She had to stop to clear her throat. “As I said before, any information you can think of that might help us would be appreciated. Suspicious characters around school. Unusual things Emma or Kayla might have said—or even usual things, something that maybe you are now thinking might be connected to what happened to them. All of that, no matter how trivial it may seem, is very valuable to us.” She cleared her throat, wishing she had some water. “As for anything you can personally do, I would ask again that you remember safety. Make sure that your parents know where you are at all times. Make sure that you take basic precautions. The fact is, we have no idea how this connects to your school, or even if it connects at all. I think vigilance is the key word here.” She felt slightly idiotic saying the words, thinking she sounded like a bad rip-off of Olivia McFaden, but the nods from both parents and students in the audience made Faith think that she had actually done some good here.

She scanned the crowd. No more hands were up that she could see. With a nod toward the

principal, Faith walked back across the stage and took her place in the wings.

"Thank you, Detective Mitchell." McFaden was back at the podium. She told the students, "In a few minutes, Coach Bob is going to do a ten-minute presentation, followed by an instructional film on personal safety."

Faith suppressed a groan, only to hear it echo around the auditorium.

McFaden continued, "After Coach Bob, Dr. Madison, who is, as you know, our school counselor, will have some remarks to make about dealing with tragedy. He will also be taking questions, so please remember, any questions you have should be saved up until Dr. Madison is finished speaking. Now, if we could all just take a moment to quietly reflect on our fellow students—those among us and those who are gone." She waited a few seconds, then, when no one reacted, she said, "Bow your heads, please."

Faith had never been a fan of the moment of silence, especially when it required head bowing. She liked it almost as much as public speaking, which took a close second to eating live cockroaches.

Faith scanned the crowd, looking past the bowed heads to Mary Clark, who was staring blankly at the stage. As quietly as possible, Faith made her way down the stage stairs. She could almost feel Olivia McFaden's disapproval as she sneaked down the side aisle, but Faith wasn't one of the woman's students and, frankly, she had more important things to do than stand in the wings listening to Coach Bob drill students about their safety for the next ten minutes.

Mary Clark stood straighter as she realized Faith was heading her way. If the teacher was surprised to find herself singled out, she didn't show it. As a matter of fact, she seemed relieved when Faith nodded toward the door.

Mary didn't stop in the hallway, but pushed on through the exit before Faith could stop her. She went outside and stood on the concrete pad, hands on her hips as she took deep breaths of fresh air.

She told Faith, "I saw McFaden pointing me out before you started and I was sure she was telling you that she was going to fire me."

Faith thought this was a strange way to open up a conversation, but it seemed like the sort of inappropriate remark she was capable of making herself. "Why would she fire you?"

"My class is too noisy. I'm not strict enough. I don't adhere to the curriculum." Mary Clark gave a forced laugh. "We have very different educational philosophies."

"I need to talk to you about Kayla Alexander."

She looked over her shoulder. "Not Emma?" Her face fell. "Oh, no. Is she—"

"No," Faith assured her. "We haven't found her yet."

Her hands covered her mouth. "I thought ..." She wiped away her tears. They both knew what she had thought, and Faith felt like an ass for not being more clear to begin with.

She said, "I'm sorry."

Mary pulled a tissue out of her jacket pocket and blew her nose. "God, I thought I was finished crying."

"Did you know Emma?"

"Not really, but she's a student here. They all feel like they're your responsibility." She blew her nose. "You were terrified up there, weren't you?"

"Yes," Faith admitted, because lying about something so simple would make it harder to lie about bigger things later on. "I hate public speaking."

"I do, too." Mary amended, "Well, not in front of kids—they don't really matter—but in faculty meetings, parent-teacher conferences ..." She shook her head. "God, what does any of that matter to you, right? Why don't I say something about the weather?"

Faith leaned against the steel door but thought better of it when her flesh started to blister. "Why weren't you in the meeting this morning?"

She tucked the tissue back into her pocket. "My opinion isn't exactly valued around here."

Teaching was a profession famous for producing burnout. Faith could well imagine the old guard did not appreciate an idealistic young kid coming in to change the world.

Mary Clark said as much. "They all think it's just a matter of time before I run screaming out the door."

"You had Kayla Alexander in your class last year."

The younger woman turned around, arms crossed over her chest, and studied Faith. There was something hostile about the stance.

Faith asked, "Can you tell me what happened?"

Mary was dubious. "They didn't tell you?"

"No."

She gave another laugh. "Typical."

Faith was silent, giving the other woman space.

Mary asked, "Did they tell you that last year, Kayla was so mean to one of the other girls that she ended up leaving school?"

"No."

"Ruth Donner. She transferred to Marist in the middle of last year."

"Daniella Park said that Kayla split the school in two."

"That's a fair statement. There was the Kayla camp and the Ruth camp. It took a while, but pretty soon more and more people went over to Ruth's side. Transferring out was the smartest thing she did, really. It put Kayla center stage, and suddenly, the cracks started to show. I think it's fair to say that by the beginning of the school year, Kayla was universally reviled."

"Except for Emma."

"Except for Emma."

"I'm hardly an expert, but don't girls usually outgrow that kind of behavior in middle school?"

"Usually," the teacher confirmed. "But some of them hang on to it. The really mean ones can't stop circling once they smell blood in the water."

Faith thought the shark analogy was a good one. "Where is Ruth Donner now?"

"College, I suppose. She was a senior."

Finding her would certainly be a priority. "Kayla would have been a junior last year. What was she doing going after a senior?"

"Ruth was the most popular girl in school." She shrugged, as if that explained everything. "Of course, there weren't any ramifications for Kayla. She gets away with everything."

Faith tried to tread carefully. There was something else to this story. Mary Clark was giving off the distinct impression that she felt as if she was being asked questions that Faith already knew the answers to. "I understand that what happened with the other girl was horrible, but this feels very personal for you."

Mary's hostility seemed to ratchet up a notch. "I tried to fail Kayla Alexander last year."

Faith could guess what she meant by "tried." Parents paid a lot of money for their kids to go to Westfield. They expected them to excel in their classes, even if their work did not warrant good grades. "What happened?"

"We don't fail children here at Westfield Academy. I had to tutor the little bitch after school."

The characterization was startling considering the circumstances. "I have to admit, Mrs. Clark, that I find it strange you would talk that way about a seventeen-year-old girl who's been raped and murdered."

"Please, call me Mary."

Faith was at a loss for words.

Mary seemed just as nonplussed. "They really didn't tell you what happened?"

Faith shook her head.

"I almost lost my job over her. I have student loans, two babies at home, my husband's trying to start his own business. I'm twenty-eight years old and the only thing I'm qualified to do is teach."

"Hold up," Faith stopped her. "Tell me what happened."

"Kayla showed up for tutoring, but short of me physically taking her hand and writing her papers for her, there was no way she was going to do the work she needed to do to pass the class." Mary's neck showed a slight blush. "We had an argument. I let my anger get the better part of me." She paused, and Faith was expecting the woman to admit to some sort of physical altercation, but what she said was far more shocking. "The next day, Olivia called me into her office. Kayla was there with her parents. She accused me of making a sexual pass at her."

Faith's surprise must have registered on her face.

"Oh, don't be fooled by the schoolmarm before you," Mary said. "I used to dress a lot better than this—like a human being, almost. I dressed too sexy, according to our illustrious principal. I suppose that's her way of saying I asked for it."

"Back up," Faith said. "I don't understand."

"Kayla Alexander said that I told her she would pass my class if she had sex with me." She was smiling, but there was nothing funny about what was coming out of her mouth. "I suppose I should have been flattered. I was three months out from giving birth to twins. I barely fit into

any of my clothes and I couldn't afford new ones because teaching is supposed to be its own reward. I started lactating during the meeting. The parents were screaming at me. Olivia just sat there, letting it all play out like her own personal movie." Angry tears streamed down her cheeks. "I've wanted to be a teacher since I was a little girl. I wanted to help people. Nobody does this for the money and it's certainly not for the respect. I tried to get through to her. I *thought* I was getting through to her. And all she did was turn around and stab me in the back."

"Is this what Daniella Park really meant when she said Kayla had split the school?"

"Danni was one of the few teachers on staff who believed me."

"Why wouldn't they believe you?"

"Kayla is extremely good at manipulating people. Men especially."

Faith remembered Evan Bernard, the easy way he had dismissed Mary Clark. "What happened?"

"There was an investigation. Thank God those stupid cameras are everywhere. She had no proof because it didn't happen, and she's not the brightest bulb to begin with. First she said I propositioned her in my room, then she said it was in the parking lot, then it was behind the school. Her story kept changing every day. In the end, it was my word against hers." She gave a tight grin. "I ran into her in the hallway a few days later. Do you know what she said? 'Can't blame a girl for trying.'"

"Why was she allowed to stay in school?"

Mary did a perfect imitation of Olivia McFaden. "Here at Westfield, we pride ourselves on nurturing the special needs of what society labels more difficult children—at fourteen thousand a year, plus athletic fees, student activity fees and uniforms."

Except for the ending, these were the exact same words the principal had used less than an hour ago. "The parents didn't have a problem with that?"

"Kayla's been kicked out of every other school in town. It was Westfield or the Atlanta Public School System. Trust me, I've met the parents. The Alexanders were much more horrified by the prospect of their precious daughter mixing with the great unwashed than they were about sending her to school with a woman who allegedly tried to molest her."

"I'm so sorry."

"Yeah." Her tone had a bitter clip. "Me, too."

"I have to ask you, Mary, do you know of anyone who would want to kill Kayla?"

"Other than me?" she asked, no humor at the question. "My planning period is at the end of the day," she said, referring to her time off to grade papers and prepare lesson plans. "I had a classroom full of kids from eight o'clock on."

"Anyone else?"

She chewed her lip, really thinking about it. "No," she finally said. "I can't think of anyone who would do something so horrible, even to a monster like Kayla Alexander."

CHAPTER EIGHT



Will sat outside the Campano house, listening to Evan Bernard's tinny voice coming out of the digital recorder. The sound quality was horrible, and Will had to hold the machine against his ear, the volume at the highest level, to make out the man's words.

It's not a disease, Mr. Trent. It's a wiring problem in the brain.

Will wondered if Paul Campano had been told this information. Had he believed it? Or had he done the same thing to his child as he had to Will?

He put the recorder in his pocket as he got out of the car, knowing this line of thinking contributed nothing toward finding Emma Campano. A cop from the day before was standing in the driveway, hands on his hips. He had obviously been doing a good job, because the scrum of reporters waiting for news from the Campano home were cordoned well across the street. They still shouted questions as Will walked past the cop. The man didn't acknowledge Will, and Will returned the courtesy as he went up the drive.

Charlie Reed's van was parked in front of the carriage house. The back doors were open, showing a mini-lab that had been fitted into the shell of the van. Boxes of plastic evidence bags and examine gloves, various tools, medical-grade vacuums and specimen vials were neatly stacked on the ground by the bumper. Charlie was inside, cataloguing each piece of evidence into a laptop before locking it into a cage that was welded to the floor. If this case ever made it to court, the chain of evidence had to be clearly defined or the forensic part of the prosecution would fall to the wayside.

"Hey," Will said, leaning on the open door. "I'm glad you're here. I've got to ask the father for a DNA sample. Can you do the swab?"

"Are you kidding me?" Charlie asked. "He's going to go apeshit."

"Yeah," Will agreed. "Amanda wants it, though."

"It's funny how she has no qualms about putting our necks on the line."

Will shrugged. You couldn't argue with the truth. "You find anything in the house?"

"Actually, yes," Charlie sounded mildly surprised. "I found a fine powder on the floor in the foyer."

"What kind of powder?"

Charlie traced his finger along a set of plastic vials and plucked one out. "Dirt, I'd guess, but it's not our famous red Georgia clay."

Will took the vial and held it between his thumb and forefinger, thinking he could be holding an ounce of cocaine, except that the grainy powder in this case was a dark gray rather than white. "Where did you find it?"

"Some was embedded in the entrance rug, some at the corner of the stairs."

"That's the only two places?"

"Yep."

"Did you check Adam's shoes and the flip-flops upstairs?"

Charlie picked at his mustache, twirling the end. "If you're asking me whether or not I found the powder in an area that wasn't trampled on by you, Amanda and the Atlanta Police Department—no. It was only in those two spots: on the rug and by the stairs."

Will was afraid that was going to be his answer. Even if the powder led them to a suspect, then the defense could always argue that the evidence should be excluded because the police had contaminated the scene. If Charlie or Will were on the witness stand, both men would have to admit to the likelihood that they could have just as easily brought in the evidence on the soles of their own shoes. Juries liked to be told a story. They wanted to know all the steps the police took

between finding the evidence and finding a suspect. Being told that a certain man carried into the crime scene a certain substance on his shoes painted a very pretty picture. The prosecution would be hamstrung if they couldn't mention a key piece of evidence pointed them toward the killer.

Of course, none of that would really matter if Emma Campano was found alive. They were coming up on twenty-four hours since the girl had been taken. Each minute that passed made it less likely she would be found.

Will shook the vial, seeing darker specs in the gray powder. "What do you think it is?"

"That's the million-dollar question." He added, "Literally," not needing to remind Will that analyzing the powder would be a costly test. Unlike Hollywood dream labs, it was very rare for a state laboratory to be equipped with all the cutting-edge computers and microscopes that made it so easy for the heroes to solve crimes in under an hour. They had two choices: send the sample to the FBI and pray they could get to it or shell out the money for a private lab to do the analysis.

Will felt the heat catch up with him, sweat rolling down the back of his neck. "How important do you think this is?"

Charlie shrugged. "I just collect 'em, boss."

Will asked, "Do you have another one of these?"

"Yep, one for each location." He pointed to another vial in the tray. "You've got the sample from the rug, so it's more likely to have cross-contamination." Charlie gave him a curious look. "What are you going to do?"

If he hadn't been to Georgia Tech the day before, Will probably wouldn't have even considered it. "Beg somebody to test it for free."

Charlie advised, "This is a hell of a lot more complicated than letting you have that key yesterday. A key either fits a certain lock or doesn't. With the powder, it's all down to one person's interpretation. We have to document everything. I've got a form you can take with you." He rummaged around in the van and pulled out a yellow sheet of paper. "This is a sign-in sheet. You're going to need a witness every step of the way. First, I need you to sign a release saying you've taken the sample." He found another form, attached it to a clipboard, and offered it to Will. "I've got the other sample if you hit on something. We can always run it through a lab to confirm whatever you find."

Will stared at the form, finding the X and the straight line. His signature was the one thing he could manage without having to think about it, but that wasn't the problem. If there was a geological characteristic to the sample that pointed to a specific location, then that might give them an area to search for Emma Campano.

Will tried to keep his tone even, but he felt a tingling at the base of his spine, like he was walking perilously close to the edge of a steep cliff. "The defense could argue that anybody brought in the powder. If we make an arrest off a lab analysis, and the judge says the analysis can't be used, the killer could walk away free."

Charlie lowered the clipboard. "Yes, that's true."

"But, if we just happen to find the girl ..."

He returned to his computer, tapping the keys to wake it up.

Will turned around, checking on the cop at the end of the driveway. The man still had his back turned to them, and he was at least twenty feet away, but still, Will lowered his voice when he asked Charlie, "Have you catalogued this yet?"

"Nope." He scanned the bar code on an evidence bag and tapped some more keys.

Will tightened his hand around the vial, which fit neatly into the palm of his hand. He had never been the kind of cop to bend the rules, but if there was a way to find the girl, how could it be right for him to stand idly by?

Charlie said, "Did you see the Toxic Shocks are battling it out with the Dixie Derby Girls this weekend?"

Will had to repeat the words in his head before he understood their meaning. Charlie was a big fan of women's competitive roller derby. "No, I didn't see that."

"It's going to be a real knockout."

Will hesitated. He checked the cop at the end of the driveway again before putting the sample in his pants pocket. "Thanks, Charlie."

"Don't mention it." He turned to face Will. "Okay?"

Will gave a quick nod. "I'll let you know when you can swab the dad."

Charlie gave a sarcastic, "Great. Thanks."

Will tucked his hand into his pocket, wrapping his fingers around the vial as he walked to the carriage house. He was really sweating now, though the temperature wasn't in the unbearable range yet. There had been times in Will's career when he had walked the tightrope between right and wrong, but he had never done something so blatantly illegal—and desperate. Not that it made a bit of difference, but nothing was breaking on this case. They were a day into it, and there were no witnesses, no suspects and nothing to go on but the gray powder that may or may not lead to anything but Will getting fired from his job.

He had actually stolen evidence from a crime scene. Not only that, but he had implicated Charlie in the process. What gave Will the most trouble was the hypocrisy involved. The disapproving cop standing guard in the Campano driveway suddenly had the moral high ground.

"Will." Hamish Patel was sitting at the top of the steps that led to the apartment over the garage. He held a cigarette between his thumb and forefinger.

Will took his hand out of his pocket as he climbed the stairs. "How's it going?"

"All right, I guess. I've got the computer hooked up to the phone line, but nothing's come in. Mostly, they've been getting calls from family and neighbors. The father's been pretty abrupt with them and no one's called this morning."

"And the family?"

"The mother's been in the bedroom pretty much from the get-go. A doctor came in this morning to check on her, but she refused sedation. Hoyt Bentley was here most of the night, but he left around an hour ago. The father left a few times, too, but mostly he just sat at the bottom of the stairs. He got the morning paper from the end of the driveway before I could stop him."

"What about his parents?"

"I think they're dead."

Will rubbed his jaw. He felt an odd sort of loss at the news. At the home, the older a child got, the less likely he was to be adopted. Paul had been twelve when his foster parents had petitioned the court to make it official. They had all waited for him to be returned like an ugly tie or a broken toaster. When Will himself left at eighteen, they were still waiting.

From nowhere, Hamish said, "I have to say, man, that Abigail Campano is one good-looking woman."

The inappropriate observation wasn't altogether a surprise. Hamish was one of those cops who liked to put on a front, as if the job was just a job.

Still, Will said, "I thought it was against your religion to covet other men's wives."

He flicked ash off his cigarette. "Southern Baptist, baby. Jesus already forgave me." Hamish indicated the pool area, which looked like an oasis in the backyard. "You mind if I take a break while you're in with them? I've been here all night. I could use a change of scenery."

"Go ahead." Will knocked lightly on the door, then let himself in. The main room of the apartment was large, with a full kitchen on one side and the living room on the other. He guessed the bedroom and bathroom were behind the closed doors at the rear of the room. Hamish Patel's laptop was set up on the kitchen table, waiting for the phone to ring. Two sets of headphones were hooked into an old-fashioned tape machine that was the size of a cement block.

Paul was sitting on the couch, his hand on the remote control. The television was muted but the closed-captioning scrolled across the screen. Will recognized the CNN logo in the corner. The reporter was standing in front of a weather map, her arms waving as she described a storm system moving across the Midwest. The coffee table was littered with newspapers—*USA Today*, the *Atlanta Journal*, printouts of other papers that Paul must have gotten off the Internet. Will could not read the headlines, but all of them showed the same school photographs of Emma, Adam and Kayla.

"Trash," Paul said.

Will didn't know whether or not to correct him. The man's daughter was missing. Was now really the time to dig up old grudges?

"They're fucking idiots," Paul said, waving the remote at the TV. "Two days now, and they're still saying the same damn thing with different graphics."

"You shouldn't watch that," Will told him.

"Why haven't you put us on TV?" he demanded. "That's what they always do on the cop shows. They show the parents so the kidnapper knows that she has a family."

Will was more concerned with getting Emma back than worrying about what cop shows dictated as standard procedure. Besides, the press was there to ravage the Campanos, not to help them. Will was under enough stress from the media without setting up the parents for an on-

camera meltdown. The last time Will had seen Abigail Campano, she had been sedated into a fog and could barely open her mouth without sobbing. Paul was a ticking time bomb, waiting for the smallest provocation to set him off. Putting either of them on television would be a disaster, and would invariably cause the press, absent any real information, to start pointing the finger right back at the parents.

Will told him, "We're not talking to the press right now. Anytime you want information, you should come to us."

He snorted a laugh, throwing the remote onto the coffee table. "Yeah, y'all have been real forthcoming."

"What do you think you haven't been told?"

Paul barked a laugh. "Where the fuck my daughter is. Why nobody noticed they had the wrong fucking body. How the fuck you wasted a whole fucking hour sitting with your thumbs up your asses while my fucking baby was being ..." He lost his steam, his eyes filling with tears. His jaw clenched as he stared at the television set.

"I just came from Emma's school," Will said, wishing he had more information. "We've been talking to her teachers, her friends. We spent most of the day yesterday at Georgia Tech, tracking down Adam Humphrey."

"And what did you find out? Jack shit."

"I know you've hired your own people to work on this, Paul."

"That's none of your fucking business."

"It is, because they could get in my way."

"Your way? You think I give a shit about getting in your way?" He pointed to the newspapers on the coffee table. "You know what they're saying? Of course you don't fucking know what they're saying—do you?" He stood up. "They're saying you're incompetent. Your own people are saying that you fucked up the crime scene, that any evidence was lost because you didn't know what the fuck you were doing."

Will couldn't think of a way to explain to him the difference between the Atlanta Police Department and the Georgia Bureau of Investigation without sounding like a condescending twat. He settled on saying, "Paul, I'm in charge of this investigation now. You should know—"

"Know what?" In seconds, he closed the space between the two of them. "You think I'm gonna trust you to find my little girl? I *know* you, Trashcan. Did you forget that?"

Will had flinched when he'd charged, like he was ten years old again, like he wasn't six inches taller and ten times stronger than the asshole in front of him.

Paul shook his head, a look of open disgust on his face. "Just get the fuck out of here and let the grown-ups do their job."

"You don't know a damn thing about me."

Paul pushed the newspaper off the coffee table, finding a sheet of notebook paper. "What does this say, Retard?" He shoved the papers in Will's face. "Can you read this? You asked for a list of Emma's friends. Can you even fucking read it?"

Will tilted up his chin, staring down at Paul. "I need a DNA sample from you to compare with the specimens we took from Kayla Alexander's vagina and the sheets in your daughter's bedroom."

"Motherfucker!" Paul swung wildly, and even though Will had been expecting it, he still lost his balance. Both of them fell back onto the floor. Paul had the superior position, but he was older and slower. Will deflected his strikes, relishing the feel of his fist in Paul's soft gut. He punched him in the kidney, then gave him another jab to the stomach.

The door flew open, popping against the wall. "Will!" Hamish yelled. "Jesus Christ!"

Will literally felt himself come back to his senses. His hearing was first—Hamish's panicked voice, a woman screaming. Pain came next, spreading across the bridge of his nose. He tasted blood in his mouth, smelled Paul's sour breath as the man rolled off Will and onto the floor.

Both men lay on their backs, panting. Will tried to move, feeling something crunch in his back pocket.

No one seemed to notice the phone was ringing until Abigail Campano cried, "It's Kayla! It's Kayla's cell phone calling!"

The woman was holding the telephone in her hand, eyes glued to the caller ID.

Both Will and Paul scrambled to stand. Hamish ran to his computer. He held up a finger, telling Abigail to wait while he pressed the keys. Will slipped on the extra set of headphones as Hamish donned his own pair. He nodded, and Abigail answered the phone, holding the receiver

so that Paul could listen in.

"Hello?"

There was static, then a garbled voice that was electronically altered to a menacing monotone. "Is this the mother?"

Abigail's mouth opened, but she wasn't speaking. She stared at Hamish for a cue. He nodded, writing something on a dry erase board in front of him.

"Y-yes," she stuttered. "This is Emma's mother. Is Emma all right? Can I talk to Emma?"

Hamish must have coached her to use her daughter's name as much as she could. It was harder to kill somebody who had a name.

The voice said, "I have your daughter."

Hamish wrote something down, and Abigail nodded as she said, "What do you want? Tell me how to get Emma back."

There was more static. The voice had no inflection, no accent. "I want one million dollars."

"Okay," she agreed. Hamish started furiously writing on the board. "When? Where?" She begged, "Just tell me what you want."

"I will call you tomorrow at ten-thirty a.m. with details."

"No—wait," she cried. "How do I know she's alive? How do I know Emma's alive?"

Will pressed his fingers into the earphones, his ears straining to hear past the static. He heard clicking, but didn't know if that was from Hamish pressing keys on his computer or something else. They all startled in unison as the sound jumped up several levels. "Daddy ..." a girl's voice said. Tired, terrified. "Daddy ... please help me ..."

"Baby!" Paul screamed. "Baby, it's me!"

There was another click, then the line went dead.

"Emma?" Abigail yelled. "Hello?"

Hamish tapped the keys on his computer, working furiously to keep the line engaged. He shook his head at Will. Nothing.

"What do we do now?" Abigail begged, fear pitching her voice up almost as high as her daughter's. "What do we do?"

"We pay the bastard." Paul glared at Will. "I want you out of my house. Take him with you."

Hamish looked startled, but Will shook his head, indicating that the man should stay put. He told Paul, "You can't negotiate with the kidnapper on your own."

"What the fuck do I need you for? You can't even trace the fucking call."

"Paul—" Abigail tried, but he cut her off.

"Get out of my fucking house. Now." When Will did not move, Paul stepped forward, crowding the space. "Don't think I won't beat your ass again."

"Why do you want me to leave?" Will asked. "So you can call your private security firm and they can tell you what to do?" You didn't have to be able to read to see the answer in Paul's eyes. "The more people you get involved in this, the more people who try to control it, the more likely it's going to be that something bad happens to Emma."

"You think I'm going to trust my daughter's life to you?"

"I think you need to stop for just a minute and realize that I am the only person you've got who knows how to keep her safe right now."

"Then I'm fucked, ain't I?" Paul's lips drew into a sneer. "You stupid piece of shit. Get the fuck out of my house."

"Please," Abigail murmured.

Paul persisted, "Get out of my God damn house."

"It's my house, too," Abigail countered, her voice stronger. "I want them to stay."

Paul told her, "You don't know—"

"I know that they're the police, Paul. They know what they're doing. They deal with this kind of thing all the ..." Her voice started to tremble again. She clutched her hands in front of her, nervously gripping the phone that had just brought her daughter's voice back to her life. "He said he'll call back tomorrow. We need their help. We need them to tell us what to do when he calls."

Paul shook his head. "Stay out of this, Abby."

"She's my daughter, too!"

"Just let me take care of this," he pleaded, though it was obvious his wife's mind was already made up. "I can handle this."

"The same way you handle everything else?"

The room went silent. Even the fan on Hamish's computer stopped spinning.

Abigail did not seem concerned that she had an audience. "Where were you, Paul? How did you handle it when Emma started hanging around Kayla?"

"That's not—"

"You said she was just acting out, that she was just being a teenager. To leave her alone. Look where leaving her alone got her. She sure as hell is alone now."

Paul was wholly unconvincing when he mumbled, "She was just being a kid."

"She was?" Abigail repeated. "You're still spouting that same parental wisdom? 'Just let her figure things out on her own,' you said. 'Just let her sow some wild oats.' Just like you did at that age. Only, look at you now—you're just a pathetic, needy bastard who can't even keep his daughter safe."

"I know you're upset," Paul said, sounding like the reasonable one. "Let's just talk about this later."

"That's exactly what you told me," she insisted. "Time and time again, you said we'd just talk about it later. Emma skipped school? We'll talk about it later. Emma's failing English? Talk about it later. Later, later, later. It's later!" She threw the phone across the room, smashing it into pieces against the wall. "It's later, Paul. Do you want to talk about it now? Do you want to tell me how I'm overreacting, how *I'm* the crazy one, *I'm* the overprotective one, how I just need to calm down and let kids be kids?" Her voice caught. "Are you calm, Paul? Are you calm while you're thinking about what that man, that animal, is doing to our daughter?"

All of the color drained from Paul's face. "Don't say that."

"You know what he's doing to her," she hissed. "You always said she was your beautiful girl. Do you think you're the only man who thinks that? Do you think you're the only man who can't control himself around hot young blondes?"

Paul glanced at Will nervously, telling him, "Get out."

"Don't," Abigail told Will. "I want you to hear this. I want you to know how my loving and devoted husband screws every twenty-year-old who crosses his path." She indicated her face, her body. "It's the car salesman in him. Every time one model gets out of date, he trades up to the newer one."

"Abigail, this isn't the time."

"When is the time?" she demanded. "When is it time for you to fucking grow up and admit that you were *wrong*?" Her fury heightened with each word. "I trusted you! I trusted you to keep us safe. I looked the other way because I knew that at the end of the day, you would always come back home to me."

"I did. I do." He was trying to soothe her, but Will could see it only made her angrier. "Abby —"

"Don't say my name!" she screamed, throwing her fists into the air. "Don't speak to me. Don't look at me. Don't say a God damn word to me until my daughter is home."

She ran toward the front door, slamming it behind her. Will heard her footsteps as she ran down the steps. When he looked out the window, he could see her on her knees in the grass, bending over at the waist as she keened.

"Get out," Paul said. His chest was heaving up and down as if the wind had been knocked out of him. "Please—just for now. Both of you. Just please get out."

CHAPTER NINE



Faith stood outside the morgue, her finger pressed into one ear to block out the noise as she talked to Ruth Donner on her cell phone. Tracking down Kayla Alexander's former nemesis had been somewhat easier than speaking in front of a group of terrified teenagers. In retrospect, Olivia McFaden's relieving her of the podium had been somewhat reminiscent of Travis and Old Yeller in the woodshed.

Still, Faith had managed to persuade Olivia McFaden to put her in touch with Ruth Donner's mother. The woman had given Faith an earful about Kayla Alexander, then volunteered her daughter's cell phone number. Ruth was a student at Colorado State. She was studying early childhood education. She wanted to be a schoolteacher.

"I couldn't believe it was Kayla," Ruth said. "It's been all over the news here."

"Anything you could think of would help," Faith said, raising her voice over the whirl of a bone saw. She went up the stairs to the next landing, but she could still hear the motor. "Have you seen her since you left school?"

"No. Truthfully, I haven't had much contact with anybody since I left."

Faith tried, "Can you think of anyone who might want to hurt her?"

"Well, I mean ..." Her voice trailed off. "Not to be cruel about it, but she wasn't very well liked."

Faith bit back the "no shit" that wanted to come, asking instead, "Did you know her friend Emma?"

"Not really. I saw her with Kayla, but she never said anything to me." She remembered, "Well, sometimes she would stare at me, but you know how it is. If your best friend hates somebody, then you have to hate them, too." She seemed to realize how childish that sounded. "God, it was all so desperate when I was in the middle of it, but now I look back and wonder why the heck any of it mattered, you know?"

"Yeah," Faith agreed, feeling in her gut that this was a dead end. She had checked flight manifests going in and out of Atlanta for the last week. Ruth Donner's name had not shown up on any airline manifests. "You have my number. Will you call me if you remember anything?"

"Of course," Ruth agreed. "Will you let me know if you find her?"

"Yes," Faith promised, though updating Ruth Donner wasn't high on her list of priorities. "Thank you."

Faith ended the call and tucked her phone into her pants pocket. She went back down the stairs, the scent of burned bone wafting up to meet her. Despite her earlier bravado with Will Trent, she hated being in the morgue. The dead bodies didn't bother her so much as the atmosphere, the industrial processing of death. The cold marble tile that wrapped floor to ceiling to deflect stains. The drains on the floor every three feet so that blood and matter could be washed away. The stainless steel gurneys with their big rubber wheels and plastic mattresses.

Summer was the medical examiner's peak period, a particularly brutal time of year. Often, you would find ten or twelve bodies stacked in the freezer. They lay there like pieces of meat waiting to be butchered for clues. The very thought brought an almost unbearable sadness.

Pete Hanson was holding up a pile of bloody, wet intestines when Faith walked in. He smiled brightly, giving her his usual greeting. "The prettiest detective in the building!"

She willed her stomach not to heave as he dropped the intestines onto a large scale. Despite being underground, the room was always disgustingly warm in the summer months, the compressor on the freezer pushing heat into the confined space faster than the air-conditioning could keep up with it.

"This one was full as a tick," Pete mumbled, writing down the number from the scale.

Faith had never met a coroner who wasn't eccentric in one way or another, but Pete Hanson was a special kind of freaky. She understood why he'd been divorced three times. The perplexing question was how he had found three women out there in the world who had agreed to marry him in the first place.

He motioned her over. "I take it there are no breaks if you're gracing me with your presence?"

"Nothing yet," she told him, glancing around the morgue. Snoopy, an elderly black man who had assisted Pete for as long as Faith had worked homicide, but whose real name she had still never learned, gave her a nod as he rolled Adam Humphrey's face back along his skull, pressing the skin into the crevices. His bony fingers worked meticulously, and Faith was reminded of the time her mother had made her a Halloween costume, her firm hands smoothing pieces of material onto the Butterick pattern.

Faith made herself look away, thinking that between this and the heat, there was no way she was going to leave this room without tasting something awful in the back of her throat. "What about you?"

"Same bad luck, I'm afraid." He took off his gloves and put on a fresh pair. "Snoopy's covering it up, but I found a pretty bad smack to the right side of Humphrey's head."

"Fatal?"

"No, more of a glancing blow. The scalp remained intact, but it would've made him see stars."

He walked over to a large soup pan with a ladle sticking out of it. She had arrived at the worst part of the autopsy. Stomach contents. The smell was vicious, the sort of scent that ate into the lining of your nose and back of your mouth, so that the next day you woke up thinking you had a sore throat.

"Now, this," Pete said, using a long set of tweezers to hold up what looked like a large crystal of salt. "This is obviously gristle, common to most fast-food hamburgers."

"Obviously," Faith echoed, trying not to be sick.

"Think of that the next time you go to McDonald's."

Faith was fairly certain she was never going to eat again.

"I would guess the young man had some type of fast food at least thirty minutes prior to death. The girl had French fries but seems to have passed on the burger."

She said, "We didn't find any fast-food bags in the trashcans or the house."

"Then perhaps they ate on the run. Worst possible thing for digestion, by the way. There's a reason why there is an obesity epidemic in this country."

Faith wondered if the man had looked in a mirror lately. His gut was so large and round that he looked pregnant under the billows of his surgical gown.

Pete asked, "How's Will doing?"

"Trent?" she asked. "I didn't realize you knew him."

He took off his gloves, motioning for Faith to follow him. "Excellent detective. It must be a nice change working with someone who is, shall we say, more cerebral than your usual bunch."

"Hm," she said, unwilling to pay Will a compliment, even though Pete was right. There were only three women in Atlanta Homicide Division. There had been four when Faith first got there, but Claire Dunkel, a thirty-year veteran, had taken retirement the first week Faith had been on the squad. Her parting advice was, "Wear a skirt every once in a while or you'll start to grow testicles."

Maybe that's why Faith was having such a hard time gelling with Will Trent. For all his faults, he actually seemed to respect her. He hadn't once drawn a ludicrous connection between Faith's hair color and her mental abilities, nor had he scratched himself repeatedly or spat on the floor—all things Leo Donnelly usually did before his second cup of coffee.

Pete untied his surgical gown, revealing a shirt that was of the loud Hawaiian variety. Faith was glad to see that he was wearing shorts. Beneath the gown, the sight of his hairless legs, bare but for the black socks he'd pulled up to his knees, had been alarming.

"Horrible situation with your mother," Pete said. Faith watched him punch the soap dispenser and lather up his hands. "It's one of those cases where 'just doing my job' seems like a lame excuse, isn't it?"

"Yes," she agreed.

"Though I've been in this building for many years, and I've seen a lot of things happening that shouldn't. I certainly wouldn't volunteer any information, but if someone asked me directly, I would feel compelled to tell them the truth." He smiled at her over his shoulder. "I suppose that

would make me what you guys call a 'rat.' ”

She shrugged.

“Will is a good man who had to do a dirty job. I can relate to that.” He pulled a handful of paper towels off the stack and dried his hands as he walked to his office.

“Sit,” Pete said, indicating a chair by his desk.

Faith sat on the stack of papers in the chair, knowing Pete didn't expect her to move them. “What do you have so far?”

“Nothing of consequence, I'm afraid.” He retrieved a paper bag from the small refrigerator in the corner. Faith concentrated on finding a clean page in her notebook as he took out a sandwich. “The girl was stabbed at least twenty-seven times. I would assume from angle and trajectory that the wounds match the kitchen knife you found at the crime scene. The killer was most likely on his knees, superior to the body, when he attacked her.”

Faith wrote furiously, knowing he would not pause to let her catch up.

“There was bruising around her thighs and some tearing in the vaginal canal. I found traces of cornstarch, which indicates a condom was used, but we can assume from the sperm that the condom tore, as often happens with rough sex. Also, I noted some faint bite marks around the breasts. I would say this was more consistent with consensual sex, though that's really just speculation on my part.”

He unwrapped his sandwich and took a bite, chewing with his mouth open as he continued. “You can certainly leave those kinds of marks by raping a woman, but then again, if you were feeling a little eager and the woman was willing, you could make an argument that the marks were left not by rape, but during a particularly ardent session of lovemaking. I wouldn't be surprised if, after a couple of bottles of tequila and some dancing, the current Mrs. Hanson happily exhibited the same sort of trauma.”

She tried not to shudder. “The bite marks, too?”

There was a loud snap as Pete clamped his dentures together, and Faith wrote nonsense words in her notebook, praying he would stop. “So, you're saying that the girl wasn't raped.”

“And as I told Agent Trent at the crime scene, there was semen in the crotch of the panties, indicating that after having sex, she put on her underwear and stood up. Now, unless the perpetrator raped her, made her dress and stand up, then chased her down the hall and killed her, then pulled down her panties again, then I would say that she was not raped. At least not during the attack.”

Faith noted this word for word in her notebook.

Pete took another bite of his sandwich. “Now, as for cause of death, I would say there are three likely candidates: blunt-force trauma, the pierced jugular and just plain old shock. The nature of the attack was intense. There would have been a cascade effect with the body. There comes a time when the brain and the heart and the organs just throw up their hands and say, ‘You know what? We can't take this anymore.’ ”

Faith dutifully recorded his words. “Which one is your money on?”

He chewed thoughtfully, then laughed. “Well, an armchair coroner might go for the jugular!”

Faith managed a chuckle, though she had no idea why she was encouraging him.

“The jugular was sliced. I would say that, in and of itself, the cut was fatal, but it would've taken time—say, three to four minutes. My official report will reflect the more likely culprit: massive shock.”

“Do you think she was conscious during the attack?”

“If the parents ask you that question, I would tell them unequivocally that she was instantly rendered unconscious and felt absolutely no pain.” He took a bag of potato chips out of the paper sack, leaning back in his chair as he opened them. “Now, the boy, not so much.”

“What's your best guess?”

“It jibes with Will's theory. I can't believe how well he reads a crime scene.” Pete popped a potato chip into his mouth, seemingly lost in thoughts of Will Trent's expertise.

“Pete?”

“Sorry,” he said, offering her a potato chip. Faith shook her head, and he went on. “I haven't culled all my notes, but I think I have a clear picture.” He sat up in the chair and drank from the Dunkin' Donuts cup on his desk. “Physically, he presents pretty straightforward. I already told you about the head wound. The stab to the chest alone was enough to kill him. I would imagine it was through pure adrenaline that he managed to put up the struggle he did. The knife punctured his right lung—easy math, we're looking for a left-handed killer—bypassing the

bronchial trunk. We can assume the victim removed the knife, which exacerbated the negative airflow. The lung is vacuum sealed, you see, and a puncture deflates it much as a balloon being pierced by a pin."

Faith had dealt with a victim who'd died of a collapsed lung before. "So, unless he managed to get help, he only had a few minutes."

"Well, here's the funny thing: he would've been panicked, his breathing would have been shallow. When a lung collapses, it's like a self-fulfilling prophecy. You gulp for air, and the more you breathe, the worse it gets. I'd say that the panic bought him some extra time."

"What's the cause of death?"

"Manual strangulation."

Faith wrote down the words, underlining them. "So, Abigail Campano actually did kill him."

"Exactly." Pete picked up his sandwich again. "She killed him right before he died."



The interior of the morgue had spotty cell reception at best. Faith used this as an excuse to leave Pete to finish his lunch by himself. She dialed Will Trent's number as she walked toward the parking garage for some air. Faith needed to tell him about Mary Clark and Ruth Donner. She also wanted to talk about Kayla Alexander some more. The picture she was getting of the girl was not a pretty one.

Will's phone rang several times before she was sent to voice mail.

"Hi, Will—" Call-waiting beeped and she checked the screen, reading the words "Cohen, G." Faith put the phone back to her ear, not recognizing the name. "I'm just leaving the morgue and —" Her phone beeped again and Faith finally realized who was calling. "Call me," she said, then switched the line over. "Hello?"

"It's Gabe." His voice sounded far away, though she guessed he was still at Tech.

"What can I do for you?"

He was silent, and she waited him out. Finally, he told her, "I lied to you."

Faith stopped walking. "About what?"

His voice was so low she had to strain to hear him. "I thought she was younger."

"Who?"

"I've got ..." His words trailed off. "I need to show you something Adam had. I should've shown you before, but I ..."

She started to jog, heading toward the Mini. "What do you have of Adam's?"

"I have to show you. I can't tell you on the phone."

Faith knew that was bullshit, but she also knew that Gabe Cohen was ready to talk. She would dance like a monkey if it got the truth out of him. "Where are you?"

"The dorm."

"I can be there in fifteen minutes," she said, unlocking the door.

"You're coming?" He sounded surprised.

"Yes," she said, switching the phone to her other ear as she put the key in the ignition. "Do you want me to stay on the phone with you while I drive over?"

"I'm okay," he said. "I just ... I've got to show you this."

She glanced over her shoulder and swerved the Mini out of the space so sharply that it squealed up on two wheels. "I'll be right there, okay? Just stay right where you are."

"Okay."

Faith had never driven so fast in her life. Part of her wondered if Gabe was just stringing her along, but there was always the slim chance that he had something important to tell her. She called Will Trent's cell phone again, leaving another message, telling him to meet her at the dorm. Her heart raced as she blew through red lights, nearly causing a bus to slam into another car, heading into oncoming traffic to whip around construction crews. On campus, she didn't bother to look for legal spaces, again parking the Mini in the handicapped section. She flipped down the visor and jumped out of the car. By the time she reached Towers Hall, she was panting from exertion.

Faith bent over at the waist, trying to catch her breath. She opened her mouth, taking in big gulps of air, cursing herself for not being in better shape. She let a minute pass, then hit the handicapped plate and headed up the stairs, taking them two at a time. There was the distant thump of music, but the building felt empty. It was the middle of the day; most kids were in class. She trotted past Adam's room, expecting Gabe to be in his own dorm, but the door to 310

was cracked open.

Faith pushed the door the rest of the way open, noting that the police tape sealing off the room had been cut. Adam's things had been boxed up. The mattress was bare, the television and game set gone. Black fingerprint powder was smeared all around the room where they had dusted for prints.

Gabe sat on the bare floor, his back to one of the beds, his book bag beside him. His elbows were on his knees, his head pressed against the cast on his arm. His shoulders shook. Still, Faith could not forget the angry man who had threatened to call security on her yesterday. Was that the real Gabriel Cohen, or was this crying child closer to his real self? Either way, he had something to tell her. If Faith had to play along with his game to get the information, then that was how it was going to be.

She rapped her knuckles lightly on the open door. "Gabe?"

He looked up at her with swollen, red eyes. Fresh tears rolled down his cheeks. "Adam told me she was young," he sobbed. "I thought, like, fourteen or something. Not seventeen. The news said that she was seventeen."

Faith used his book bag to prop open the door before sitting beside him on the floor. "Tell me from the beginning," she said, trying to keep her voice calm. Here was proof that Adam had talked to Gabe about Emma.

"I'm sorry," he cried. His lip trembled, and he put his head down, hiding his face from her. "I should have told you."

She should have felt sorry for the kid, but all Faith could think was that Emma Campano was somewhere crying, too—but there was no one there to comfort her.

"I'm sorry," he repeated. "I'm so sorry."

Faith asked him, "What did you want to tell me?"

His body shook as he struggled with his emotions. "He met her online. He was on this video Web site."

Faith felt her heart stop mid-beat. "What sort of Web site?"

"LD." Faith had known the answer before he opened his mouth. Learning disabilities. Will Trent's instincts had been right yet again.

Gabe told her, "Adam went online with her all the time, like, for a year."

"You said it was a video site?" she asked, wondering what else the kid had been hiding.

"Yeah," Gabe answered. "A lot of them weren't really good at writing."

"What learning disorder did Adam have?"

"Behavioral stuff. He was homeschooled. He didn't fit in." Gabe glanced up at her. "You don't think that's why he was killed, do you?"

Faith wasn't sure about anything at this point, but she assured him, "No. Of course not."

"She seemed younger than she was, you know?"

Faith made sure she understood. "That's why you didn't tell me that you knew Adam was seeing Emma? You thought she was underage and you didn't want to get him into trouble?"

He nodded. "I think he had a car, too."

Faith felt her jaw clench. "What kind? What model?"

He took his time answering—for effect or from genuine emotion, she could not tell. "It was an old beater. Some graduate student was transferring to Ireland and he posted it on the board."

"Do you remember the student's name?"

"Farokh? Something like that."

"Do you know what the car looked like?"

"I only saw it once. It was this shitty color blue. It didn't even have air-conditioning."

Adam would have had thirty days to register the car with the state, which might explain why they hadn't pulled up anything on the state's system. If they could get a description, then they could put it on the wire and have every cop in the city looking for it. "Can you remember anything else about it? Did it have a bumper sticker or a cracked windshield or—"

He turned petulant. "I told you I only saw it once."

Faith could practically feel the irritation in her voice, like an itch at the back of her throat. She took a deep breath before asking, "Why didn't you tell me about the car before?"

He shrugged again. "I told my girlfriend, Julie, and she said ... she said that if Emma's dead, it's my fault for not telling you. She said she never wants to see me again."

Faith guessed that *that* was what was really bothering him. There was nothing more self-involved than a teenager. She asked, "Did you ever meet Emma in person?"

He shook his head.

"How about her friend Kayla Alexander—blond girl, very pretty?"

"I'd never even heard of her until I turned on the news." Gabe asked, "Do you think I did a bad thing?"

"Of course not," Faith assured him, hoping she managed to keep the sarcasm out of her voice. "Do you know the Web site Adam and Emma used?"

He shook his head. "He had it on his laptop, but then his laptop got stolen."

"How did it get stolen?"

Gabe sat up, wiping his eyes with his fist. "He left it out at the library when he went to pee, and when he came back, it was gone."

Faith was hardly surprised. Adam might as well have put a "take me" sign on it. "Did you ever see what name he used on the site? Did he use his e-mail address?"

"I don't think so." He used the bottom of his shirt to wipe his nose. "If you put in your e-mail address, then you get all kinds of trolls for spam and shit."

She had assumed as much. Compounding the problem, there were probably nine billion Web sites for people with learning disabilities, and those were just the American ones. She reminded him, "When you called me, you said you had something to show me. Something that belonged to Adam."

Guilt flashed in his eyes, and she realized that the other stuff—the Web site, the car, the fear about Emma's age—was just preamble to the information that had really compelled him to call her.

Faith struggled to keep the urgency out of her tone. "Whatever it is that you have, I need to see it."

He took his sweet time relenting, making a show of leaning up on his heels so he could dig his hand into the front pocket of his jeans. Slowly, he pulled out several pieces of folded white paper. He explained, "These were slipped under Adam's door last week."

As he unfolded the three pages, all she could think was that between the creases, smudges and dog-eared corners, the paper had been handled many, many times.

"Here," Gabe said. "That's all of them."

Faith stared in shock at the three notes he'd spread out on the floor between them. Each page had a single line of bold, block text running horizontally across it. Each line heightened her sense of foreboding.

SHE BE LONGS TOME!!!

RAPIST!!!

LEV HER ALONG!!!

At first, Faith didn't trust herself to speak. Someone had tried to warn Adam Humphrey away from Emma Campano. Someone had been watching them together, knew their habits. The notes were more proof that this was not a spur-of-the-moment abduction. The killer had known some if not all of the participants.

Gabe had his own concerns. "Are you mad at me?"

Faith could not answer him. Instead, she gave him back her own question. "Did anyone else touch these besides you and Adam?"

He shook his head.

"What order did they come in—do you remember?"

He switched around the last two sheets before she could stop him. "Like that."

"Don't touch them again, okay?" He nodded. "When did the first one come?"

"Monday last week."

"What did Adam say when he got it?"

Gabe was no longer being emotional about his answers. He seemed almost relieved to be telling her. "First, we were like, you know, it was funny, because everything is spelled wrong."

"And when the second one came?"

"It came the next day. We were kind of freaked out. I thought Tommy was doing it."

The asshole dormmate. "Was he?"

"No. Because I was with Tommy the day Adam got the third note. That was when his computer was stolen, and I was like, 'What the fuck? Is somebody stalking you or what?'" Gabe glanced at her, probably looking for confirmation on his theory. Faith gave him none, and he continued, "Adam was pretty freaked out. He said he was going to get a gun."

Faith's instincts told her that Gabe was not blowing smoke. She made her tone deadly serious. "Did he?"

Gabe looked back at the notes.

"Gabe?"

"He was thinking about it."

"Where would he get a gun?" she asked, though the answer was obvious. Tech was an urban campus. You could walk ten blocks in any direction and find meth, coke, prostitutes and firearms in any combination on any street corner.

"Gabe?" she prompted. "Where would Adam get a gun?"

Again, he remained silent.

"Stop screwing around," she warned him. "This is not a game."

"It was just talk," he insisted, but he still wouldn't look her in the eye.

Faith no longer tried to hide her impatience. She indicated the notes. "Did you report these to campus security?"

His chin started to quiver. Tears brimmed in his eyes. "We should've, right? That's what you're saying. It's my fault, because Adam wanted to, and I told him not to, that he'd get in trouble because of Emma." He put his head in his hands, shoulders shaking again. She saw how thin he was, how his ribs pressed into the thin T-shirt he wore. Watching him, listening to him cry, Faith realized that she had read Gabe Cohen completely wrong. This was no act on his part. He was genuinely upset, and she had been too focused on the case to notice.

His voice cracked. "It's all my fault. That's what Julie said. It's all my fault, and I know you think that, too."

Faith sat there, not knowing what to do. The truth was, she was mad at him, but also at herself. If Faith had been better at her job, she would have spotted this yesterday. The time lost was down to her. Gabe had probably had these notes in his pocket when he challenged her less than twenty-four hours ago. Blaming him for her own failure would not get them any closer to finding Emma Campano, and right now, that was all that mattered.

She sat back on her heels, trying to figure out what to do. Faith could not tell how fragile the young man was right now. Was he just another teenager caught up in his emotions or was he playing up the situation for her attention?

"Gabe," she began, "I need you to be honest with me."

"I *am* being honest."

Faith took a moment, trying to find the best way to phrase her next question. "Is there something else you're not telling me?"

He looked up at her. There was suddenly such sadness in his eyes that she had to force herself not to look away. "I can't do anything right."

His life had been turned upside down over the last couple of days, but she knew he was talking about more than that. She told him, "I'm sure that's not true."

"Adam was my only friend, and he's dead—probably because of me."

"I promise you that's not true."

He looked away, staring at the bare mattress across from him. "I don't fit in here. Everybody's smarter than me. Everybody's already picking fraternities and hanging out. Even Tommy."

Faith was not stupid enough to offer Jeremy as his new best friend. She told Gabe, "It's hard to adjust to a new school. You'll figure it out eventually."

"I really don't think I will," he said, sounding so sure of himself that Faith could almost hear an alarm going off in her head. She had been so concerned about the information Gabe had withheld that she had lost sight of the fact that he was just a teenager who had been thrown into a very bad situation.

"Gabe," Faith began, "what's going on with you?"

"I just need to get some rest."

She knew then that he wasn't talking about sleep. He had not called her to help Adam, he had called to help himself—and her response had been to push him around like a suspect she was interrogating. She made her voice softer. "What are you thinking about doing?"

"I don't know," he answered, but he still would not make eye contact with her. "Sometimes, I just think that the world would be a better place if I was just ... gone. You know?"

"Have you tried anything before?" She glanced at his wrists. There were scratch marks that she hadn't noticed before, thin red streaks where the skin had been broken but not punctured. "Maybe tried to hurt yourself?"

"I just want to get away from here. I want to go ..."

"Home?" she suggested.

He shook his head. "There's nothing there for me. My mom died of cancer six years ago. My dad and me ..." He shook his head.

Faith told him, "I want to help you, Gabe, but you need to be honest with me."

He picked at a tear in his jeans. She saw that his fingernails were chewed to the quick. The cuticles were ragged and torn.

"Did Adam buy a gun?"

He kept picking at his jeans. He shrugged his shoulders, and she still did not know whether to believe him.

She suggested, "Why don't I call your father?"

His eyes widened. "No. Don't do that. Please."

"I can't just leave you alone, Gabe."

His eyes filled with tears again. His lips trembled. There was such desperation in his manner that she felt like he had reached into her chest and grabbed her heart with his fist. She could have kicked herself for letting it get to this point.

She repeated, "I'm not going to leave you alone."

"I'll be okay."

Faith felt caught in an untenable position. Gabe was obviously a troubled young man, but he could not be her problem right now. She needed to get the threatening notes to the lab to see if there were any usable fingerprints on them. There was a student in Ireland who had sold his car to Adam—a car that had probably been used to transport Emma Campano from the Copy Right. There were two sets of parents who would identify their dead children tonight. There was a mother and a father on the other side of Atlanta waiting to find out whether or not their daughter was still alive.

Faith took out her cell phone and scrolled through her recent calls.

Gabe asked, "Are you going to arrest me?"

"No." Faith pressed the send button on the phone. "I'm going to get you some help, and then I have to go do my job." She didn't add that she was going to search every item in his room, including the computer he'd let Adam borrow, before she left campus.

Gabe sat back against the bed, an air of resignation about him. He stared at the mattress opposite. Faith resisted the impulse to reach out and tuck a stray strand of hair behind his ear. Pimples dotted his chin. She could see stubble on his cheek where he had missed a spot shaving. He was still just a child—a child who was very lost and needed help.

Victor Martinez's secretary answered on the second ring. "Student Services."

"This is Detective Mitchell," she told the woman. "I need to speak to the dean immediately."

CHAPTER TEN



Will stood behind Gail and Simon Humphrey as they waited in front of the viewing window. The setup was the sort that was always shown on television and in movies: a simple curtain hung on the other side of the glass. Will would press a button, and the drape would be slowly drawn back, revealing the cleaned-up victim. The sheet would be tucked up to the chin in order to cover the baseball stitches holding together the Y-incision. Cue the mother slumping against her husband.

But the camera couldn't capture everything. The pungent smell of the morgue. The distant whine of the giant freezers where they stored the bodies. The way the floor seemed to suck at the soles of your shoes as you walked toward that window. The heaviness of your arm as you reached out to push that button.

The curtain pulled back. Both parents stood, silent, probably numb. Simon was the first to move. He reached out and pressed his hand against the glass. Will wondered if he was remembering what it felt like to hold his son's hand. Was that the sort of thing fathers did? At the park, out in public, fathers and sons were always playing ball or tossing Frisbees, the only contact between them a rustle of the hair or a punch on the arm. This seemed to be how dads taught their boys to be men, but there had to be a point, maybe early on, when they were able to hold their hands. One tiny one engulfed by one big one. Adam would have needed help crossing the street. In a crowd, you wouldn't want him to wander off.

Yes, Will decided. Simon Humphrey had held his son's hands.

Gail turned to Will. She wasn't crying, but he sensed a familiar reserve, a kindred spirit. She would be at the hotel later tonight, maybe in the shower or sitting on the bed while her husband went for a walk, and then she would allow this moment to crash over her. She would be back in front of that window, looking at her dead son. She would collapse. She would feel her spirit leaving her body and know it might never return.

For now, she said, "Thank you, Agent Trent," and shook his hand.

He led them down the hallway, asking them about the hotel where they would stay, giving them advice on where to have supper. He was aware of how foolish the small talk sounded, but Will also knew that the distraction would help them make it through the building, to give them the strength they needed to leave their child in this cold, dark place.

They had rented a car at the airport, and Will went with them as far as the garage. Through the glass panel in the door, he watched Gail Humphrey stumble. Her husband caught her arm and she shrugged him off. He tried again and she slapped at him, yelling, until he wrapped his arms around her to make her stop.

Will turned away, feeling like an intruder. He took the stairs up the six flights to his office. At half past eight, everyone but the skeleton crew had already gone home for the day. The lights were out, but he would have known his way even without the faint glow of the emergency exit signs. Will had a corner office, which would have been impressive if it hadn't been this particular corner. Between the Home Depot across the street and the old Ford Factory next door that had been turned into apartment buildings, there wasn't much to look at. Sometimes, he convinced himself that the abandoned railroad tracks with their weeds and discarded hypodermic needles offered something of a parklike view, but daydreaming only worked during the day.

Will turned on his desk lamp and sat down. He hated nighttime on days like this, where there was nothing he could do but catch up on paperwork while he waited for other people to bring him information. There was an expert in Tennessee who specialized in detecting fingerprints on paper. Paper was tricky and you only got a couple of tries developing prints before the process

ruined the evidence. The man was driving down first thing in the morning to look at the notes. The recording of the ransom call was being hand-delivered to the University of Georgia's audiology lab, but the professor had warned them it would take many hours to isolate the sounds. Charlie was working late at the lab trying to process all the evidence they had collected. Tips from the hotline were being followed up on, cops sifting through the pranksters and nutjobs, trying to find a viable lead.

Will had paperwork to do on all of this, but instead of turning to his computer, he sat back in his chair and stared at his blurred reflection in the dark window. They were coming up on thirty-six hours since Abigail Campano had come home to find her life turned upside down. Two people were still dead. One girl was still missing. And, still, not a single suspect was in sight.

He didn't understand the ransom demand. Will was no rookie. He had worked kidnapping cases before. He had worked abduction cases. There were basic tenets to both. Kidnappers wanted money. Abductors wanted sex. He could not reconcile the brutal way in which Kayla Alexander had been killed with the phone call this morning demanding one million dollars. It just did not add up.

Then there was the fight between Abigail and Paul Campano. Angie had been right: Paul was cheating on his wife. Apparently, he liked young blondes, but did that include his own daughter, and possibly Kayla Alexander? Amanda had told Will to get the man's DNA. Maybe she was right, too. Add in Faith, who had managed to get Gabriel Cohen to talk, and that just left Will as the odd man out—literally—because he was the only one who brought absolutely nothing to this case.

Will turned back to his desk, knowing that overthinking the problem would not bring him any closer to a solution. His cell phone was laid out on his desk in two pieces. During his fight with Paul, the clamshell had snapped off and the screen had cracked. Will held the lid in place and taped it back onto the phone with several pieces of Scotch tape. The phone still worked. When he'd left the Campano house, he had been able to hold it together in order to check his voice mail. Faith Mitchell's messages had gotten progressively more important, her voice going up in excitement as she told him about the threatening notes Gabe Cohen had kept from them.

Will still wasn't sure she had made the right decision about keeping the kid out of the system, but he had to trust her instincts.

At least they had more information on the car now. A computer search of graduate students working at the Georgia Tech Research Institute in Ireland had revealed the name Farokh Pansing. After a few phone calls, they had located a cell phone number and woken the man up from what sounded like a very deep sleep. The physics major had given Will a loving description of the blue 1981 Chevy Impala he had left behind. No air-conditioning. No seat belts. The driver's door stuck when it rained. The engine leaked like a sieve. The undercarriage was so rusted out that, from the backseat, you could watch the road pass under your shoes. Because of its age, the state of Georgia considered the car a classic and it was therefore exempt from any emissions requirements. Farokh had sold the ancient car to Adam Humphrey for four hundred dollars. The state had no record of Adam ever applying for insurance or a tag.

They had issued a new alert on the Impala, but the warning only pertained to the state of Georgia. Emma Campano could easily be in Alabama or Tennessee or the Carolinas. Given the almost two days that had passed since her abduction, she could well be in Mexico or Canada.

Will's computer gave a chug like a train, indicating that the system was running. Will had been out of the office for two days. He needed to check his e-mail and file his daily reports. He put on the headphones and adjusted the microphone, preparing to dictate the report. After opening up a blank Word document, he pressed the start key, but found himself at a loss for words. He stopped the recorder and sat back in his chair. When he reached up to rub his eyes, he gasped from the pain.

Paul hadn't broken his nose, but he'd managed to whack it hard enough to move the cartilage. With the ransom recording to analyze and the threatening notes to rush to the lab, Will hadn't had time to look at himself in the mirror until about ten minutes before the Humphreys had shown up to identify their son. Will's nose had been broken several times in the past. It was already crooked enough. With the bruises, he looked like a bar brawler, which did not exactly engender trust in the Humphreys. The father had accepted his mumbled excuse about a rough football game the weekend before, but the mother had looked at him as if he had a giant "liar" sticker pinned to his head.

Will tapped the space bar on his computer and used the mouse to click on the e-mail icon. He

slipped the headphones on and listened to his e-mails. The first three were spam, the second was from Pete Hanson, telling him the basic information Faith had already relayed about the autopsies of Adam Humphrey and Kayla Alexander.

The third e-mail was from Amanda Wagner. She had called a press conference for six-thirty the next morning. Will guessed she had been following the news as closely as he had. Absent anything else to cover, the reporters had started targeting the parents, picking apart their lives, slowly pointing the finger back at the victims. The press would be in for a disappointment if they thought they'd be able to talk to the Campanos tomorrow. Amanda was a master at controlling the press. She would parade out Paul and Abigail for the cameras, but she would do all the talking. Will couldn't think how she would manage to put a muzzle on Paul, but he'd seen her pull too many rabbits out of her hat in the past to worry about logistics.

Amanda's e-mail ended curtly. "You are to be in my office directly after the press conference," the computer read. Will gathered she had heard about Paul Campano bashing his face in.

Will pressed play again, listening to Amanda's terse message as if he could divine some nuance. The program allowed you to assign different voices to people. Pete sounded like Mickey Mouse. Amanda was Darth Vader. Sitting alone in his dark office, the sound gave Will an involuntary shudder.

Then it gave him an idea.

He opened up Pete's e-mail again and selected a different voice to read the text. He went through each option, listening to the nuances. Will realized he was doing this the wrong way. He opened a new e-mail and clicked in the text area, then took out his digital recorder and selected the file that had the kidnapper's voice on it.

He held the player up to the microphone and let it dictate the text:

"Is this the mother?"

Then Abigail, stuttering, "Y-yes ... *This is Emma's mother. Is Emma all right? Can I talk to Emma?*"

"I have your daughter."

"What do you want? Tell me how to get Emma back."

"I want one million dollars."

"Okay ... When? Where? Just tell me what you want."

"I will call you tomorrow at ten-thirty a.m. with details."

"No—wait! How do I—"

Will cut off the recording, excitement taking hold. Playing back each line, he isolated the kidnapper's sentences and deleted Abigail's. Next, he went through each voice option, searching for one that sounded similar to the kidnapper's.

The last one in line was the one he used for Amanda Wagner. His finger hovered over the mouse. He clicked the button. The headphones sent out a foreboding, deep voice.

"Is this the mother?"

Will looked up, sensing he was not alone. Faith Mitchell stood in the doorway.

He jumped up, yanking off the headphones as if he had something to be guilty about. "I thought you were going home."

She walked into his office and sat down. The desk lamp cast her in a harsh light. She looked older than her thirty-three years. "What are you doing?"

"The audiotape of the ransom demand," he began, then figured he could just as easily show her. He picked up his digital recorder and pressed play. "This is the audio." Will kept his thumb on the button, listening along with Faith to the kidnapper's phone call this morning, Abigail Campano's terrified responses. He stopped it at the same place as before. "Now this is something I just did in my computer. It's got one of those speaking options for lazy people where it reads stuff to you." He moved the mouse over to the start button, saying, "I didn't even remember I had it on here. I guess it's some ADA thing." He pulled out the headphone jack so the speakers would play. "Ready?"

She nodded.

He pressed play, and the kidnapper's words came out of the computer speakers in the Darth Vader voice.

"Is this the mother?"

"Jesus Christ," she murmured. "It's almost exactly the same."

"I think he must have written the sentences and prerecorded them coming out of the computer speakers."

"That's why the sentence construction's so simple. There aren't any contractions."

Will looked at the computer screen as he repeated them back from memory. "I have your daughter. I want one million dollars. I will call you this time tomorrow with details."

He picked up the phone and called Hamish Patel, who was driving the tape up to the University of Georgia in Athens.

Hamish sounded as excited as Will felt. He told Will, "If you manage to keep your job, you might actually break this case."

Will made excuses. He didn't want to think about what Amanda had in store for him tomorrow morning, but he imagined she was concocting a special kind of hell for the agent who had gotten into a fight with the father of a kidnapping victim. The FBI was planning another sex sting at the Atlanta airport. Will might be stuck in a bathroom stall on the B Concourse, waiting for a married father of three to tap his foot and ask for a blow job.

He rang off with Hamish and told Faith, "They're going to check into it. These guys deal with computers and audio enhancement all of the time. I'm sure they would've figured it out in ten seconds."

"Saves them ten seconds, then," she pointed out. "I can't help but think where we'd be if I'd been able to get Gabe to talk yesterday."

"He wasn't ready," Will told her, though there was no way of knowing whether or not that was true. "Maybe if you'd pushed him yesterday, he would have gone over the edge without telling us anything."

"What do you think about the notes?"

"Someone—probably the kidnapper—was trying to warn or threaten Adam."

"She belongs to me," Faith quoted. "That's a pretty definitive statement."

"It supports the kidnapper knowing Emma, at least."

"What about the way they were written?"

Will nodded, as if he knew what she was talking about. "That's a good point. What do you think about it?"

She tapped her finger to her mouth as she considered it. "Either the person who wrote them is dyslexic or they're trying to make it seem like they are."

Will felt the glimmer of pride from a few moments ago disappear like a flash of lightning. The notes were misspelled. He had missed an important clue because of his own stupidity. What else had he missed? What other evidence had gone by the wayside because Will couldn't wrap his head around them?

Faith asked, "Will?"

He shook his head, not trusting himself to speak. He would have to call Amanda, tell her what he had missed. She had a way of finding out these things on her own. He didn't know how to handle it other than to confess and wait for the ax to fall.

"Go ahead and say it," Faith told him. "It's not like I haven't been wondering."

He clasped his hands under the desk. "Wondering what?"

"Whether or not Emma's involved in this."

Will looked down at his hands. He had to swallow past the lump in his throat. "It's possible," he admitted. He tried to refocus his attention, using a roundabout question to find out how Faith had arrived at Emma Campano being involved. "Kayla certainly knew how to inspire hate in people, but it's a huge leap, don't you think?"

"Kayla was such an awful person, and from the sound of it, Emma was one step up from her lapdog. She might have snapped."

"You think a seventeen-year-old girl is capable of doing all this—killing people, staging her own kidnapping?"

"That's the question, isn't it?" Faith leaned her elbows on his desk. "I hate to say this, but considering what Mary Clark said about her, if Emma was dead and Kayla was missing, I would have no problem believing Kayla was in on it."

"Did Clark's alibi for yesterday check out?"

"She was in class all day," Faith continued, "Ruth Donner, the girl who was archenemies with Kayla last year, was out of the state. There aren't any other girls in particular at the school who were Kayla's sworn enemies. I mean, not any one who stands out from the crowd."

"What about Gabe Cohen?"

She pressed her lips together, not answering for a moment. "There's no evidence that links him to either of the girls." She added, "I think he's told us everything he knows."

"What about the gun?"

"He mentioned it for a reason, but I checked his book bag and his dorm top to bottom. If Adam bought a gun, he didn't give it to Gabe. Maybe he kept it in his car."

"Which means our abductor probably has it," Will pointed out. "Where was Gabe yesterday when this was all going down?"

"In a class, but it was in one of those huge lecture halls. He didn't have to sign in, the teacher doesn't take attendance. It's a shaky alibi." She paused. "Listen, if you think I made a bad call, we can go pick him up right now. Maybe sitting in a jail cell will jog his memory."

Will did not relish the prospect of sweating an eighteen-year-old kid based on a hunch, especially considering Gabe Cohen's suicidal ideation. He listed the points in Gabe's favor. "He doesn't have a car on campus. He doesn't have a place to hide Emma. We have no connection between him and either girl. No motive, no opportunity, no means."

"I think he's troubled," she said. "But I don't think he's capable of this sort of thing." Faith laughed. "Of course, if I was good at spotting the ones who had murder in their hearts, I'd be running the world."

It was a sentiment Will had often thought himself. "What's the school doing with him?"

"Victor says it's a delicate situation," she said. "They're really caught in the middle."

"How so?"

"Do you remember the dozen or so suicides at MIT back in the nineties?"

Will nodded. The stories of parents suing the university had made national news.

"The schools have a legal obligation—in *loco parentis*," she cited, the phrase that basically said the school acted as parents to the students while they were enrolled. "Victor's going to recommend to the father that Gabe be committed for psychiatric evaluation."

Will couldn't help but notice that she kept using the dean's name. "Have him committed?" he asked. "That seems kind of drastic."

"They have to be careful. Even if Gabe's just blowing smoke, they have to take him seriously. I doubt Tech will allow him back in without a doctor's assurance that he's okay." She shrugged. "Even then, they'll probably make him check in with counselors every day."

Will liked the idea of Gabe Cohen being on psychiatric lock-down instead of left out in the world to his own devices. At least this way, he knew how to get his hands on the kid if he wanted to.

He said, "Let's go back to the murders."

"All right."

"Kayla was killed by someone who hated her. I can't believe the killer would take that much time with her otherwise. All those stab wounds, pulling down the underwear, pushing up the shirt. Classic debasement and overkill. You don't punch somebody's face off unless you know who they are and despise them for it." He suggested, "Maybe you're right. Maybe Emma snapped."

"She would have to kill her best friend—beat her, stab her, possibly rape her with something that, according to Pete, had a condom on it—*then* hit Adam over the head and stab him, *then* create this hoax for her parents to fall for." She added, "And that still doesn't explain the sperm found in Kayla Alexander's vagina."

"Or maybe Emma just stood by while it was all happening." He reminded her, "Charlie says there were four people in that house."

"True," Faith conceded. "But I have to put this in there some-where: for a girl like Emma Campano, living where she lives, having the father and grandfather that she has, a million dollars isn't a lot of money."

Will hadn't considered that, but she was right. Ten million would be more on par with Paul's lifestyle. Then again, one million would be a lot easier to hide.

He said, "Bernard, Emma's teacher, said that she was highly organized. This took a lot of planning."

Faith shook her head. "I don't understand kids anymore. I really don't." She stared out the window at the apartments next door. "I hope I did the right thing with Gabe."

Will gave her one of Amanda's more solid pieces of advice. "You can only make decisions with the information you have at the time."

She was still looking out the window. "I've never been up to this floor before."

"We try to keep out the hoi polloi."

She smiled weakly. "How did it go with the Humphreys?"

"As bad as you would expect."

Faith chewed her lip, still staring out the window. "When I first saw Adam yesterday, all I could do was think about my son. Maybe that's why I missed so many things. We lost hours when we could have been looking for her."

It was the most personal thing she had ever shared. Will had said so many wrong things to her lately that he knew better than to try to comfort her.

"I feel like we should be doing something," she said, her frustration obvious.

He told her the same things he had been telling himself. "It's a waiting game now. We're waiting on Charlie to process the evidence. We're waiting on the fingerprint guy. We're waiting on—"

"Everything," she said. "I'm half tempted to follow up nutjobs from the tip line."

"That wouldn't be the most productive use of your time."

Faith sighed in response. She looked bone-tired. Will imagined that getting some sleep was probably the only productive thing they could do tonight. Being fresh tomorrow morning when some of the evidence came in was key.

Will told her as much. "We'll have more to go on tomorrow morning." He checked the time. It was almost nine o'clock. "They're going to turn off the air-conditioning to the top floors in ten minutes. You should go home and try to get some sleep."

"Empty house," she told him. "Jeremy is enjoying his independence a little too much. I thought at least he'd miss me a little."

"I guess children can be stubborn sometimes."

"I bet you were a real handful for your mother."

Will shrugged. He supposed that was true enough. You didn't stick a baby in a trashcan because he was easy. "Maybe I could ..." Will hesitated, but decided he might as well. "Would you like to go get a drink or something?"

She startled. "Oh, my God."

He realized two seconds too late that he'd put his foot in his mouth again. "I have a girlfriend. I mean, a fiancée. We're engaged." The details rushed out. "Angie Polaski. She used to work vice. I've known her since I was eight."

She seemed even more startled. "Eight?"

Will realized he should close his mouth and think about what he was saying before he let it out. "It sounds more romantic than it actually is." He paused. "I just ... you said you didn't want to go to an empty house. I was just trying to ... I don't know." He laughed nervously. "I guess my feral monkey is acting up again."

She was nice about it. "We've both had a long day."

"I don't even drink." Will stood as Faith did. He put his hand in his pocket and felt something unfamiliar mixed in with the change. He pulled out the vial with the gray powder in it, surprised the plastic hadn't broken during his scuffle with Paul.

"Will?"

He realized that his initial impression of the vial was probably hers, that he was holding an ounce of cocaine. "It's dirt," he told her. "Or some kind of powder. I found it at the Campano house."

"You found it?" she asked, taking the vial from him. "Since when do you work collection?"

"Since, uh ..." Will held out his hand for the sample. "You really shouldn't be touching that."

"Why not?"

"It's not evidence."

"It's sealed." She showed him the unbroken strip of tape with Charlie's initials on it.

Will didn't have an answer for her.

Faith was instantly suspicious. "What's going on here?"

"I stole it from the Campano crime scene. Charlie turned his back and I swiped it before he could catalogue it into the system."

She narrowed her eyes. "Is that recorder on?"

He took the player off his desk, opened the back and shook out the batteries. "The powder was found in the foyer. It's ripe for a cross-contamination argument. We were all in and out of the area. It could have been brought in by one of us. Hell, for all I know, it was, but—"

"But?"

"But maybe not. It doesn't match any of the soil around the house. It wasn't on Adam's shoes or the girls' shoes. It could have been brought in by the killer."

"That sounds like information you got from the person who collected the evidence."

"Charlie has no idea that I'm doing this."

She obviously did not believe him, but Faith did not press the point. "Hypothetically, what would I do with it?"

"Maybe reach out to someone at Tech?"

She vehemently shook her head. "I'm not getting my son involved in—"

"No, of course not," he interrupted. "I thought maybe you could talk to Victor Martinez?"

"Victor?" she echoed. "I barely know the man."

"You knew him well enough to call him about Gabe Cohen."

"That's different," she insisted. "He's head of student services. Taking care of Gabe Cohen is his job."

Will tried, "He wouldn't think the request was odd coming from you. If I called him out of the blue, there would be all kinds of formalities, red tape. We need to keep this quiet, Faith. If that powder leads us to an area we can search, and we find the man who did this ..."

"Then the chain of evidence would be compromised and the arrest might get thrown out." She gave a heavy sigh. "I need to think about this, Will."

He had to make sure she understood the implications. "I'm asking you to break the law. You realize that?"

"It runs in the family, right?"

He could see her words were angrier than she'd intended, but he also knew that she had been struggling over the last day and a half to make the best of their marriage of convenience.

Will told her, "I don't want you to do something you can't live with, Faith. Just make sure you get the sample back to me if you decide against it."

She wrapped her hand around the vial and held it to her chest. "I'm going to go now."

"Are you—"

She kept the vial in her hand. "What are we doing tomorrow?"

"I've got a meeting first thing with Amanda. I'll meet you back here around eight o'clock. Gordon Chew, the fingerprint expert, is driving down from Chattanooga to see if he can find any latents on our notes." He glanced around the office, his parklike view. "If I'm not here by eight-fifteen, check the men's toilets at the airport."

CHAPTER ELEVEN



Faith sat at her kitchen table. Except for the nightlight on the stove, the room was bathed in darkness. She'd gotten out a bottle of wine, a glass, the corkscrew, but they all sat unused on the table in front of her. All those years, she had wanted nothing more than to have Jeremy old enough to move out of the house so she could have some semblance of a life. Now that he was gone, she felt like she had a gaping hole in her chest where her heart used to be.

Drinking wouldn't help. She always got maudlin with wine. Faith reached for the wineglass to put it away, but ended up knocking it over instead. She grabbed for it, but the rim bounced off the edge of the table, then shattered on the tile floor. Faith knelt down, picking up the sharp shards of the broken wineglass. She thought about turning on the lights the second before a sliver cut into her skin.

"Dammit," she muttered, putting her finger in her mouth. She walked over to the sink, let cold water pour over the wound. She turned on the light above the sink, watching the blood pool and wash away, pool and wash away.

Her vision blurred as tears welled into her eyes. She felt foolish at the melodrama, but no one was around to ask her why she was crying over what amounted to a nasty paper cut, so Faith let the tears come. Besides, she had plenty to cry about. Tomorrow morning would mark the third day since Emma had been taken.

What was Abigail Campano going to do when she woke up tomorrow? Would sleep bring some kind of amnesia, so that at first light, she would have to remember all over again that her baby was gone? What would she do then? Was she going to think about all the breakfasts she had made, all the soccer practices and school dances and homework she had helped with? Or would her thoughts move to the future rather than the past: graduation, weddings, grandchildren?

Faith took a tissue and wiped her eyes. She realized how faulty her thinking had been. No mother could sleep when her child was in danger. Faith had spent many sleepless nights of her own, and she'd known exactly where Jeremy was—or where he was supposed to be. She had worried about car accidents and underage drinking and, God forbid, some little girl he was seeing who might be just as stupid as Faith had been at that age. It was bad enough to have a son fifteen years her junior, but a grandchild who was a mere sixteen years younger than that would have been crushing.

Faith laughed out loud at the thought, tossing the tissue into the trashcan. She should call her mother and commiserate, or at the very least apologize for the millionth time, but the person Faith really wanted right now was her father.

Bill Mitchell had died of a stroke seven years ago. The whole ordeal had been mercifully quick. He had clutched his arm and fallen down on the kitchen floor one morning, then died peacefully at the hospital two nights later. Faith's brother had flown in from Germany. Jeremy had taken off the day from school. Bill Mitchell had always been a considerate man, and even in death he managed to be mindful of the needs of his family. They were all in the room with him when he passed. They'd all had time to say good-bye. Faith did not think a day went by when she didn't think of her father—his kindness, his stability, his love.

In many ways, Bill Mitchell had handled his teenage daughter's pregnancy better than his wife. He had adored Jeremy, had relished the role of grandfather. It wasn't until much later that Faith found out the real reason Bill had stopped attending his weekly Bible study meetings and quit the bowling team. At the time, he'd said he wanted to be with his family more, to do some projects around the house. Now Faith knew that they had asked him to leave because of her. Faith's sin had rubbed off on him. Her father, a man so devout that he had once considered the ministry as

a vocation, had never stepped foot in a church again, not even for Jeremy's baptism.

Faith wrapped a paper towel around her finger to catch the remaining trickles of blood. She turned on the lights and got the broom and dustpan from the pantry. She swept up the glass, then got out the stick vacuum to get the smaller pieces. She hadn't been home in two days, so the kitchen was messier than she usually kept it. Faith ran the vacuum over the tiles, angling the bristles into corners.

She rinsed off the dishes in the sink and put them in the dishwasher. She scoured the sink and put the dish towels in the washing machine along with a load of clothes that she found in her bathroom hamper. She was cleaning out the dryer lint trap when she remembered the uncomfortable moment with Will Trent, when just for a moment, she had thought he was asking her out on a date.

Angie Polaski. For the first time since she'd met him, Faith felt sorry for the man. Talk about sloppy seconds. Was there such a thing as sloppy thousandths? Polaski's conquests were legend in the squad room. There were even jokes to rookies about how they had to pass through those legs to become one of the finest cops in the city.

Will had to know about the rumors—or maybe he was just one of those people who couldn't translate the skills they showed on the job to their personal lives. Standing in his office doorway tonight, watching him work on his computer, Faith had been struck by his sense of isolation. Will had literally jumped out of his chair when he'd seen her. With the bruises around his eyes, he'd looked like a startled raccoon.

That was another thing. How was he going to keep his job after getting into a fistfight with Paul Campano? Talk about police gossip. Hamish Patel gossiped like a woman. Faith had gotten a phone call from one of her fellow homicide detectives before she'd even left Georgia Tech.

Will didn't seem to be worried about his job. Amanda was tough, but she could also be very fair. Or maybe tolerance was the new buzzword at the GBI now. Faith had called Will an asshole and a monkey in the space of two days and he still had not thrown her off the case. He had just given her a vial of gray powder and asked her to break the law.

Her cell phone started ringing, and Faith ran to the kitchen like an anxious schoolgirl, expecting to hear Jeremy's voice.

She said, "Let me guess, you need pizza?"

"Faith?" She felt herself frowning, trying to place the voice. "It's Victor Martinez."

"Oh," was all she could manage.

He said, "Were you expecting someone else?"

"I thought you'd be my son."

"How is Jeremy doing?"

Faith didn't recall having told him Jeremy's name, but she said, "He's fine."

"I met him this afternoon. He's in Glenn Hall. Fine young man."

"I'm sorry," she began. "Why were you talking to him?"

"I've spoken with all the students who lived near Adam Humphrey. I wanted to check on them, make sure they knew they had someone to turn to."

"More ass covering?"

"Have I made myself seem that callous?"

Faith stumbled through an apology. "It's been a long day for me."

"Me, too."

She closed her eyes, thinking about the way Victor Martinez's eyes crinkled when he smiled—the real smile, not the "oh-shit-you've-got-a-son-at-my-school" smile.

"Faith?"

"I'm here."

"There's an Italian restaurant on Highland. Do you know the one I'm talking about?"

"Uh ..." Faith shook her head, as if she needed to clear her ears. "Yes."

"I know it's late, but would you meet me there for dinner? Or maybe just a drink?"

Faith was sure she had misunderstood him. She actually stuttered. "S-sure. Okay."

"Ten minutes."

"All right."

"I'll see you then."

Faith held the phone in her hand until the recorded message beseeched her to hang up. She dropped the phone and rushed around the house like a madwoman, looking for a clean pair of jeans, then deciding on a skirt, then realizing the skirt was not only too tight but had a

guacamole stain from the last time she had eaten out with a man—if you counted Jeremy as a man. She settled on a strapless sundress and headed for the front door, only to turn around and change when she caught her reflection in the mirror, the pasty skin under her arm rolling up over the dress like the top of a Starbucks sour cream blueberry muffin.

Victor was sitting at the bar when she finally made it to the restaurant. He had a half-empty glass of what looked like scotch in front of him. His tie was pulled down, his jacket on the back of his chair. The hands on the clock over the bar were coming up on eleven. Yet again, Faith found herself wondering if this was even a date. Maybe he had just asked her out as a friend, or someone who was a peer, so they could talk about Gabriel Cohen. Maybe he just didn't like to drink alone.

He stood up when he saw her, a tired, lazy smile on his lips. If this wasn't a date, then Faith was the biggest fool on the planet; her knees went weak at the sight of him.

Victor rubbed his hand along her arm and she fought the urge to purr. He said, "I thought you'd changed your mind."

"Just my clothes," she admitted. "Four times."

He took in her outfit, which was a variation on the same work clothes he'd seen her in since they'd met yesterday. "You look very ... professional."

Faith sat down, feeling exhaustion overcome desire. She was a bit old to be acting like a heartsick schoolgirl. The last time that'd happened, she'd ended up pregnant and alone. "Believe me, considering what I found in my closet, it could have been a lot worse."

He pulled his bar stool close to hers and sat. "I like it without the gun and the badge."

She felt naked without them, actually, but she chose not to share the information.

"What'll you have to drink?"

Faith looked at the bottles of liquor stacked behind the bar. She knew she should have chosen something ladylike—a wine spritzer or a cosmopolitan, but she couldn't bring herself to do it. "Gin and tonic."

Victor motioned over the bartender and placed the order.

Faith asked, "What happened with Gabe?"

Victor turned toward her. She could see that the sparkle in his eyes was not as intense. "Are you asking in an official capacity?"

"Yes, I am."

He rolled his palm along the outside of his glass of scotch. "Honesty isn't really a problem with you, is it?"

"No," Faith admitted. She had yet to meet a man who considered this an asset.

Victor said, "Can I ask you—when you called me today, you said you didn't want to put Gabe into the system. What did you mean by that?"

She was silent as the bartender put a large gin and tonic in front of her. Faith allowed herself a sip before telling Victor, "I think the easiest way to sum it up is to say that the police are known for using sledgehammers to drive in thumbtacks. The department has a procedure for everything. With Gabe—I would've placed him in protective custody, either called an ambulance or taken him to Grady hospital myself. I would tell them what he told me: He admitted to trying to kill himself before. He admitted to me that he was thinking about doing it again. Suicide is the eighth-leading cause of death among young men. We take that very seriously."

His eyes had not left hers the entire time she'd talked. Faith could not remember the last time a man had kept eye contact with her, really listened to what she had to say. Well—unless she was reading them their rights, but that was hardly flattering.

Victor said, "So, you take him to the hospital. What happens next?"

"He would have a twenty-four-hour observation period, then if he freaked out and refused treatment, which in this case would be completely understandable, he would have a right to go before a judge and petition for his release. Depending on how he presented, whether the judge thought he was being reasonable or not, whether the doctor who evaluated him actually had time to show up in court, he would be released or sent back for a more extensive evaluation. Either way, his name would go into a computer. His personal life would forever be recorded on a national database. That's assuming he wasn't under arrest for something."

"I thought the public university system was convoluted," Victor said.

"Why don't you tell me about that?" she suggested. "Trust me, office politics are much more interesting than police procedure."

He draped his arm over the back of her bar stool. She could feel the heat from his body

through her thin cotton blouse. "Humor me," he said, or at least that's what Faith heard. Her hearing had faded out as soon as he'd touched her—maybe it was the angels playing harps or the exploding fireworks. Maybe her drink was too strong or her heart was too lonely. With some effort, she made herself lean forward, taking a healthy swig from her glass.

Victor stroked her back with his thumb, either a playful, flirting gesture or a nudge to keep her talking. "What would an arrest entail?"

She took a deep breath before listing it out, "Handcuffing him, driving him to the station, fingerprinting, photos, taking away his belt, his shoestrings, his personal belongings, putting him in a cell with the dregs of society." She leaned her chin in her hand, thinking about Gabe Cohen being locked up with the drunks and the dealers. "That late in the day, he would probably spend the night in jail, then be taken over to the courthouse in the morning, where he would wait three or four hours for his bail hearing, then he would have to wait to be processed out, then wait some more for his trial." Faith took a heftier sip of her drink, then leaned back into his arm. "And from then on, every time he got a speeding ticket or an employer did a background check or even if a crime happened in his neighborhood and his name came up, he would be subjected to the kind of scrutiny that would make a proctologist blush."

Victor put his thumb to work again, and again she didn't know if it was blanket encouragement or a more intimate gesture. "You did him a favor today."

"I don't know," she admitted. "It seems like I just pawned him off on you."

"I'm glad you did. We had a student last year who overdosed on oxycodone. She lived off campus. No one found her for a while."

Faith could all too easily imagine what the scene had looked like. "In my experience, the ones who talk about it don't usually do it. The quiet ones, the ones who just close in on themselves, are the ones you have to worry about."

"Gabe wasn't being quiet."

"No, but maybe he was getting there." She took another drink so she wouldn't fidget with her hands. "You never know."

Victor told her, "Gabe's father took him to a private hospital."

"Good."

He loosened his tie some more. "What else happened today? How is your case going?"

"I've already dominated the conversation too much," she realized, feeling slightly embarrassed. "Tell me about your day."

"My days are tedious, trust me. I solve squabbles between students, I rubber-stamp requests for kids to build lofts in their dorms, take endless meetings on the same, and if I'm lucky enough, I get to deal with spoiled little jerks like Tommy Albertson."

"How fascinating. Tell me more."

He smiled at her teasing, but asked a serious question. "Do you think you'll be able to find that girl?"

"I think that ..." She felt the darkness come back, the deepening pull of the abyss. "I think I like me better when I'm not wearing my badge, too."

"Fair enough," he said. "Tell me about Jeremy."

Faith wondered if that was really what this date was about—idle curiosity. "We're just another Reagan-era statistic."

"That sounds like a stock answer."

"It is," she conceded. There wasn't really a way to describe what had happened. In the course of a month, she had gone from singing Duran Duran songs into a hairbrush in front of her bathroom mirror to worrying about hemorrhoids and gestational diabetes.

Victor gently pressed, "Tell me how it was."

"I don't know. It was how you would think. Horrible. I kept it from my parents as long as I could and then it was too late to do anything about it."

"Are your parents religious?"

She gathered he was asking about abortion. "Very," she answered. "But they're also realists. My mom in particular wanted me to go to college, to have a family when I was ready, to have choices in my life. My dad had some qualms, but he would've supported any decision I made. Basically, they both left it up to me."

"So what happened?"

Faith gave him the truth. "It was too late for a legal abortion, but there was always adoption. I hate to admit it, but I was selfish and rebellious. I didn't think about how hard it would be or

how it would impact everyone in my family. Everything my parents told me to do, I did the exact opposite, damn the consequences." She laughed, saying, "Which might explain how I got pregnant in the first place."

He was staring at her again with the same intensity that had sent a jolt through her the first time they had met. "You're beautiful when you laugh."

She blushed, which was just as well because her first inclination had been to throw herself at his feet. The effect he had on her was both exciting and humiliating, mostly because she had no idea how he felt in turn. Was he asking all of these questions out of idle curiosity? Or was he really interested in something deeper? She was far too inexperienced to figure this out on her own, and much too old to be bothering.

Faith had actually brought her purse with her, a concession to femininity when her earlier dressing debacle had ended with her wearing her extremely unsexy but moderately clean work outfit. She dug around in the bag to give herself something to do other than stare like a lost puppy into the fathomless, deep black of his beautiful eyes.

Kleenex, her wallet, her badge, an extra pair of hose, a pack of gum. She had no idea what she was supposed to be looking for as she rummaged around in the bag. The back of her hand brushed against what she thought was one of those annoying little perfume samples they give you at the mall, but turned out to be the plastic vial of gray powder that Will Trent had given her. She had thrown it into the bag at the last minute, not really thinking about it. Now, she felt nauseated as she held the vial in her hand, considered the implications behind the theft.

Victor asked, "Is something wrong?"

She forced out the question before logic had time to stop her. "Does Tech have someone who specializes in ...?" She didn't know what to call it. "Dirt?"

He chuckled. "We're ranked the seventh-best public university in the country. We've got a whole dirt department."

"I need to ask you a favor," she began, but didn't know where to go from there.

"Anything you want."

She realized that this was her last chance to change her mind, that she could always make up an excuse, change the subject, and be the kind of straight-arrow cop that her mother had taught her to be.

Faith was a mother too, though. How would she feel if some cop out there was playing it so close to the rulebook that Jeremy's life was lost?

Victor motioned over the bartender. "Maybe another drink will help loosen your lips."

Faith put her hand over her glass, surprised that it was empty. "I'm driving."

He took her hand away, holding on to it. She could feel his other hand wrap around her waist. There was no mistaking his meaning now. "Tell me your favor." He stroked her fingers, and she felt the warmth of his skin, the firm caress of his thumb. "I'll make sure you get home safe."

DAY THREE



CHAPTER TWELVE



Abigail sat on the couch as she watched her mother fuss around the room, straightening pillows, opening curtains. Beatrice had flown fourteen grueling hours to get here, but her makeup was neatly applied and her hair was tightly swept into a bun. When Abigail was growing up, her mother's unflappability had annoyed her to no end. She'd spent years trying to shock her with tight jeans and garish makeup and inappropriate boyfriends. Now she could only be grateful for the normalness the older woman brought to the situation. Emma may have been missing for three days and Abigail may have killed a man, but the bed would still be made and fresh hand towels would still be put out in the bathroom.

"You need to eat," Beatrice told her. "You want to be strong when Emma comes home."

Abigail shook her head, not wanting to think about food. Her mother had been speaking in these sorts of declarative statements since she'd arrived yesterday afternoon. Emma was the fulcrum to everything, whether it was coaxing Abigail to get out of bed or making her comb her hair for the press conference.

Beatrice addressed Hamish. "Young man, would you like something to eat?"

"No, thank you, ma'am." He kept his head down, checking his computer equipment again. Bless his heart, the man was terrified of Beatrice and her desire to put everything in order. From the moment she started straightening, Hamish had stationed himself in the kitchen, hovering over his equipment for fear she would touch something. When the other technician came to relieve him for the night, Hamish had told the man to go away. Abigail wanted to think his actions were out of concern for his computer equipment rather than any indication that the situation had escalated.

She shuddered, the mechanical voice on the phone coming back to her.

Is this the mother?

The ransom call had changed everything. The whispers between Paul and her father had increased. They had talked about the money, the logistics of putting their hands on the cash, as if the kidnapper had asked for billions instead of one million. Abigail knew for a fact that they had at least a million and a half in their money market account. Barring that, her father could have the sum couriered to his doorstep with just a phone call. Something was going on—something that they didn't want to tell Abigail about. She was at turns furious and relieved that they weren't involving her.

"Now," Beatrice said, sitting on the opposite side of the couch. She was on the edge of the cushion, her knees pressed together, legs slanted to the side. Abigail could not remember ever seeing her mother slump against anything. She seemed to have a spine made of titanium. "We need to talk about what you are doing to yourself."

Abigail glanced back at Hamish, who was studying something on his computer screen. "Do we need to have this conversation now, Mother?"

"Yes, we do."

She wanted to roll her eyes. She wanted to flounce. How easily she fell back into that rebellious pattern when Abigail could plainly see that all her mother was doing was trying to help her. Why was it so much easier with her father? Why was it that Hoyt had persuaded her to eat a piece of cheese toast and change into a fresh set of clothes? Why was it so much easier to cry on his shoulder than to take comfort from her mother?

Beatrice took her hand. "You're crying again."

"Am I allowed to do that?" Abigail stared at the stack of newspapers on the coffee table, the printouts from the *Washington Post* and the *Seattle Intelligencer*. Paul had downloaded every story

he could find, scouring the reports for some detail that he was certain the police were withholding from them. He was paranoid about everything, quizzing Abigail about crime-scene details the press had made up, conjecture they'd put out as real news. Three years ago, Adam Humphrey had been cautioned for driving without proof of insurance. Did that point to a darker side the police weren't talking about? Kayla had been kicked out of her last school for smoking on campus. Did that mean she was doing harder drugs? Did her drug dealer bring this insanity into their lives? Was there some thug out there who was pumping Emma full of dope right now?

Making matters worse, Paul's temper was more uncontrollable than ever. Abigail had pressed him for details about the fight with Will Trent yesterday and he had gotten so angry with her that she'd left the room rather than hear his tirade. She wanted to say that she didn't even know him anymore, but that wasn't true. This was exactly the Paul she had always known was there. Tragedy just brought out the finer points, and, frankly, their privileged lives had made character flaws easier to overlook.

They were used to living in eight thousand square feet of space—plenty of room to get away from each other. The carriage house, with its cozy kitchen/living room and single bedroom, was too small for them now. They were tripping over each other, constantly in each other's way. Abigail thought that she was just as much a prisoner of this space as Emma was—wherever that may be.

What she really wanted to do was grab him, punch him, do something to punish him for letting this terrible thing happen to Emma. Paul had broken their silent deal and she was furious with him for his transgression. He could fuck around with his women and spoil their daughter to within an inch of her life, but at the end of the day, the only thing Abigail wanted from him, the only thing she expected from him, was to keep their family safe.

And he had failed miserably. Everything had gone so horribly wrong.

Beatrice stroked Abigail's hand. "You need to be strong."

"I killed someone, Mother." She knew she wasn't supposed to talk about it in front of Hamish, but the words flowed. "I strangled him with my bare hands. Adam Humphrey was the only person here who tried to help Emma, the only person who could tell us what really happened, and I killed him."

"Shh," she hushed, stroking Abigail's hand. "You can't change that now."

"I can feel remorse," she said. "I can feel anger, and helplessness and fury." She gulped for air, her emotions overwhelming her. How could they expect her to go on camera today, to expose herself to the world? They weren't even going to let her speak, a fact that had made Paul furious but had secretly relieved Abigail.

The thought of opening her mouth, begging some unseen stranger for the return of her child, made Abigail feel physically ill. What if she said the wrong thing? What if she answered a question the wrong way? What if she came across as cold? What if she came across as hard? What if she sounded too harsh or too needy or too pathetic?

The irony was that it was other women—other mothers—she was worried about. The ones who so easily passed judgment on their own sex, as if sharing certain biological characteristics made them experts on the subject. Abigail knew this mind-set because she had shared it back when she had the luxury of her safe and perfect life. She had read the stories about Madeleine McCann and JonBenet Ramsey, following every detail of the cases, judging the mothers just as harshly as everyone else had. She had seen Susan Smith pleading to the media and read about Diane Downs's despicable violence against her own children. It had been so easy to pass judgment on these women—these mothers—to sit back on the couch, sip her coffee, and pronounce them too cold or too hard or too guilty, simply because she had caught five seconds of their faces on the news or in *People* magazine. And now, in the ultimate karmic payback of all time, Abigail would be the one on the cameras. She would be the one in the magazines. Her friends and neighbors, worst of all, complete strangers, would be sitting on their own couches making snap judgments about Abigail's actions.

Beatrice said, "It's all right."

"It's not all right." Abigail stood up from the couch, snatching her hand away from her mother. "I'm sick of everyone walking around on eggshells. Somebody needs to mourn Adam. Somebody needs to acknowledge that I fucked everything up!"

Beatrice was silent, and Abigail turned around to look at her mother. The harsh light did her skin no favors, picking out every crevice, every wrinkle that the makeup could not hide. Her mother had had work done—a lift of the brow, a sharpening of the chin—but the effect was not

drastic, more a softening of time's ravages so that she looked young for her age rather than like a silicon-lipped, plastic figurine.

She spoke quietly, authoritatively. "You did fuck up, Abby. You misread the situation and you killed that boy." Her mother didn't like to use such language, and it showed on her face. Still, she continued, "You thought he was attacking you, but he was asking you for help."

"He was only eighteen years old."

"I know."

"Emma may have loved him. He had her picture in his wallet. He might have been her boyfriend." She thought about what that meant—holding hands, their first kiss, awkward fumbling and touching. Had her daughter made love with Adam Humphrey? Had she experienced the pleasure of a man holding her, caressing her? Was that first love the memory she would have, or would Emma only recall her abductor hurting her, raping her?

This time yesterday, the only thing Abigail had thought about was Emma's death. Now she was finding herself wondering what would happen if Emma lived. Abigail was no fool. She knew that money was not the only reason a grown man would steal a seventeen-year-old girl from her family. If they got her back—if Emma was returned—who would that child be? Who would that stranger be in the place of their daughter?

And how would Paul deal with it? How could he ever look at his little angel again without thinking about what had been done to her, how she had been used? After yesterday's fight, Paul hadn't even been able to look at Abigail. How could he face their daughter?

She spoke the words that had been choking her since they had realized Emma was not dead, but taken. "Whoever has her ... he'll hurt her. He's probably hurting her right now."

Beatrice gave a curt nod. "Probably."

"Paul won't—"

"Paul will handle it, just like you."

She doubted that. Paul liked for things to be perfect, and if they couldn't be perfect, then he liked the appearance of perfection. Everyone would know what had happened to Emma. Everyone would know every single detail of her damaged life. And who could blame them for their bloodlust, their curiosity? Even now, the smallest part of Abigail's brain that remembered details from movies of the week and sensational magazine cover stories threw out the names of abducted and returned children: Elizabeth Smart, Shawn Hornbeck, Steven Stayner ... what had become of them? What had their families done to cope?

Abigail asked, "Who will she be, Mama? If we get her back, who will Emma be?"

Beatrice's hand was steady as she tilted up Abigail's chin. "She will be your daughter, and you will be her mother, and you'll make everything fine for her, because that is what mothers do. You hear me?"

Abigail had never seen her mother cry, and that wasn't about to change now. What she saw in her eyes was Beatrice's strength, her calm in the storm. For just a moment, the certainty in her voice, the sureness of her words, brought something like peace to Abigail for the first time since this waking nightmare had started.

She said, "Yes, Mama."

"Good girl," Beatrice answered, patting her cheek before she walked toward the kitchen. She rummaged through the cabinets, saying, "I told your father you'd have some soup before he got back. You don't want to disappoint your daddy now, do you?"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Will had always been a good sleeper. He supposed it came from sharing a room with a handful of strangers for the first eighteen years of his life. You learned to sleep through the coughs and the cries, the passing of wind and the one-handed lullabies every teenage boy practiced from a very young age.

Last night, the house had been quiet except for Betty's soft snores and Angie's occasional groans. Sleep, on the other hand, had been an impossibility. Will's brain would not shut down. Lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, his mind had shuttled through what little evidence they had on the case until the sun had come up and Will had finally forced himself out of bed. He'd done his usual routine—taken Betty for a stroll, then taken himself for a run. Even as he jogged, the predawn heat pressing out every drop of moisture in his body, all he could do was think about Emma Campano. Was she being held somewhere in the air-conditioning or was she exposed to hundred-plus temperatures? How long could she survive on her own? What was her abductor doing to her?

It did not bear thinking about, but as Will stood on the loading dock behind City Hall East, waiting for Emma's parents to show up, all he could think was that for the first time in his life, he was no longer envious of Paul Campano.

Will wondered how Amanda had broken it to the man that he was not to open his mouth during the press conference. Paul would not have taken the order lightly. He was used to bossing people around, controlling the situation with his anger—or the threat of it. Even when he didn't speak, Paul managed to convey his displeasure. Will knew that the kidnapper would be watching the parents for any indication that he should just kill the girl and move on. Keeping a lid on Paul would be an uphill battle. He was glad it wasn't his job.

Amanda had obviously not been pleased that the press had basically forced her into calling a conference. She had scheduled it at a time when most reporters were sleeping off the night before. They weren't as savage at six-thirty in the morning as they were at eight or nine, and, as usual, she liked exploiting the advantage. In a fit of compassion, Will had not bothered Faith with the early call. He thought it best to let her sleep in. He didn't know her well, but he guessed the detective had spent her night tossing and turning over the case just like he had. Maybe the extra two hours would help clear her mind this morning. At least one of them would know what they were doing.

A black BMW 750 pulled up to the loading dock. Of course, Paul had refused to let a cruiser bring him in. Amanda had told the Campanos to meet Will on the North Avenue side of the building because a couple of photographers were already milling around the front steps of City Hall East. The back was restricted to police vehicles and various support vehicles, so the vultures couldn't get in without risking arrest.

Paul got out of the car first, his hand smoothing back the flap of hair that covered the top of his balding head. He was wearing a dark suit with a white shirt and blue tie—nothing flashy. Amanda would have coached them not to appear too wealthy or too well dressed; not for fear of the kidnapper, but because the press would be scrutinizing every inch of the parents to find a vulnerability that could be exploited for their lead paragraph.

Abigail opened her car door just as Paul reached for the handle. Her long, shapely legs were bare, her shoes modestly heeled. She was wearing a dark blue skirt and an off-white cotton blouse of the sort Faith Mitchell seemed to favor. The overall look was understated, reserved. Except for the ninety-thousand-dollar car, she could be any soccer mom within a five-mile radius.

Yesterday's fight was obviously still fresh for the couple, or maybe there had been some new

ones in between. There was a distance between them. Even as they walked up the stairs to the loading dock, Paul did not offer his arm, nor did his wife reach to take it.

"Agent Trent," Abigail said. Her voice was thin, her gaze almost lifeless. He wondered if she was still medicated. The woman seemed to have trouble standing upright.

Paul, on the other hand, was almost bouncing on his toes. "I want to talk to your boss."

"You'll see her in a minute," Will said, opening the door to the building. They walked down the narrow hallway to the private elevator that serviced the police station. Will could not help but put his hand at Abigail's back as she walked. There was something so fragile about her. The fact that Paul was oblivious to this was not surprising, but Will was taken aback by the renewed anger he felt at the man. His wife was falling apart in front of him and all Paul could think to do was demand to talk to the person in charge.

Will kept his pace slow so that Abigail would not have to struggle to keep up. Paul bounded ahead of them toward the elevator, as if he knew where to go.

Will kept his voice low, telling the woman, "This won't take long."

She looked at him, her red-rimmed eyes filling with tears. "I don't know what to do."

"We'll get you back home as soon—"

"I've got a statement to make," Paul told Will, his loud voice an intrusion in the small space. "You're not going to stop me."

Will tried to temper his anger, but the other man's smug certainty was grating. "What exactly do you want to say?"

"I'm going to offer a bonus."

Will felt sucker punched—again. "A bonus for what?"

"I'm going to tell the kidnapper we'll double the ransom money if Emma isn't harmed."

"That's not how these things—"

"Let me talk to your boss," he interrupted, pressing the call button for the elevator just as the doors opened. "I don't have time to fuck with you."

A crowd of cops filled the ancient elevator. They all recognized the Campanos and gave them a wide berth, vacating the car as quickly as possible.

Paul got on. Will pressed his hand to Abigail's back, gently persuading her to move. He entered his code on the grimy keypad, then pressed the button for the third floor. There was a rumbling somewhere in the bowels of the building, then the doors creaked closed and the car jerked as it slowly started upward.

Among other things, Will had discussed the press conference with Amanda last night. The Campanos were not going to talk to the media because Abigail was too vulnerable and Paul was too volatile. Once they opened their mouths, the press would attack. Even the most innocuous statement could be spun into a damning indictment.

Will told Paul as much now. "This isn't like what you see on television. We don't need you to make a statement. We just need you to be there to remind the kidnappers that Emma has parents who love her."

"Fuck you," Paul barked back, his fists clenching. "You can't stop me from talking to the press."

Will's nose still ached from yesterday. He wondered if he was about to get punched again and how much it would bleed. "I can stop you talking at this particular press conference."

"We'll see what your boss says," Paul told him, crossing his arms. Maybe he wasn't ready to get hit again, either. "I told you yesterday, I'm not fucking around. This guy wants money and we'll give it to him. Whatever he wants. I'm not going to let my baby get hurt."

"It's too late," Abigail said. Her voice was barely more than a whisper, but she still managed to be heard. She told her husband, "Don't you know that the worst has already happened?"

Paul looked as if he'd been sucker punched. "Don't say that."

"The only reason he's giving her back is because he's finished with her."

Paul jabbed his finger in her face. "Don't you talk like that, God dammit!"

"It's true," she said, unfazed by the sudden flash of fury. "You know it's true, Paul. You know he's used her every way—"

"Stop it!" he screamed, grabbing her by the arms, shaking her. "You shut up, do you hear me? Just shut up!"

The doors slid open, the bell dinging to indicate they had reached the third floor. A tall man with steel gray hair and bronzed skin stood in front of the open doors. He looked like something out of *Garden & Gun*, and his face was familiar to Will from the newspaper reports: Hoyt Bentley,

Emma Campano's wealthy grandfather. Amanda was beside the man. If she was surprised to find Paul Campano threatening his wife, she didn't show it. She took in Will, her eyes traveling over his bruised face. Her eyebrow lifted, and he instantly understood that they would be having a conversation about how he'd gotten his face punched at a more convenient time.

Hoyt spoke like a man used to being obeyed. "Let go of her, Paul."

"Not until she says it's not true," Paul insisted, as if this was some kind of pissing contest he knew he could win by bullying his wife.

Abigail had obviously dealt with this before. Even in her grief, a hint of sarcasm crept into her tone. "Okay, Paul. It's not true. Emma's fine. I'm sure whoever took her hasn't hurt her or abused her or—"

"Enough," Amanda said. "This is why you're not talking to the press—both of you." She held out her hand, stopping the elevator doors from closing. She directed her words to Paul. "Unless you want your wife to take questions about killing Adam Humphrey? Or perhaps you'd like to talk about your extramarital affairs?" She gave one of her icy smiles. "This is how it's going to work: you're both going to sit there on the dais and let the cameras roll. I am going to read from a prepared statement, while the press takes photographs, then you are both going to go home and wait for the second call from the kidnapper. Is that clear?"

Paul dropped his hands, fists tight. "Emma's okay," he told his wife, unable to let her have the last word. "This is a ransom, not a kidnapping. Kidnappers don't hurt the victims. They just want money."

Will glanced at Amanda, guessing she was thinking the same thing that he was, which was that Paul's words pretty much confirmed he had hired an outside expert to advise him—and possibly more. The offer of extra money was a calculated risk, but men who were paid by the hour tended to be good at coming up with a scattershot of ideas that justified their large paychecks.

Hoyt spoke in a deep, resonant voice that perfectly matched his zillion-dollar suit and handmade loafers. "The only thing we're going to do by waving around more money is convince the kidnapper that he should hold out for more."

Paul shook his head. His lips were moving, no words coming out. It was as if his anger had a stranglehold on him. For Will's part, he was surprised to find that Paul wasn't more cowed by the father-in-law. He sensed a camaraderie between Hoyt and Amanda that Paul seemed to be missing. They had already decided how to approach this, the best way to get things done. Will was not surprised that the two would see eye-to-eye. In her own way, Amanda Wagner was a captain of her own industry. Hoyt Bentley would appreciate that.

Amanda suggested, "Why don't we talk about this?" She indicated the long hallway before them, the skanky set of windows overlooking the railroad trellis.

Paul looked back and forth between his father-in-law and Amanda. He nodded once, then walked down the hallway with them. No one talked until they were far away enough not to be heard.

Will tried not to feel completely emasculated as he watched them—the child who wasn't allowed to sit at the adult table. As if to put a fine point on it, he noticed that he was standing right by the women's restroom. Will made himself look away, leaning his shoulder against the wall. Before he turned, he noticed that Paul's opening tactic was the usual one—he jabbed his finger in Amanda's face. Even from twenty feet away, Will could feel the tension his bluster created. There were just some people in the world who had to be the center of attention at all times. Paul was king of them.

Abigail said, "He's not all bad."

Will raised his eyebrows, his nose throbbing from the gesture. He realized he should stop feeling sorry for himself and take the opportunity to talk to Abigail Campano, whom he'd yet to find alone.

"I said some horrible things to him yesterday. Today. This morning." She gave a faint smile. "In the bathroom. In the driveway. In the car."

"You're under a lot of pressure."

"I've never been the type of person to strike out," she said, though, to Will, yesterday's performance in the carriage house had seemed pretty natural. "I think maybe I used to be. Maybe some time ago. It's all coming back to me now."

She wasn't making much sense, but Will preferred talking to her rather than straining to hear the exchange between the adults. "You just need to do what you can do to hold on. The press conference won't take long, and Amanda will handle everything."

"Why am I here?" Her question was so straightforward that Will found himself unable to answer her. She continued, "I'm not going to make a plea. You're not going to let me beg for the safe return of my daughter. Why is that?"

He did not tell her that if a sadist had her child, watching Abigail's pain might inspire him to get more creative with his victim. Even without that, Abigail proved every time she opened her mouth that she was unpredictable.

He told the woman a softer version of the truth. "It's easier if you let Amanda do all the talking."

"So they won't ask me about killing Adam?"

"Among other things."

"Aren't they going to wonder why I'm not at home waiting for the second phone call?"

He gathered she was speaking more for herself than the members of the press. "This is a very tense time—not just for us, but for whoever has Emma. We need the press to tone down the rhetoric. We don't need them running with some wild story, making up clues and chasing down crazy theories while we're trying to negotiate for Emma's return."

She slowly nodded her head. "What will it be like in there? In front of all those cameras?"

Excruciating, Will thought, but said, "I'll be standing in the back of the room. Just look at me, okay?" She nodded, and he continued, "There will be a lot of cameras flashing, lots of people asking questions. Just stare at me and try to ignore them. I'm kind of easy to pick out of a crowd."

She didn't laugh at the joke. He noticed that she was holding her purse against her stomach. It was small, what he thought was called a clutch. Will had seen her closet, a spectacularly furnished room that was larger than his kitchen. There were evening gowns and designer labels and slinky high heels, but nothing in her wardrobe had appeared understated. He wondered if she had bought the outfit for the occasion, or borrowed it from a friend.

As if she could read his mind, she asked, "Do I fit the part of the bereaved killer?"

Will had heard the news call her as much this morning. The reporters were having a field day with the savage-mother-protecting-her-daughter angle. The irony was too rich to pass up. "You shouldn't watch television. At least until this is over."

She opened her purse. He saw a tube of lipstick, a set of keys, and a bundle of photographs that she rested her fingers on but did not take out. Instead, she pulled a tissue from the bottom and used it to wipe her nose. "How can I not watch? How can I not soak up every horrible thing that comes out of their mouths?"

Will did not know how he was expected to answer, so he said nothing.

One of Paul's ubiquitous "fuck you's" came from down the hallway. Whatever Amanda said was more of a murmur, but the tone sent out a chill that could be felt even from this distance.

Abigail said, "I like your boss."

"I'm glad."

"She wrote my statement for me."

Will knew this already. Amanda wouldn't have trusted the mother to prepare a plea for the return of her child. The semantics were too important. One wrong word could send the wrong message, then they would suddenly find themselves going from working a kidnapping to working a murder case.

"She doesn't lie to me," Abigail said. "Are you going to lie to me?"

"About what?"

"Are they going to ask me questions about Adam?"

"If they're any good at their jobs—yes. They'll try. But keep in mind, you're not here to answer questions. The reporters know the ground rules. That doesn't mean they'll necessarily follow them, but *you* have to. Don't let them bait you. Don't let them force you into a situation where you have to explain yourself, or where you say something that might later be used against you."

"I killed him. In every sense of the word, I murdered him."

"You probably shouldn't say that to a cop."

"I used to be a lawyer," she said. "I know how this works."

"How?"

"It all depends on how things go from now on, doesn't it? Whether or not you charge me. If Emma comes back in one piece, or if she's ..." Abigail sniffed, wiping her nose again. "If the newspapers are with me, if they paint me as some kind of cold-blooded killer, if the parents push for prosecution ... so many ifs."

Will assured her, "I'm not going to charge you with anything."

Abigail indicated Amanda. "She might."

Will admitted to himself that the woman had a point. "It's not my place to advise you, but you're not going to do yourself any favors talking like this."

"He was just a child. He had his whole life in front of him." She pressed her lips together, taking a moment to gather her thoughts. "Think of all the things I took from him—from his parents. There's nothing for them now. Just eighteen years, then nothing."

Will wasn't sure what he would be saying in her place, but he found himself wondering if Abigail was focusing so much on Adam Humphrey because the alternative—focusing on the fate of her own daughter—was too much to bear.

She asked, "What should I say when the reporters ask me about Adam?"

"Nothing," he told her. "We told them from the start that they're only supposed to direct their questions to Amanda. They won't do that, of course, but you don't have to talk to them."

"What if I want to?"

"What would you say?" Will asked. "Because if it's the things you just told me, I can tell you right now that they'll have you nailed to a cross by nightfall." He added, "If you want to punish yourself for what happened to Adam Humphrey, then take some pills or try experimenting with heroin. You'll be much better off than throwing yourself onto the mercy of the press."

"You *are* honest."

"I guess I am," Will admitted. "Save yourself for Emma. If you can't be strong for yourself, then be strong for her."

"I'm so sick of people telling me to be strong."

Will wondered what else could be said—be weak? Fall on the floor? Rend your clothes? Wail? All of these things seemed like obvious reactions that a normal person might have, but they certainly wouldn't play well for the cameras.

Abigail said, "I'm not usually this melodramatic. I'm afraid I might ..." She shook her head. "What if he sees me on television and thinks that Emma deserves it? What if I do something wrong or don't look grieved enough, or look too grieved, or—"

"You can't keep playing this game in your head."

"Game?" she asked. "I want this all to be a game. I want to wake up tomorrow morning and yell at Emma to get ready for school. I want to scream at my husband for screwing around on me. I want to play tennis with my friends and throw dinner parties and decorate my house and ignore my husband's affairs and ..." Her composure had held up longer than he'd thought it would. Slowly, she started to shatter. It started in her mouth—a slight tremble of her bottom lip that spread up her face like a tic. "I want to change places with her. He can do whatever he wants to me. Fuck me, sodomize me, beat me, burn me. I don't care." The tears came pouring now. "She's just a baby. She can't take it. She won't survive ..."

Even as he took her hand, Will felt the awkwardness of the gesture. He did not know this woman and certainly was in no position to comfort her. "Emma's alive," Will reminded her. "That's what you need to hold on to. Your daughter is alive."

Impossibly, the moment turned more awkward. Gently, she slipped her hand from his. She ran her fingers under her eyes in that magical way women do to keep their eyeliner from smudging. Unexpectedly she asked, "How do you know my husband?"

"We met a long time ago."

"Were you one of the boys who bullied him?"

Will felt his mouth open, but could not find any words to answer.

"My husband doesn't talk much about his childhood."

Will could've told her some stories. Instead he said, "That's probably a good thing."

Abigail looked at him—really looked at him—for the first time since they'd met. He could feel her eyes scanning the scars on his face, the thin, pink line where his lip had been split so badly that there wasn't enough good skin left to sew it back together straight.

Her gaze was so intimate that it was almost like a touch.

They both looked away uncomfortably. Will checked his watch to make sure the battery was working. Abigail rummaged around in her purse.

Footsteps clicked against the tiles as Hoyt, Amanda and Paul made their way back up the hallway. Paul looked positively defeated, and Will wished that he had paid more attention to the exchange. Paul silently took his wife's hand and placed it on his arm.

Amanda said, "Thank you," to Hoyt, shaking his hand. He kissed his daughter on the cheek,

gave Paul a clap on the shoulder, then headed toward the exit. Will guessed the millionaire's work here was done.

Amanda took both of Abigail's hands in hers. The naturalness of the gesture was surprising, but women—even Amanda—could get away with that sort of thing. "Chin up," she said. "Don't let them see you break."

Will chewed his lower lip, knowing that Amanda was hoping for the exact opposite. The grieving-mother card could never be played enough times in situations like this. Paul was simply an accessory. Knowing how these things worked, Will guessed that half the people following the story assumed that the father was the root of all this evil. If Abigail came across as too strong, then they would toss her onto the list of suspects, as well. Then, of course, there was the only opinion that mattered—that of the person who was holding Emma Campano. If the abductor thought that the parents were unworthy, then he might have second thoughts about returning their child.

"This way," Amanda said, indicating the opposite end of the hallway. She opened the door to the pressroom and lights flashed like a strobe, blinding them all for several seconds.

Will stood at the edge of the door, making sure the cameras followed Amanda and the Campanos to the impromptu stage at the end of the narrow room. He didn't want his picture in the paper. He didn't want to answer their stupid questions. He just wanted the kidnapper to see Abigail Campano, her sunken eyes and chapped lips, her thin shoulders. He wanted the man who had taken Emma Campano to see what he had done to her mother.

The reporters shuffled around as Amanda took her sweet time adjusting the microphone, unfolding the prepared statement. There were about fifty reporters in all, most of them men, all of them giving off a slightly desperate smell in the cramped room. The air-conditioning wasn't doing much to help matters, and hot air was blasting through a broken window like heat from a flame. Not much news had leaked out on the case, mostly because no one on Amanda's team was stupid enough to open their mouths. This had left the press to their own devices, and from what Will had heard on the radio this morning, they had started to report on what other stations were reporting.

Without preamble, Amanda read from the statement. "The reward for any information leading to the safe return of Emma Campano has been increased to one hundred thousand dollars." She gave the particulars—the toll-free number, the assurance that the call would be completely anonymous. "As you already know, Emma Eleanor Campano is a seventeen-year-old girl who attends a private school outside of the city. Emma was abducted from her home three days ago between the hours of eleven a.m. and twelve noon. At approximately ten-thirty yesterday morning, a call was made from a man claiming to be Emma's kidnapper. A ransom demand was made. We are awaiting details and will brief you at this same time tomorrow morning. I will now read from a statement written by Abigail Campano, Emma Campano's mother."

The cameras flashed like mad, and Will could see Abigail Campano looking for him in the back of the room. He stood up straighter, his height giving him a natural advantage. She finally found him, and he could read the terror in her eyes.

Maybe Will had spent too much time with Amanda lately. He was glad to see the terror, glad that the cameras would pick up this woman's fear. You could read every second of the last three days in the mother's expression—the sleepless nights, the arguments with her husband, the absolute horror of what had happened.

Amanda read, "'To the man who has Emma: please know that we—her father and I—love Emma and cherish her, and will do whatever you want in order to have our daughter returned to us. Emma is only seventeen years old. She likes ice cream and watching reruns of *Friends* with us on family night. Her father and I are not interested in vengeance or punishment. We just want Emma returned.' " Amanda looked up over her glasses. " 'Please return our Emma to us.' " She folded the paper. "I'll take a few questions."

A local reporter shouted, "Abby, what did it feel like to kill—"

"Rules, please," Amanda cut him off. "Remember to direct all your questions to me."

The reporter didn't give up. "Are you going to press charges against Abigail Campano for the murder of Adam Humphrey?"

"We have no plans to pursue charges at this time."

Abigail stared blankly at Will, as if unworried about the equivocation. Beside her, Paul seemed to be struggling to hold his tongue.

Another local reporter asked, "What leads do you have at the moment? Are there any

suspects?"

"Obviously, we're full speed ahead on this investigation. I can't tell you about particulars."

And yet another question came. "You've posted police around Westfield Academy. Are you worried this is the work of a serial killer?"

The serial killer angle was a hot topic of debate on the talk shows. The Hiker Murders back in January were still fresh on everyone's mind.

Amanda told them, "This has absolutely none of the markings of a serial case at this time."

Will felt a bead of sweat roll down his back. The flashes seemed to be making the room hotter. He opened the door to let in some fresh air.

"When do you think an arrest will be made?" someone in the front asked.

Amanda artfully dodged, "As soon as we are certain we have our bad guy."

"What other lines of investigation are you following?"

"We're pursuing any and all leads."

"Which are?"

Amanda smiled. "I can't go into particulars at this time."

Will caught Abigail's eye again. He could see that she was swaying and did not know if it was the heat or the circumstances. Her face had turned completely white. She looked like she might faint.

Will tilted up his chin, which was enough to get Amanda's attention. She did not need to look at Abigail to know what was worrying him. Instead of calling the meeting to a close, she asked, "Any more questions?"

A man in the back wearing a blazer that screamed New York and a sneer that screamed Yankee even louder, asked, "Don't you agree that valuable time was lost due to the incompetence of the Atlanta Police Department?"

Amanda's eyes found the man, and she gave him one of her special smiles. "At this point in time, we're more focused on finding Emma Campano than we are on pointing fingers."

"But wouldn't—"

Amanda cut him off. "You've had your turn. Give the others a chance."

Will heard some of the more seasoned local reporters snicker. For his part, Will was more interested in Abigail Campano. She was searching in her purse again, her head down. She was leaning too far forward in the chair. For just a moment, it seemed like she might fall to the floor, but Paul caught her at the last moment, putting his arm around her, shoring her up. He whispered something in her ear and Abigail numbly nodded her head. She looked up at the people crowding in on her, the crush of humanity seeking to drain every emotion from her face. Her mouth opened for air. The camera flashes blinked wildly. Will could almost hear the reporters trying to come up with adjectives for the captions: devastated, crushed, mournful, broken. Amanda's plan had worked beautifully. Abigail had swayed them all without even saying a word.

More questions were allowed, each asking for details that Amanda skillfully sidestepped. Some were valid—they pressed again on what clues had been found, what progress had been made. Some were meant to be inflammatory, like the man who asked again whether or not this was the work of a sadistic serial killer who was "targeting affluent young girls."

Amanda gave them nothing, rapping her knuckles on the podium like a judge ending a court session, then leading the Campanos off the stage.

Another barrage of photographs were taken as Amanda followed the parents back toward the exit. Abigail could barely walk on her own. She leaned into Paul like a crutch. The reporters kept their distance, not crowding the group. If Will didn't know any better, he would have sworn they were being respectful.

Outside, Amanda made all the right noises. She took Abigail's hand, saying, "You did perfectly."

Abigail nodded, obviously not trusting herself to speak. The ordeal had taken the last bit of strength out of her.

Amanda said, "The second call from the kidnapper is in three hours. I'll be with you at the house."

Paul said, "Thank you."

Amanda shook Paul's hand. She gave Will a sharp look. "My office. Ten minutes."

He nodded, and she walked off toward the stairs.

For the first time since this had all started, Paul seemed concerned about his wife. "Are you

okay?"

"I just got a little too warm," she murmured, hand covering her stomach.

Will offered, "There's a bathroom down here."

She didn't look at him. Still leaning on her husband, she made her way to the ladies' room. Outside the door, she put her hand to his face, then his chest. "I'm okay."

"You sure?"

She pressed her fingertips to his mouth, then went into the bathroom. Paul stood outside, facing the closed door as if he could still see her.

Will found himself feeling something like jealousy, coupled with confusion. How could someone like Abigail love Paul? How could she have a child with this man? He'd never been attractive, but Paul had let himself go over the years. He'd put on more than a few pounds. His hairline was receding. This, coupled with his roving eye, did not exactly make him a catch. What did she see in him that was attractive?

And why was it that even after almost thirty years had passed, Will was still comparing himself to the bastard?

Paul let out a long sigh. He walked a few feet away, then turned on his heel and walked back, as if keeping sentry. Will put his hands in his pockets and leaned against the wall, wondering why he kept ending up outside the ladies' room.

Paul stopped. He indicated his own face, asking, "Does it hurt?"

Their fight the day before was the last thing on Will's mind, though the bruise that spanned the bridge of Will's nose and ran under his eyes was reminiscent of an Egyptian Pharaoh. Instead of answering the man, Will looked down at the ground, noting that his shoes were badly scuffed.

"Here," Paul held out the stack of photographs that Will had spotted in Abigail's purse. All of them, he knew, would show Emma in various stages of happiness. "My wife wanted you to have these." He did not look at the photos. "She wanted you to know what Emma looks like."

Will took the photos, but did not look at them, either. The girl's face was already seared into his mind. He did not need more visual cues.

Paul lowered his voice. "You hit back a lot harder than you used to."

Will tried not to take that as a compliment.

"Anyway," Paul said, but nothing else followed.

Will could not stop himself. "You're a dumb bastard to cheat on her."

"I know."

"She's too good for you."

"I can't look at her." He kept his tone low, mindful his wife was on the other side of the door. "You heard her yesterday. I know she blames me."

Will felt his radar come on. "Is there something you're not telling me?"

"No," Paul told him. "Believe me, I wish there was. I wish there was some guy out there I pissed off, or somebody I fucked over, who I could point to. I'd beat the shit out of the fucker."

"What about this girl you're seeing?"

"She's a *woman*," Paul said, putting emphasis on the word. "It's a casual thing. She works at the dealership. She was there when I was talking to Abby—when all of this started."

"Is she married?"

"No."

"Does she have a jealous ex-boyfriend?"

Paul shook his head. "She lives with her parents. She knows I'm married. She was just looking for some fun. Trust me, she's had fun like this before. Lots of times before."

"I'm still going to need to talk to her."

"I'll write down—" He stopped himself. "Give me your business card. I'll tell her to call you as soon as I get home."

Will took out his wallet and fished around for a card. "You won't listen to me, so listen to your father-in-law. Let us handle this. We know what we're doing. I know what I'm doing."

Paul looked at Will's business card, his eyes moving back and forth over the words. His voice was barely more than a whisper when he spoke. "You and me—we lived that life. We knew that there was always a bad guy around the corner. With Em, I thought it would be different. You saw my house, man. I'm a fucking millionaire. I've got more money than I know what to do with." He stopped, his emotions catching up with him, tears flooding into his eyes. "I'd give it all up if I could have my little girl back."

Will was uncomfortable being in the position to assure the man that everything was going to

be okay, not least of all because they both knew better.

"Fuck me," Paul whispered, sniffing, wiping his eyes. "I'm like a fucking girl here."

Will looked back at his shoes. He'd paid seventy-five dollars for them a year ago. Maybe he should get some new ones. He looked at Paul's shoes. They gleamed as if they'd been freshly polished. He probably had people who did that. At night, he put his shoes in the closet all scuffed, and then in the morning they were perfect again. Or maybe he just bought new ones when the old ones got marked up. How many hand-me-down shoes had they both suffered through at the children's home? Pinched toes, blistered heels. If Will had Paul's money, he'd have a new pair of shoes for every day of his life.

Paul let out another stream of breath, oblivious to Will's observations. "I've been letting myself think about all the bad things he could be doing to her."

Will nodded. Paul would know firsthand the nasty things men could think to do to children. Will had seen the scars, the bruises. He had heard Paul screaming in the middle of the night.

"You're the only one I can talk to about this kind of shit."

"Abigail doesn't know?"

"She's still with me, isn't she?"

Will could hear the shame in the man's tone. It was a familiar sound to his ears. He looked back up at Paul. "Why did you hate me so much when we were kids?"

"I dunno, Trash, it was a long time ago."

"I mean it, Paul. I want to know."

Paul shook his head, and Will thought that was the only answer he was going to get until the man said, "You had it down, Trash. You knew how to do the time."

"What do you mean?"

"You just accepted it. Being there, trapped at the home for the rest of your life. Not ever having anybody." He stared at Will as if he still could not believe it. "You were content."

Will thought about all the visiting days, all the times he combed his hair and changed into his best clothes and prayed that some couple would see him coloring pictures or playing on the swing and think, "That's him. That's the boy we want for our son." No one did. No one ever did. That wasn't contentment, that was resignation.

He told Paul, "It wasn't like that at all."

"That's how you made it seem. Like you didn't need anybody. Like you could handle everything. Like you were fine with whatever they gave you."

"It was the exact opposite."

"Maybe it was," Paul admitted. "You know, when you're a kid, you see things differently."

Will heard the words come out of his mouth before he could stop himself. "I'm going to get Emma back for you."

Paul nodded, obviously not trusting himself to speak.

"You're going to have to be strong for her. That's what you need to be thinking about: how you can help her." Will added, "She's got you, Paul. That's the difference. Whatever she's going through right now, she's got you waiting at the end of it to help her."

"I wish I could be strong," he said. "I feel so fucking weak right now."

"You're not weak. You were the meanest bastard in a house full of bastards."

"No, buddy." He seemed resigned as he patted Will on the shoulder. "I was just the most scared."

Behind the door, the sink turned on, water flooding out of the faucet. The paper towel dispenser screeched as the crank turned, then the door opened. Abigail's makeup had been fixed, her lipstick reapplied.

"Okay," Paul said, more to himself. He reached out his hand and she took it, nothing awkward in the gesture. Will led them down the hall and pressed the call button. Abigail had her head on Paul's shoulder, her eyes closed as if she was willing herself to get through this. When the doors slid open, Will reached in and pressed his code into the keypad. Emma's parents got on.

Paul gave him a stiff nod—not a thank-you, but an acknowledgment that Will was there.

Abigail didn't give Will a second glance as the doors closed.

Will looked down at the photographs in his hand. Emma Campano smiled back at him in a toothy grin. He thumbed through the pictures. In some, she was with her parents. Others showed her with Kayla Alexander. Younger shots showed Emma with a group of girls in the school choir, another group on a skiing trip. She seemed even more vulnerable with a group than when she was alone, as if she could feel her separateness, her outsider status, as keenly as the prick of a

pin. He saw in her eyes the trepidation of a kindred spirit.

Will tucked the photos into his pocket and headed toward the stairs.



Amanda's corner office was on the opposite side of the building from Will's and a lifetime away from the squalor in which he toiled. Ahead was the ubiquitous view of the Home Depot parking lot. Up the street, the city loomed—skyscrapers, regal old buildings and in the mist-covered distance, the greenery of Piedmont Park.

Her desk was not the requisitioned metal type whose sharp corners had taken out more than one poor civil servant's kneecap. Polished wood gleamed from under her leather blotter with its pink phone messages Caroline had left her. Her in and out trays were always empty. Will had never seen a speck of dust in the place.

Pictures of Amanda with various dignitaries hung alongside newspaper articles touting her triumphs. The walls were painted a soothing gray. The ceiling was made of crisp white squares rather than the dingy, water-stained tiles that were the hallmark of every other office in the building. She had an LCD TV and her own coffee bar. The air really was better up here.

"Get you anything?" Caroline, Amanda's secretary, asked. She was the only woman who worked on Amanda's team. Will supposed this was because Amanda had come up during the age of tokenism, when there was only one spot for a woman at the top. Or maybe it was because Amanda knew that men were easier for her to control.

"No, thank you," he said. "Did Amanda tell you we're—"

"Expecting a phone call?" she interrupted.

"Thanks."

She smiled and returned to her desk outside the office.

Will had called Evan Bernard, Emma's reading teacher, first thing this morning. The man had agreed to look at the threatening notes that Adam Humphrey had been sent. As Faith had suggested, Will was hoping the teacher could give his opinion as to whether or not they were looking at the work of a dyslexic. A cruiser had been dispatched to show him copies of the letters. Bernard was supposed to call as soon as he got them.

Will checked the time on his splintered cell phone, wondering where Amanda was. The numbers didn't glow as brightly. Sometimes it rang when someone called, sometimes it flashed silently. Earlier, it had started vibrating for no apparent reason, and he had to take out the battery to get it to stop. He was worried about the phone, which was three years old and about three million models out of date. A new one would require him to learn a whole new set of directions. He would have to change over all the numbers and program in the functions. There went his vacation. Or maybe not. You needed a job to take a vacation.

"Looks like we're getting good feedback from the press," Amanda said, breezing into her office. "Paul Campano denied getting into a scuffle with you. He said it was an accident, that you fell."

Will had stood when she entered the room and he was so shocked that he forgot to sit back down.

"Hamish Patel and his big mouth say otherwise." Amanda eyed him as she fanned through the notes on her desk. "I'm going to guess from your appearance that Campano took a swing at you?"

Will sat down. "Yeah."

"And I gather from the black eyes and swollen nose that you valiantly suffered his blows?"

Will tried, "If that's what Hamish says."

"Care to tell me why he took the swing in the first place?"

Will told her a favorable version of the truth. "The last thing I said to him before he hit me was that we needed a DNA sample."

"That puts it nicely back on me."

He asked, "Did Paul give the sample?"

"Yes, actually. So, either he's extremely arrogant or he's innocent."

Will would've bet on both, but he still could not believe that Paul had covered for him. He hadn't even hinted at the favor less than half an hour ago. Maybe this was the man's way of paying him back for being such a jerk all those years ago. Or maybe he was still the same old Paul who liked to settle his scores when the adults weren't watching.

"What about his affairs?"

"I called the dealership as soon as I got back to my office. If she doesn't get back to me by noon, I'll send a squad car to pick her up." Will had to add, "My gut tells me Paul doesn't have

anything to do with this. Maybe if it was just a simple kidnapping—but it's not."

"We'll know soon enough," Amanda said. "I've fast tracked the comparison between Paul Campano and the DNA we found on Kayla Alexander. Becky Keiper at the lab is going to call you as soon as the results are in."

"I sent a cruiser over to Emma's school," Will said, barely able to get past his shock. "Bernard should be calling us any minute."

"It's extremely ironic that our resident dyslexic can't tell us, isn't it?"

Will tried not to squirm in his chair. He had called his boss at home only one other time in the last ten years, and that was to tell her that a colleague had been killed. Last night, she had been even icier to him when he'd explained that he had been unable to see anything unusual about the notes someone, probably the killer, had slipped under Adam Humphrey's dorm room door.

He cleared his throat. "If you want my resignation—"

"When you leave this job it'll be with my foot up your ass, not slinking out the door like a wounded kitten." She sat back in her chair. "God dammit, Will."

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry doesn't cut it right now." She twisted the screw tighter. "Those letters are the first pieces of real evidence we have. 'Leave her alone.' 'She belongs to me.' Those are direct threats from our killer to one of our victims. If this is the work of someone with some kind of handicap—that's our blood in the water, Will. We should have been circling this information as soon as we got it."

"I'm aware of that."

"Where would we be right now in this case if you had followed up on the spelling yesterday afternoon instead of first thing this morning?" She didn't let him answer. "We're going on three days here. Three days. I don't have to tell you what that means."

"What else do you want me to say?"

For once, she seemed to be at a loss for words. The condition was fleeting. "We're burning daylight. When is this teacher supposed to call?"

"The cruiser should be there any minute."

"What time is Gordon Chew supposed to be here?"

She meant the fingerprint expert from Tennessee. "Around eight-thirty. He was going to drive down first thing this morning."

"He drove down last night," she said, but didn't elaborate. "What do we have?"

"A lot of nothing," Will told her. "Charlie found fibers and footprints at the Ansley Park house, but we need someone or something to match them to before we can use them." The gray dirt Charlie had found also came to mind, but he kept that information to himself, hoping against hope that something came of it. He cleared his throat before continuing. "The ransom call yesterday came from Kayla Alexander's phone. It bounced off a cell tower that covers most of north Atlanta on up to Kennesaw Mountain."

"We can try to triangulate the second call today, but I'm sure he watches enough television to know it takes time." She paused, thinking. "I didn't peg this for a kidnapping."

"Neither did I," Will said. "I'm still not sure I do."

"There was proof of life."

"I know."

"Both parents confirm that it was their daughter's voice on the phone. Are you still thinking that Emma Campano might be involved in this?"

"Something isn't sitting right," Will told her. "The scene was too sloppy."

"Charlie says that based on the blood and shoe-print evidence he believes that only four people were in the house during the time of the crime."

"I know."

Amanda added another point that he had yet to consider. "If you've got a thing for young girls, you don't leave one dead at the scene. You take them both with you."

"Kayla was a fighter. Maybe she wouldn't go peacefully."

Amanda held up her hands. "We can talk in circles like this all morning and it won't get us anywhere. I heard the proof of life from the call yesterday. The girl sounded terrified. Not movie terrified, not fake, this-is-how-I-think-I-should-sound-when-I'm-trying-to-sound-terrified terrified. She was making the sorts of noises you only make when you know that you are about to die."

Will let her words sink in. Amanda was right. They had both heard true fear before—more times than either of them cared to remember. Emma Campano had not been acting. There was an

ungodly tremble to her voice, a harsh rasp to her breathing. You couldn't make that up. Absolute terror was a secret language you only learned by experience.

Will asked, "Was there any background noise on Emma's part of the tape?"

"They say it'll be noon at the soonest before they have anything substantive. Preliminarily, there's traffic noise, a dog barking. The girl was in an enclosed area when her part of the recording was made."

"So he drove her somewhere, took her out of the car, then made the recording."

"That tells us that the ransom demand wasn't an afterthought. We've seen how these guys work before. They get heated up, they take the girl, they rape her, they kill her, and *then* they make their plan. This was thought out from the beginning. Before he stepped foot in that house, he bought rope and duct tape. He found a knife. He had a place picked out where he knew he could take her."

"If I were a more optimistic person, I would say that proves she's still alive."

"That was yesterday," Amanda reminded him. "We'll know about today in a little over two and a half hours."

"Was the lab able to tell anything about the kidnapper's voice?"

"You were right about him taping it off a computer and playing it back over the phone." She read from one of the notes, "'The VoiceOver utility is a standard feature found in Apple Macintosh's universal access software. The voice selected by the caller is called Bahh.'" She looked up from the note. "So that narrows our suspect pool down to several million smug Apple computer owners."

"Kayla Alexander's parents should be—"

"They're back," she interrupted. "And you're not to go within a hundred miles of them without an attorney."

"Why?"

"They're filing lawsuits against Westfield Academy, the Campanos and the Atlanta Police Department. I'm sure as soon as they realize we're on the case, they'll slap us with one, too."

"On what grounds?"

"The school couldn't keep the girl from leaving, the Campanos couldn't keep the girl from dying and the police department couldn't find their asses if you drew them a map."

Caroline called from her office, "Evan Bernard is on line three."

Will told Amanda, "Please let me handle this."

"Are you trying to redeem yourself?"

"I'm trying not to piss off the man who's trying to help us."

"Don't be ridiculous." She pressed the speakerphone button. "Mr. Bernard, this is Amanda Wagner, I'm the deputy director of the special criminal apprehension team. I've got agent Will Trent here with me. Thank you so much for helping us this morning."

"No problem," he answered. "The policeman you sent came with his lights and siren blaring right up to the front door." He gave a forced chuckle. "I have to admit, it was a little disconcerting."

Amanda smiled her grandmotherly smile. "Consider it incentive to keep your nose clean."

Will shook his head at the silence on the other end of the line. He took over the call, asking, "Mr. Bernard, can you give us your impression of the letters?"

"I have to admit, I find them curious."

"Can you explain why?"

"The first one, which I would read as 'she belongs to me,' just doesn't ring true. I told you yesterday that each dyslexic is different, and perhaps you'd be better off talking to a linguist for regional dialect and such, but in my opinion, you're dealing with a phonetic speller, not a dyslexic."

Will asked, "How can you be sure?"

"Well, I'm not." He made a thinking noise. "All I can speak from is my own experience. With a dyslexic, I would expect the letters to be mixed up, not just misspelled or run together. Transposition is the most notable characteristic. For instance, Emma continually transposed the 'e' and 'l' in help, spelling it 'h-l-e-p.'"

Amanda did nothing to hide her impatience. "What about the other ones?"

"The second one, 'rapist,' is correct, of course, but the third one, the 'lev her along' for 'leave her alone'—and again, let me qualify this by saying that each person is different—but the 'along' seems odd. Typically, you would not expect to find the 'g' there. It's what I would call a heavy

letter, meaning it has a definitive sound within a word. You often see it used for 'j' or a 'j' used in its place, but you never see it just thrown in for no reason." He made the thinking noise again. "But then the 'lev' gives me pause."

Will was having a hard time following all the spelling, but he still asked, "Why is that?"

"Because, generally, that's a dyslexic spelling. It's the word in its purest form. No run-on, no 'g' thrown in for effect. I would assume that spell-check added it there."

"So, what's your opinion? Is someone trying to appear dyslexic or do they really have the disorder?"

"Well ..." The man hesitated. "I'm not a doctor. I'm a reading teacher. But if you were to put a gun to my head, I'd say that you are looking at the work of an adult, probably of average intelligence, who simply never learned basic reading skills."

Will looked up at Amanda and found her staring back at him. They were both unused to getting straight answers. Just to clarify, Will asked, "You don't think this person has some sort of reading disability?"

"You asked for my honest opinion and I gave it to you. I would say that the person who wrote these letters never learned how to properly read or spell. At best, they're on a second-or third-grade level."

Amanda was obviously skeptical. "How is that possible?"

"I saw it more when I taught in the public school system, but it happens. Kids with all kinds of reading problems can slip through the cracks. You try to help them, but there's nothing you can really do. That's one of the reasons I moved to Westfield."

In the background, they heard the class bell ring.

Bernard said, "I'm sorry, but I need to get to class. I can get someone to cover if you—"

"That's okay," Will told him. "Thank you for your time. If you could give those notes back to the patrolman who gave them to you?"

"Of course. Please call me if anything else comes up. I wish I could have been more help to you."

"You were very helpful," Will told him. "I would appreciate if you kept this conversation to yourself. We don't want to do anything to jeopardize Emma's situation."

"Of course not. I think our students are damaged enough by this tragedy as it is."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Bernard."

Amanda ended the call. "Did you follow any of that?"

"Yes," Will said. "Our letter writer is an adult of average intelligence who happens to be a functional illiterate."

"You don't know how refreshing I find it for an expert to give me their honest opinion."

Caroline came into the office with a file folder in her hand. "Background checks on the Copy Right employees, and Gordon Chew called to say he's running half an hour late."

Amanda did not bother to thank the woman. She opened the file and skimmed the pages, giving Will the highlights. "Everyone's clean except for Lionel Edward Petty, who has a drug conviction. During a traffic stop, they found two ounces of pot in his glove compartment."

"Was he hit with intent to distribute?" Will asked. Though it was discretionary, one ounce of marijuana would generally buy you a misdemeanor. Two ounces could be construed as drug trafficking.

Amanda told him, "He ratted out his dealer and they knocked it down to a fine and time served."

"Faith found some pot taped under Adam Humphrey's desk," Will said. "It's a tenuous connection, but the Copy Right is close to Tech. If he really was dealing, then he could easily walk to campus during his lunch hour."

"I'm sure there are dealers living right on campus who have that business all wrapped up," She closed the file folder. "I'm getting the runaround from the contractors who had construction crews outside the copy center. My gut says they were using illegals. Maybe we should go back and see if anyone in the store talked to the workers. There's a Hispanic girl who works the morning shift." She referenced one of the pages in the folder. "Maria Contreras. Maybe she had some contact with them. Maybe I'm racial profiling. Check the other girls, too. They may have flirted with the men." She started to hand the sheet to Will, then thought better of it.

He held out his hand. "I can give it to Faith."

She put the paper on the desk and slid it over, making her point loud and clear. "You need a partner, Will."

"You know I don't work well with others."

"You seem to be working fine with Faith Mitchell."

"Because she knows there's an end to it."

"Ah," she said. "There it is. The famous Trent self-esteem."

He bristled. "What does that mean?"

"I'm not your mama, Will, but it's time to grow a pair and stop feeling sorry for yourself because you have a disability."

He did not ask why she kept throwing his dyslexia back in his face if she thought his problem was so inconsequential. Amanda had built her career around knowing people's weak points and exploiting the hell out of them.

She leaned forward, making sure she had his attention. "You see cases as puzzles and whatever it is that's so different in your brain makes it possible for you to solve them the way no one else can." She paused, letting that sink in. "I trusted you with this case because I knew that you could handle it. I don't need a crisis of confidence from you right now. I need you to go out there and work with Faith and do your job the best way you know how."

"Amanda—"

"And while I'm at it, you could probably do a hell of a lot better than Angie Polaski."

"That's out of line."

"Probably, but consider yourself put on notice. When this case is over, I'm going to ask Faith to join the team."

"She's APD. She'll lose her benefits and pension and—"

"I'll worry about the details. You worry about finding a way to tell Faith about your little problem, Special Agent Trent. She's going to figure it out on her own eventually and she'll be furious at you for hiding it." She added, "And I'm not too pleased myself about having to babysit you on this phone call when I could be off doing something that actually moves this case forward instead."

He opened his mouth to respond, but she talked over him.

"No more," she commanded. Will stood up because she did. "Speaking of pissing away time, I've got to go talk to our lawyers about the Alexanders, then I'm heading over to Ansley to wait with the Campanos for the ten-thirty ransom call." Her heels clicked across the floor as she crossed the room. "Wait for Gordon Chew to see what he comes up with on the threatening notes, then canvass the Copy Right again to see if they remember anything about those construction workers. We'll reconvene outside the Campano house." She paused in the doorway, repeating, "*Outside* the house, Will. I have no idea why Paul Campano covered your ass over the little contretemps you two had, but don't think for a moment you've got me fooled."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Faith covered her mouth as she yawned hard enough to pop her jaw. She was almost punch-drunk with exhaustion after spending most of the night talking to Victor Martinez. Once the restaurant had kicked them out, they had walked to the closed coffee shop next door and sat at one of the metal tables outside. Sweating in the evening heat, being devoured by mosquitoes, neither of them had made a move to leave. They had both had horrendous days. They had both studiously avoided any further conversation about them.

Faith had told him about her father, how she missed him, her brother in Germany, her relationship with her mother, and of course Jeremy. Victor had listened so intently, his eyes never leaving hers, his fingers stroking hers in ways that made Faith incapable of thinking about anything other than the feel of his skin, that she had finally given up and stared wordlessly back at him until he started talking about himself.

He had given her the highlights: an early failed marriage, his rise to dean of student services at Georgia Tech. He was the first man in his family to go to college. He was bullying his nieces and nephews to make sure he wasn't the last. He found out she had dropped out of college and started bullying her, as well.

When Faith had finally realized it was three in the morning, that she had to get up for work in four hours, she had finally broken the spell. Victor had taken her hand and kissed her on the cheek, then—very gently—on the mouth. He had walked her to her car, then kissed her again before she'd pulled away.

Even if he never called her again, Faith thought that it was one of the most romantic evenings of her life.

Will came into the office. "Looks like I'm not going to be investigating bingo applications, after all." He slumped into the chair behind his desk. His suit was pressed and his face was shaved, but he looked ruffled somehow. "Did you see the press conference this morning?"

Faith felt the hair on the back of her neck stand up. She'd barely managed a shower, let alone had time to turn on the television. "What?"

"The press conference," he said, as if it was common knowledge. "I thought Amanda pushed it, but it's not like she consults me on—"

"There was a press conference?" Faith realized she had stood up. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I thought you'd appreciate the sleep."

"Why the hell am I here?" she demanded. "What am I doing—"

"Hold on," Will interrupted. He was still sitting in his chair, a confused look on his bruised face. "What did I do now?"

"What did you do?"

"Whatever it is, I'm sorry. I really am." Will leaned forward. "Let's just talk about this, okay? Please sit down."

His genuine remorse took some of the fight out of her. She sat down. "This is ridiculous."

"Just tell me what you want to do."

"We need to define my position on this case." He still seemed at a loss, so she gave him some options. "Am I still your lackey or school spokesperson or chauffeur or—"

A loud bang came from the office next door, followed by laughter. Phones were ringing. The day shift was starting to straggle in. Will seemed to realize this just as Faith did. He squeezed around his desk and pulled the door closed.

He waited until he was seated again to tell her, "We're in this together."

"Then why aren't you telling me things?"

"I just thought ..." He still sounded baffled. "I thought you'd appreciate getting some extra sleep. The press conference was just smoke and mirrors. There was no reason for both of us to have to suffer through it."

Faith could think of all kinds of reasons—a chance to talk to Abigail Campano again, to see the mother and father interacting. The opportunity to find out what the reporters had dug up on their own, or just the common God damn courtesy of being included in the case she had been pouring her life into for the last three days.

Will was looking down at his desk, but Faith had been the mother of a teenage boy long enough to spot guilt when she saw it.

She asked, "What else?" He didn't answer, so she pressed. "I know there's something else, Will. Just go ahead and tell me."

A sense of dread filled his voice. "You're really not going to like it."

Faith waited. She could clearly hear the conversation in the next office—cop talk, somebody bragging about kicking the knees out from under an arrest.

Will said, "I talked to Evan Bernard this morning."

"By yourself?"

"With Amanda."

Faith let that sink in. Was it Amanda who didn't trust her? It would be very like the older woman to make her own decisions and leave Will to clean up the mess. Was Faith mad at the wrong person? On the other hand, if that was the case, if Faith's being left out was coming from Amanda, then why wasn't Will telling her?

She rubbed her eyes, too tired to see through the layers of deceit. "What did he say?"

"In his opinion, we're looking at an illiterate adult, not someone with a learning disability."

Faith found the leap extraordinary. "He got that from three notes?"

"I'm just telling you what he said."

"How can someone get through school without learning how to read and write?"

"It happens," he said, rubbing his jaw.

Faith felt more than snubbed this time. The press conference was one thing, but she had real questions for Evan Bernard, primarily: how could he be so sure from three short sentences that they were dealing with someone who had a learning disability rather than someone who was perfectly normal and trying to cover his tracks?

Will said, "The lab is going to call us when Gordon Chew gets here. He's the fingerprint expert."

"Why didn't you use one of our guys?"

"You only get a few chances to chemically process paper. If there's a fingerprint on one of those notes, Gordon will find it." Will tapped the keyboard on his computer to wake it up. He started reading something, probably his e-mail. "Did you do anything with that vial?"

She was conscious that sound traveled both ways. "I put it in the right hands."

He kept his eyes on his computer, moving the mouse around, clicking. She didn't know if he was pouting or scared to say the wrong thing again. As usual, his topic of choice was the last thing she would have predicted. "I had to have a root canal last year. You're very lucky you're with APD. The GBI's dental plan sucks. I had to pay fifteen hundred bucks out of my own pocket."

Faith made a sympathetic noise, but she was about ready to snatch the keyboard out from under him. "Do you want me to leave you alone so you can play with your computer?"

He had the grace to look guilty. Finally, he sat up in his chair, actually looking at Faith as he talked. "The ransom call from the cell phone came from a tower that services most of Atlanta. The ransom call analysis won't be ready until noon. Charlie still doesn't have anything tangible on the Prius. We're waiting for Paul Campano's DNA to come back to see if it matches Kayla Alexander. It's been almost three full days since the girl was abducted and it looks like we're going to waste another two hours waiting for people to answer our questions, which, by the way, is only going to lead to more questions."

"You make it sound so easy."

"Yeah, by the way, I'd call your union rep if I were you. The Alexanders are suing the city for mishandling the identification on their daughter."

"Fuck," Faith groaned.

Will tapped his fingers on his desk. "I'm sorry. We're in this together, okay?"

"You mean in the lawsuit?"

He smiled. "Maybe that, too."

Faith couldn't get bogged down in this crap and still do her job. "What's our plan after the fingerprint guy?"

"Amanda wants us to talk to the Copy Right employees to see if they noticed anything suspicious about the construction workers. Then we're supposed to meet her at the Campano house. The kidnapper said he would call at ten-thirty this morning. Hopefully we'll have some new information to go on then, a drop, a new proof of life."

"We've got a solid description of Adam's Chevy Impala on the wire. Every cop in the city will be looking for it."

"Let's just hope it's still in the city."

He sat back in his chair, hands folded across his flat belly. Faith asked him, "Did Amanda tear you a new one?"

"No," he said. "I was surprised. She's very hard to work for."

"I can imagine."

He held up his hand, thumb stretched out at an angle. "See this?" he asked, indicating a faint scar on the webbing. "She shot me with a nail gun four years ago."

"On purpose?"

"That's the question," he said, folding his hands again.

Since this seemed to be turning into a pile-it-on-Amanda party, she told him, "She dated my uncle Kenny when I was a kid."

Will nearly fell out of his chair. "What?"

Faith explained, "My dad's brother. He was a colonel in the Air Force. Amanda dated him for ..." She thought about it. Amanda had left Ken right before Jeremy entered high school. "Almost fifteen years."

"I didn't know that."

"Amanda didn't tell you when she put you onto my mother?"

"No, but as far as I know, she never interfered. She just told me to be fair." His voice sounded odd when he answered.

Faith remembered something her mother had told her. At the time, she had found it strange, but now she understood. "My mother didn't talk about you much during the investigation, but one time she told me that she trusted you to do the right thing."

"That's nice," Will said, though she gathered by his expression that he was feeling duped. Faith was beginning to see that this was classic Amanda. She never gave you the entire picture.

She tried to change the subject, talking about his dank office. "The view doesn't really improve in the sunlight."

Will rubbed his jaw again. "No." He was silent for a moment, then said, "I'm sorry I left you out of the phone call. And the press conference. It won't happen again."

She wasn't quite ready to accept his apology, maybe because he kept leaving her out no matter how many times he said he was sorry. "What was Paul's reaction to all this?"

"He was his usual asshole self," Will said. "Trying to control everything."

"What about him?" Faith asked. "Doth he protest too much?"

"Paul's an asshole, but I don't see him doing this kind of thing. He'd have to have an accomplice, a motive."

"I guess we'll know motive well enough when the DNA comes back."

"It's not going to match." He seemed so sure of himself that Faith didn't bother to argue. The obvious culprit in any child abduction case was always the father. Actually, *most* domestic cases ended up pointing a big accusatory finger back at the father, no matter the circumstances. This was Will's case, and if he was so damn sure the man wasn't involved, then there was nothing Faith could do about it.

"I know him," Will said, as if he could sense Faith's skepticism.

"All right."

"I'm serious, Faith. Paul didn't do this." He kept pressing the matter. "I know you don't trust my judgment on a lot of things—"

"That's not true."

"Then can I get a word in?"

Faith didn't trust herself to respond. She seemed to be making a habit of sparring with this man, and the end result usually had him feeling perplexed and her feeling like a heel.

Will seemed to realize this, too. "All I am trying to say is that I know this guy. Please trust me."

There is no way Paul Campano would be involved in anything that would hurt a kid—especially when it's his own child."

"Okay," Faith agreed. God knew she'd taken more on face value than this. She glanced around the room, feeling a desperate need to change the subject. "I don't mean to pry, but do you mind my asking why you have two bags of home pregnancy kits by your window?"

He actually blushed as he turned around to look at them.

Faith rushed an apology. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said—"

"I forgot they were over there."

Faith saw the boxes peeking up from the bags, their happy little logos. If only she'd had access to a kit when she was pregnant with Jeremy. Maybe Faith wouldn't have waited until she was in her third trimester to tell her parents. She put her hand to her neck, wondering where that awful thought had come from. She must have been more exhausted than she realized.

He said, "I think my girlfriend might be pregnant."

His words hung between them, and Faith tried to pin down when exactly their relationship had gone from coolly professional to personal. There was something so kind about him under his awkward manners and social ineptness. Despite her best intentions, Faith realized that she could not hate Will Trent.

She glanced at the myriad kits. There had to be a dozen of them. "You can't just dip those in the toilet. You have to have a fresh sample."

Will opened his desk drawer and reached his hand all the way to the back. "I've got this," he said, pulling out a test stick. "I found it in the trash. Do you know what this signifies?"

Faith stopped herself before touching the stick, remembering at the last minute that someone had actually urinated on it. She looked at the result panel. There was a single blue line. "I have no idea."

"Yeah," he said. "Anyway, I got all these so I can figure out which brand it is and get the results."

The obvious question hung in the back of her throat—*why don't you just ask her?*—but Faith figured the fact that Angie Polaski hadn't mentioned the test to Will in the first place was proof enough that there was a serious breakdown in communications.

She said, "Let's go through them now."

He was obviously surprised by the suggestion. "No, I couldn't ask you to do that."

"We can't do anything until Bernard calls. Come on."

Will only made a show of resisting. He emptied the bags onto his desk. They started opening the boxes, breaking the plastic seals, finding the test sticks, comparing them to the one on Will's desk calendar. They were nearly to the last one when Will said, "This looks like it."

Faith looked at the plastic-wrapped tester in his hand and compared it to the used one on his desk. "Yep," she agreed.

He unfolded the directions that came with the test, skimming them to find the right section. He glanced up at Faith nervously, then looked back at the directions.

"Let me," she finally said, putting him out of his misery. There was a drawing on the back side. "One line," she said. "That means it's negative."

He sat back in his chair, hands gripping the arms. She couldn't tell if he was relieved or disappointed. "Thank you for helping me with that."

Faith nodded, sticking the directions back in the box.

"Spell-check."

"What?"

"Yesterday, Bernard said that computers make it easier for dyslexics to hide their problem." He shrugged. "It would make sense that someone who was functionally illiterate would do the same thing."

Faith closed her eyes, remembering the threatening notes. "The way the words were jumbled together—they were spelled correctly, right? Is l-e-v a word?" She pointed to his computer. "Type it in."

Will didn't move. "It's a word."

"What does it mean?"

His phone rang. He didn't move to answer it.

Faith had seen him acting strangely, but this took the cake. The phone rang again. "Do you want me to get that?"

He reached over and pressed the speakerphone button. "Will Trent."

"It's Becky in the lab," a woman with a pronounced Yankee accent said. "Gordon Chew is here."

Will pressed the off button on his computer monitor. He stood up, straightening his jacket. "Let's go."



The forensics lab took up the entire second floor of City Hall East. Unlike the rest of the building, which was likely filled with mice and asbestos, the lab was clean and well lit. The air-conditioning actually worked. There were no cracked tiles on the floor or jagged pieces of metal sticking out from the desks. Everything was either white or stainless steel. Faith would've eaten her gun if she'd had to work here day in and day out. Even the windows were clean, missing the great swaths of grime that covered the rest of the building.

At least two dozen people buzzed around the room, all of them wearing white coats, most of them in goggles and surgical gloves as they handled evidence or worked on their computers. There was music playing, something classical that Faith did not recognize. Other than this and the hum of electronics, there was no other noise. She supposed processing blood and combing through carpet fibers didn't call for much conversation.

"Over here," a slim Asian man called across the room. He was sitting on a stool beside one of the lab tables. Several trays were laid out in front of him and a large black briefcase that she was used to seeing lawyers carry was on the floor at his feet. Faith wondered if he'd brought the white lab coat he was wearing or if someone had let him borrow it.

"Gordon," Will said, then introduced Faith.

He offered her his hand. "Nice meeting you, ma'am."

"Likewise," Faith said, thinking she hadn't heard such a lovely, soft drawl since her grandmother had died. She wondered where Gordon had picked it up. He was probably a few years older than Faith, but he had the manners and bearing of a much older man.

Will indicated the notes on the table. Gordon had taken them out of their plastic bags. "What do you think?"

"I'm thinking it's a good thing you called me. This paper is in terrible condition. I'm not going to even try iodine fuming."

"What about DFO?"

"I already put them under the light. It's a mess, man."

"Is there anything special about the brand or the watermark or—"

"Generic as a pair of loafers."

Faith decided that hiding her ignorance was only punishing herself. "I'm not really familiar with chemical processing. Why can't we just dust the paper for prints?"

He smiled, obviously pleased at the question. "I bet you dusted a cigarette butt for prints at the academy, right?" He laughed at her expression. "They've been doing that for as long as I can remember." He leaned back on the stool behind him. "Paper's porous. The natural oil in your fingertips leaves a good, readable print on a hard surface, but when you're dealing with fibers, the oil penetrates and migrates. Dusting it with powder is not going to bring out any latents. You use something like ninhydrin, which reacts with the amino acids in fingerprint residue, and hopefully, you get a pretty little print and we bring home your little girl."

The mood turned decidedly somber as they all considered how important these next few minutes would be.

Will said, "Let's get started."

Gordon took a pair of goggles out of his bag and a pair of green gloves. He told Will and Faith, "Y'all may want to step back. This is pretty toxic stuff." They both did as he advised, but Gordon still handed them paper masks to cover their mouths and noses.

He leaned down and took a small, unmarked metal container out of his bag. He unscrewed the cap and poured some of the contents into one of the pans, careful not to splash. Even through the mask, the fumes hit Faith like a flash of gunpowder. She had never smelled anything so blatantly chemical.

Gordon explained, "Ninhydrin and heptane. I mixed it up last night before I headed down." He capped the metal container. "We used to use Freon, but they outlawed that a few years back." He told Will, "I used the last of my stash two months ago. Hated to see it go."

Gordon used a pair of tweezers to pick up the first sheet of paper. "The ink's going to run a little bit," he warned.

"We already took pictures and made copies," Will told him.

Gordon dropped the paper into the chemical solution. Faith thought it was a lot like the old-fashioned way people used to develop photographs. She watched as he gently agitated the page in the solution. The type print shook, and Faith read the words over and over again as she waited for something to happen.

SHE BE LONGS TOME!!!

Whoever had written that note felt a closeness to Emma Campano. He had seen her, coveted her. Faith looked at the other note.

LEV HER ALONG!!!

Did the kidnapper feel like he needed to protect her from Adam?

"Here we go," Gordon said. She saw stray marks start to develop, forensic proof that the paper had been handled many times by different people. The creases of the folds came up first in a dark orange that quickly turned red. Other stray marks showed smeared thumbprints. A series of swirls came into relief, their color reminiscent of the purple from ditto machines that they used to use when Faith was in school. Thanks to the chemicals, she could see where the paper had been touched over and over again.

Gordon murmured, "That's kind of strange."

Will leaned over, keeping the mask on his face. "I've never seen it turn that dark before."

"Me, neither," Gordon said. "Where'd you find this?"

"A dorm room at Georgia Tech."

"Was it sitting near anything unusual?"

"It was in the pocket of a student. All of them were."

"Was he a chemistry major?"

Faith shrugged. "He worked with adhesives."

Gordon leaned over the pan, staring at the dark print, the distinctive swirls. "This is a left thumbprint. I would say that whoever made it was exposed to some kind of chemical that is reacting to the acetate in my solution."

He reached into his bag and pulled out a magnifying glass. Faith held her breath as she watched him lean over the toxic-smelling pan. He studied all the different fingerprints the chemicals had brought out. "Based on the latents, we've got three different people touching this paper." He looked at the black print again. "I'd say the thumbprint is the only time the third person touched this page." He indicated the position. "It's in the bottom left corner. He was being careful when he handled it."

Will said, "He might have put his thumb there because he was trying not to touch it as he slid it under the door."

"He might very well," Gordon agreed. "I need to dry this, then I can look at the back. Why don't y'all give me a few hours to see what I can come up with? Do you have comparisons of the two people you believe touched this?"

Faith said, "Adam's will be on file. We took Gabe Cohen's to rule him out before we searched Adam's room."

"What about Tommy Albertson's?"

She nodded. Albertson had been an ass about it, but she had managed to get prints off him.

"Well," Gordon began, "get me the comparisons. This is a pretty excellent print, coloring aside. I'll run it through AFIS," he said, referencing the automated fingerprint identification system. "The system's been running slow lately. You know the best way to go about this. Give me the right suspect and I can give you a solid match."

"Will?" A tall woman with spiky blond hair and the requisite white lab coat walked over. "Amanda told me to find you. We got a hit on the sperm from the crime scene."

Will's shock registered on his face. He shook his head, insisting, "No, it can't be the father."

"The father? No, Will, I'm telling you we got a hit from the sex-offender database." She held up a Post-it note.

Faith read the name, hissing, "Jesus, he was right under our nose."

Will seemed just as shocked as she felt. He asked the woman, "Do you have an address?"

Faith told him, "We know where he is."

"His house," Will said. "We need to check his house."

He was right. Faith took out her cell phone and dialed the switchboard. After giving her badge number, she told the operator, "I need ten-twenty-eight on a code forty-four." She read the name from the Post-it note. "Patrick Evander Bernard."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Will slowed at a red light, looking both ways and blowing through the intersection in front of an angry driver.

Amanda's voice was clipped on the phone. "Bernard was picked up in Savannah two years ago for sex with a minor. She was fifteen. He roughed her up pretty badly—bite marks, tearing, bruising. The skin on her palms and knees was ripped open. He pretty much did what he wanted to her."

"Why isn't he in jail?"

"He pleaded it down to reckless endangerment and paid the fine."

Will sped up, passing a truck. "That's a slap on the wrist. Why didn't he go to trial?"

"He met her in a bar. He claimed he took that as proof that she was twenty-one. The prosecutor was scared the jury would equate her sneaking into the bar with asking for trouble."

Will slammed on his brakes, nearly rear-ending a car that was stopped for another red light. "She deserves to be raped for having a fake ID?"

"The parents didn't pursue it. They didn't want their daughter raped again by the court system and the media."

Will could understand their fear. Fewer and fewer rape cases were making it to trial for this very reason. The light changed and he pressed the gas pedal to the floor. "Why was his DNA in the system?"

"It was processed through the rape kit when he was arrested."

"We need to get a copy of his fingerprints to Gordon Chew to match them against the thumbprint on the letter."

"We can't do that."

"Why not?"

"Part of his deal with the district attorney was that his record be expunged if he kept his nose clean for a year."

"But his DNA was still in the sex-offender database."

She mumbled a curse. "That's our fuckup. He should have never ended up in there. He's not a convicted sex offender. Legally, we have no right to use Evan Bernard's DNA or his fingerprints as evidence."

"But if we get a match—"

"Then a judge will throw it out before we even make it to trial."

Will felt the bottom drop out of his case. Unless the teacher was feeling particularly generous—or stupid—they could not get a sample of Evan Bernard's DNA without a court order. A judge would not sign off on the order without probable cause that Bernard had committed a crime. Illegally obtained DNA was not probable cause.

Will stated the obvious. "If we can't use the DNA, we can't link him to Kayla Alexander." He saw the possibilities fall like dominoes. No Kayla, no crime scene. No probable cause, no arrest.

No hope for Emma Campano.

"Faith's waiting outside Bernard's apartment right now. His unit is on the first floor. All the blinds are open. She can see straight into the rooms. There's a garage, but the car is gone. Without the DNA, we can't do anything. She needs legal cause to go inside. I need you to link Bernard to one of these crimes, Will. Get me into that apartment."

Will jerked the steering wheel, swerving the car into the school's parking lot. It felt like a lifetime since he'd been here, though only a day had passed. He thought of Emma Campano again, how a day could be an eternity for her, every second the difference between life and

death. Bernard would know that they would come to Emma's school. He would know that they would eventually find out about the arrest, just as he would know that the apartment was the first place they would look. He had to be keeping her somewhere remote—somewhere no one would hear Emma scream.

Two cruisers were parked on the street, away from the school's security cameras. Will jogged toward the front door, directing one team to go around the back of the building and the other to wait at the front. The rent-a-cops on the front steps seemed confused for a moment, but they knew better than to interfere.

Will glanced across the street. The photographers were still there. CNN was doing a live news feed, the reporter's back to the school as she gave absolutely no new information on the case. She would have some information soon enough. This would probably be the scoop of her career.

Will told the security guard, "Get some more of your men around here. Keep the press off school property."

"Yes, sir," the man replied, taking his walkie-talkie out of his pocket.

Will took the steps up to the main building two at a time. He had already debated with Amanda about how to approach this. Emma Campano was in danger, but Evan Bernard could not hurt her while he was at school. Surprise was the only element they had in their favor. The fact that the ransom call was supposed to be made within the next half hour had sealed the deal. If they could catch him on the phone, that would be all the proof they would need.

Will reached out to press the intercom button, but he was already buzzed in. Olivia McFaden waited for him on the other side of the door.

She didn't mince words. "There are two officers with guns in front of my school."

"There are two more in the back," Will informed her, ushering her down the hallway by her arm. He led her into the same conference room they had used the day before. "I'm going to tell you some things and I need you to remain calm."

She jerked her arm away. "I run a high school, Mr. Trent. There's not much you can say that would shock me."

Will did not feel the need to go into the fact that they had found Bernard's sperm inside one of his dead students. Instead, he told the woman, "We have reason to believe that Evan Bernard was having a sexual affair with Kayla Alexander."

Apparently, she could be shocked. She sunk into one of the chairs. "My God." She stood up just as quickly, her mind leaping to the next conclusion. Kayla had been murdered, but Emma was still missing. "He's got students—" She was heading toward the door, but Will stopped her.

"Is there a camera in his room?"

She was still trying to absorb the news, but McFaden snapped out of her surprise quickly enough. "This way," she said, leading him back into the hallway and to the main office. "Colleen," she told the woman behind the desk. "Pull up Mr. Bernard's classroom."

The woman turned to the bank of monitors and tapped some keys. There were six screens in all, each partitioned into smaller images from various cameras around the school. They were all in color, all showing crisp, clear images. Colleen pressed another key and Evan Bernard's classroom filled the middle screen.

There he was in his rumpled jacket and patchy beard, walking up and down the rows of desks, surrounded by teenagers. The class was a small one, maybe a dozen kids in all. They were mostly young girls, their knees clenched together under their desks, pens scribbling nimbly as they recorded Mr. Bernard's every word. No one had their heads down on their desks. They seemed enraptured. Had the fifteen-year-old whom Evan Bernard met in Savannah looked at him the same way? Maybe she did until he raped her.

Will asked, "Is there audio?"

Colleen tapped another key. Sound came out of the speakers, Evan Bernard discussing the importance of *The Awakening* in American literature.

Will asked, "When is his planning period?"

The principal provided, "Right after lunch, so he gets about an hour and a half between classes."

"Can you give me an exact time frame?"

"Class ends at eleven forty-five. Evan wouldn't have to be back until one-thirty."

Plenty of time, Will thought. Adam's car was parked in the garage at eleven-fifteen. Paul Campano had made the 9-1-1 call at twelve-thirty.

Will asked the secretary, "Do you archive footage?"

"We have everything from every school year since we started recording in 1998," Colleen told him. "What do you need?"

"Two days ago," Will said. "From eleven forty-five until one-thirty."

"Well, that's easy." She kept the image of Bernard on the monitor and pulled up the information on another screen. The woman knew how to work the keyboard and she had obviously figured out what they wanted, because she tracked Evan Bernard's movements as he packed up his briefcase, left his classroom, walked down the hall, exited the building, got into his red Volvo C30 and drove away.

Will tried not to get excited. "When did he return?"

The parking lot was still on the monitor, and she fast-forwarded the camera until Evan Bernard's Volvo showed back up. The car slid into the parking space, stopping on a dime. Bernard got out, glancing around nervously as he adjusted his tie. He ran toward the building. Will thought Colleen was still fast-forwarding, but he saw that the man was, in fact, jogging.

"One thirty-two," McFaden noted from the time stamp. "He was late for class."

The next frame showed Bernard running down the hall. "Back it up," Will said. Something was different, and not just the man's disheveled appearance.

Colleen worked the keys and froze the frame on Evan Bernard as he jogged down the hall. He was looking right up at the camera. His hair was messed up, his tie skewed.

Will asked, "Can you leave that there and pull up the image of him leaving the first time?"

Colleen went to work, and he stared at the live image of Bernard in his classroom. The teacher was still pacing up and down between the desks, still droning on about literature.

McFaden was still incredulous. "I don't understand how this can happen. Mr. Bernard has been teaching with us for twelve years. There was nothing in his background—"

"You did a check, right?"

"Of course," McFaden told him. "It's state law. All school employees are screened by the police department before we can hire them."

"Oh, my Lord," Colleen whispered. Will saw that she had captured the images of Bernard leaving the school and returning side by side. "He changed his clothes."

The shirts were the same color, but the style looked different. His pants went from black to khaki. Will remembered what Beckey from the lab had told him earlier. Kayla Alexander wasn't the only source of DNA matching Evan Bernard. The seat swatch Charlie had cut out of the Prius had contained traces of Bernard's sperm, too. Of course, none of that got them closer to linking Bernard to Emma Campano. Even if they found a way to get a DNA sample from the teacher, all they could prove was that the teacher had at some point had sex in the Prius with Kayla Alexander.

The telephone on the desk rang. McFaden answered it, then handed the receiver to Will.

Amanda demanded, "Why aren't you answering your phone?"

Will patted his pocket, feeling the pieces of plastic move around.

Amanda didn't wait for his answer. "Did you catch him?"

Will looked at the monitor, Evan Bernard pacing the classroom. "We're waiting until he makes the ransom call."

"He already made it," she told him. "The proof of life was the same tape as yesterday, Will. I told him we had to have a new one or the deal is off."

"Is he going to call back?"

"Four o'clock," she said.

Will checked the digital clock on the wall. Ten thirty-three. "I've been watching Bernard the whole time. He hasn't left the classroom and he hasn't made a call."

"Shit," she hissed. "He's got an accomplice."



Will knocked on Evan Bernard's classroom door. The man seemed surprised to find him standing there.

"Agent Trent? Come in."

Will shut the door behind him.

"Actually, leave that open. I've got students coming."

"My partner's keeping them out in the hall."

"I'm glad you're here." Bernard picked up a book off his desk. There were triangles and squares in various colors on the cover. "This is a copy of Emma's reading textbook. I thought maybe you

could use it."

"I just wanted to go over a couple of things you said."

"All right." He put the book on the desk, then used his sleeve to wipe the cover, telling Will, "Sorry, I smudged it up a bit."

Will wasn't concerned about fingerprints. "You seemed pretty certain that whoever wrote those notes was illiterate. I'm really not sure what you mean by illiterate, though. I mean, is it like dyslexia? Is that some sort of spectrum diagnosis where somebody can be at one end or the other?"

"Well." He sat on the edge of his desk. "The traditional definition of literacy concerns reading and writing abilities, the ability to use language, to speak in a fluent manner. Then, of course, you could take that out to the next logical step and use it to define a certain level of class or culture." He smiled, enjoying himself. "So, to say someone is illiterate, you would be employing the Latin, 'il,' meaning not or without. Without reading skills, without fluency."

"Without class or culture?" Will asked, gathering from Evan Bernard's cockiness that he had expected the police to turn up on his doorstep. The arrest in Savannah was public record. The man had probably been wondering what was taking them so long.

As if to prove the point, there was a devious lilt to the teacher's tone. "One could say."

"That sounds a little different from the language you used yesterday."

"Yesterday I was in a meeting with my peers."

Will smiled at the dig. He was glad to find the man underestimating him. "What about someone who is functionally illiterate?"

"Strictly going by definition, it is as it sounds. A person who is able to function, or 'pass' if you will, in the real world."

"And you're sure that's the sort of person who wrote those notes?"

"As I said on the phone, I'm not an expert."

"You're an expert in something, aren't you?"

He had the audacity to wink. "Let's just say that I know a little bit about a lot of things."

Will leaned against the closed door, casually crossed his arms. There was a security camera mounted in the corner on the wall opposite. Will knew that he was in the camera's frame, just as he knew that Evan Bernard had signed away his right to privacy when the school had installed the security system. It was to the teacher's benefit at the time, because it meant any spurious allegations of sexual misconduct could be quickly dismissed. On the other hand, it also meant that anything Bernard said or did right now was being recorded on equipment owned by the school, and as such, was completely admissible.

Will said, "I guess you're familiar with your rights. They read them to you when you were arrested in Savannah, right?"

His smile didn't falter. "That was two years ago, Mr. Trent, as I'm sure you know. She was fifteen, she told me she was twenty-one. You're barking up the wrong tree here. This is all just a misunderstanding."

"How's that?"

"I met her in a bar where alcohol is served. I assumed they checked her ID when they let her in."

"If you weren't guilty, why did you plead to reckless endangerment of a minor?"

He held up his finger. "Not a minor. That would be a felony. I was only charged with a misdemeanor."

Will felt a chill from his words. The man was not frightened of being accused, let alone being caught. "Evan, you need to start thinking about what your options are, the best course you can take to make this go easy for you."

Bernard adjusted his glasses, bringing out his teacher voice. "You're wasting your time here, Agent Trent. Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got a class."

"Kayla was a good-looking girl," Will said. "I can see where it'd be hard to resist something like that."

"Please don't insult my intelligence," he said, picking up his briefcase off the floor. He started shoving in papers as he said, "I know my rights. I know I'm being recorded."

"Did you know you were being recorded two days ago when you left the school?"

For the first time, he looked nervous. "I'm allowed to leave campus during my off period."

"Where were you between the hours of eleven forty-five and one-thirty?"

"I drove around," he replied evenly. "It's the first few weeks of school. I had cabin fever. I just

needed to get out.”

“Get out where?”

“I drove into Virginia Highland,” he said, referring to a local neighborhood with coffee shops and restaurants.

“Where did you go?”

“I don’t remember.”

“Where did you park?”

“I have no idea.”

“Should I check for your red Volvo on the traffic cameras at Ponce de Leon and Briarcliff or Ponce and Highland?”

He didn’t have an answer for that.

“Or did you cut through Emory? Should I check the traffic cameras there?” Will told him, “You might not have noticed, but the city has cameras at just about every major intersection in town.”

“I was just driving around.”

Will reached into his jacket pocket and took out a pad of paper and a pen that he had borrowed from the front office. “Write down your route, then I’ll go check it out and we can talk this afternoon when school is over.”

Bernard reached for the pen, then stopped himself.

Will asked, “Is there a problem? You said this was a misunderstanding, right? Just write out where you were. I’ll have one of the patrolmen check it out, then we’ll go over your story later.”

The teacher took his own pen out of his jacket pocket and started to write. Will could see the nib of his fountain pen moving across the page in quick strokes. Bernard filled the first sheet, then turned to the next, writing more.

“That’s enough,” Will told him, taking back the tablet. He flipped from one page to the next, then back, before looking up at Bernard. “You teach normal kids, right? Not just the stupid ones.”

He nodded, not correcting the gaffe.

Will pretended to read the pages, moving his eyes back and forth. “I just had a question for you, because I do this a lot. I ask people to write things down, and what I’ve found in the past is that the innocent people are usually so nervous that they forget things. They go back and forth and they scratch things out and they change words around. The guilty people just pick up the pen and start writing, and it’s so easy for them because they’re just making up shit as they go along.”

Bernard put his pen back in his jacket pocket. “That’s an interesting observation.”

“Evan,” Will said. “It’s going to go a lot easier for you if we get Emma Campano back to her parents.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. I’m just as outraged as the next person that one of our students has been abducted from her home.”

“Do you remember when you first started teaching?” Will asked. “The state did a background check on you, right? You had to go to the police station and give them your Social Security number and your address and then they took your fingerprints. Do you remember that?”

Bernard seemed to realize where this was going. His little game with the pen and wiping down the book had been for naught. “Vaguely.”

“What’s going to happen when the fingerprints from your card match the ones we found on the threatening letters you slid under Adam Humphrey’s door?”

He seemed wholly unconcerned. “I imagine you’ll be investigated for fabricating evidence.”

“Even if Emma’s dead, Evan, if you tell us where she is, a judge will look at that as a positive indication that you tried to do the right thing.”

“That’s your reality, not mine.” He sat back in his chair, the smug look returning to his face.

“Kayla was a troublemaker. Everybody said that. Did she meet you outside of school? It wouldn’t have been here, right? It would’ve been somewhere outside of school.”

Bernard shook his head slowly from side to side, as if he felt sorry for Will.

“She’s a good-looking girl. I mean, I know, man.” Will felt his stomach clench like a fist. “I’ve been in this school ten minutes and I’ve already seen some girls ...” He shrugged. “Different time, different place, I wouldn’t say no.”

Bernard took off his wire-rimmed glasses and used the tail of his shirt to clean the lenses. “Not that it’s any of my business, but I’d be careful talking like that.” He nodded toward the video camera in the corner. “People are watching.”

"They were watching two days ago when you came running back to school, too."

He breathed on his glasses, as if there was a spot he needed to get. "I lost track of time. I was late for class."

"Really? I assumed it was because you had to change your pants."

He stopped, his shirttail still in his hand.

"Come stains are hard to wash out, aren't they?" Will smiled. He couldn't use the DNA from the rape kit, but it was perfectly legal for him to lie about finding another source. "Funny thing about come, Evan, it takes more than one washing to get it out."

"You're lying."

Will counted it off for him. "I've got a dead girl with your sperm inside of her and your bite marks on her breast. I've got video showing you changed your pants." Will didn't think about the risk he was taking as he lied. "The same pants we found with your DNA all over them."

"You can't go through my garbage without a search warrant and you have no—"

Will forced himself not to smile, though he ached to tell the man he'd fallen into a trap. "Once the city puts the trash in the truck, I can roll around naked in it if I want."

Bernard shrugged. "Kayla was seventeen. She consented. There's nothing illegal about two adults having sex."

Will chose his words carefully. "This wasn't a recent thing. You've been seeing her for a while."

"Are you asking that because Kayla's birthday was two months ago?" He shook his head, as if he was disappointed that the trap was so obvious. "Our first time having sexual intercourse was two days ago."

"She was a virgin?"

He gave a genuine laugh. "She was the sexual equivalent of McDonald's."

"We found your sperm in Kayla's car."

Again, he seemed unconcerned. "So we had sex in the car."

"Oral? Anal?"

He raised an eyebrow—another trap he saw coming from a mile away. "I watch the news, Mr. Trent. I know that Georgia's laws are very strict where sodomy is concerned."

The arrogant prick thought he had it all wrapped up. "You expect me to believe you just had sex with Kayla Alexander two days ago, but you had nothing to do with her murder?"

"As you said yourself, I had to go home and change my pants. The last time I saw Kayla Alexander, she was alive and heading back to school."

"So you left school, had sex with Kayla Alexander in her car, then came back to school."

"What of it?"

Will could feel his own smile spread across his face. "I've got some more Latin for you, Evan."

Bernard held out his hands in a wide shrug, indicating Will should fire away.

"*In loco parentis*," Will said. "In place of the parent."

Bernard's hands were still out, but his expression had drastically changed.

"By law, you're Kayla's guardian—her acting parent—during school hours. According to the state, it's illegal to have sex with anyone who is under your supervisory control, no matter what their age is." He gave the same open shrug Bernard had used. "I don't think fucking a minor in her car in the middle of a school day is something a parent is allowed to do." Will added, "Even if it is the first time."

Bernard's mouth closed. His nostrils flared. Will could almost see him going over the last two minutes, desperately trying to figure out how he had walked into the trap. The man cleared his throat, but instead of addressing Will, he looked directly into the video camera, saying, "My name is Evan Bernard and I am requesting this interview to be terminated so that I can consult with my lawyer about these spurious allegations."

"Tell me where Emma is, Evan."

"I have nothing to say to you."

"I know you didn't do this by yourself. Tell me who you're working with."

"Mr. Trent, you seem to think you're well versed in the law. I have just asked to speak to my lawyer. This interview is over."

Will walked over to the door and let in the two cops who were standing outside. He told them, "Arrest him."

"For what?"

"Sexual contact"—he turned around, making sure that Bernard was listening—"with a minor."

Will went out into the hallway and leaned against the wall. He could hear the cops reading Evan Bernard his rights, the polite responses the teacher gave in turn, assuring them that he understood everything. The man did not scream or rail against the injustice, he simply seemed to be biding his time, waiting to be processed. It was as if, even as he was being handcuffed, the teacher still thought he held all the power.

If Bernard knew where Emma was being held, he *did* have all the power.

Will sank down onto his heels and put his face in his hands. He wanted Evan Bernard to resist arrest so that he would have to go back into that room and help the cops subdue him. He wanted to grab the man and throw him to the ground. He wanted to beat him the way Kayla Alexander had been beaten.

Instead, he pulled out his cell phone, holding the pieces together so he could make the call.

"Can I go in?" Faith asked, her words rushed. She had been standing outside Bernard's house for the last hour, waiting for Will to give her the word that they had enough evidence for a warrant.

Will thought of the teacher, the smug look on his face, his certainty that he was going to get away with this. "Call the county," he said. "Tell them to pick up Bernard's trash, then go through whatever they put in the truck. I want you to photograph every step you take."

"What am I looking for?"

"A pair of black pants."

"What about his apartment? Can I go in?"

Evan Bernard came out of his classroom, his hands cuffed behind his back, a cop on either side of him. Amanda would be angry at Will for not being the one to escort the prisoner outside, but he wasn't up to smiling for the cameras. The Atlanta Police Department could have this photo op. Will would be better off spending his time looking for evidence that would convict the bastard.

For his part, Bernard's composure had returned, and he looked down at Will with something like pity. "I hope you find her, Officer. Emma was such a sweet girl."

He kept his head turned, watching Will even as he was being led up the hallway.

Faith asked, "Are you there?"

His hands shook as he struggled not to break the phone into more pieces. "Tear the fucking place apart."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Faith watched Ivan Sambor swing back the metal battering ram and slam it into Evan Bernard's front door. The wooden jamb splintered in a satisfying way, the cheap dead bolt breaking in two as the metal door swung back on its hinges.

She had easily seen inside the apartment from the outside, but Faith walked through the four rooms with her gun drawn, checking the kitchen, the bathroom and the two small bedrooms. Her impression now was the same as when she had first arrived on the scene: Evan Bernard had known they were coming, known that his earlier arrest for sex with a teenage girl would come to light and that the obvious conclusion would be drawn between what happened on the coast and what happened to Kayla Alexander. Bernard had probably stripped the apartment the minute he had gotten home from school that first day.

Faith could smell bleach in every corner of the house. The closet doors had been left open, easily seen from the bedroom windows. There wasn't a speck of dust anywhere—not on the kitchen table, the many bookshelves or, when out of curiosity she decided to check, the blades of the ceiling fans. Even the tops of the doors had been dusted.

Faith holstered her gun and called in Charlie Reed and his team. She leaned her shoulder against the door outside the second bedroom. The walls were pink. Blue and white clouds were painted on the ceiling. The furniture was cheap, probably secondhand, but it reminded Faith of a bedroom set she had seen in the Sears catalogue when she was a little girl. The small chest of drawers and the four-poster bed were laminated in white Formica with swirly, gold trim outlining the knobs and various other architectural details. Fluffy pink pillows were scattered on the bed. There was framed artwork of Winnie the Pooh with Tigger. It was the sort of room every girl dreamed about in the 1980s.

Outside, she heard Will Trent asking one of the cops where Faith was. He had probably blown through every light on the five-mile stretch between Westfield and Evan Bernard's apartment.

Will's jaw was clenched as he walked down the hallway. He had an air of fury about him, and seeing the girly bedroom did nothing to change his disposition. His throat worked as he took in the pink curtains and lace bedspread. Several seconds passed before he could speak. "Do you think he held her here?"

Faith shook her head. "It's too obvious."

Neither one of them walked into the room. Faith knew there would be no evidence in the white sheets, no telltale strands of hair in the freshly vacuumed carpet. Bernard had kept this showcase for his own benefit. She could imagine him coming into the room, sitting on the bed and living out his sick fantasies.

"It's younger than seventeen," Faith said. "The room, I mean. It's the kind of stuff you'd buy for a ten-or eleven-year-old."

"Did you get the pants?"

"They were in the garbage," she told him. "Do you think we'll get any DNA off them?"

"We'd better," he said. "The second ransom call had the same proof of life from yesterday. Maybe the kidnapper got spooked because he saw us around the school."

"Or she's already dead."

"I can't accept that," Will told her, his voice firm.

Faith chose her words carefully. "Statistically, children taken by strangers are killed within the first three hours of their abduction."

"She wasn't taken by a stranger," Will insisted, and she wondered where he got his certainty. "The kidnapper prerecorded the part about calling back at four. He obviously needed more time.

We'll get the new proof of life then."

"You can't be certain of any of that, Will. Look at the facts. Evan Bernard's not talking. We have no idea who his accomplice is. There's not a chance in hell we'll find something here to—"

"I'm not going to have this conversation with you."

So they were back to him being the boss again. Faith bit her lip, trying not to let her sarcasm escalate the situation. He could live in fairyland all he wanted, but Faith was fairly certain that there would not be a happy ending to this story.

Will pressed the point. "I can't believe she's dead, Faith. Emma's a fighter. She's out there somewhere waiting for us to find her."

The passion in his voice was unmistakable, and instead of feeling irritated, she now felt sorry for him.

He said, "I should've gotten more from Bernard. He was so smug, so sure that he was in control. I feel like I played right into his hands."

"You got him to admit to having sex with Kayla."

"He's going to make bail in twenty-four hours. If his lawyer's any good, he'll get the trial postponed until no one remembers who Emma Campano is. Even with the parents pushing for a prosecution, he could end up walking."

"He admitted on tape to having sex with her."

"I hadn't read him his rights. He could argue that I coerced him." Will shook his head, obviously angry with himself. "I screwed it up."

"He knew we were coming to his apartment," Faith said. "This place is immaculate. He didn't clean like this overnight. He prepared the space for us. He's playing some kind of game."

"I should have run a background check on him yesterday."

"There was no reason to," she countered. "We both assumed that the school had checked him out."

"They did," Will reminded her. "Just not recently."

Charlie called from the other room, "Hey, guys."

Faith and Will went into the master bedroom, which had a decidedly more masculine flair. The furniture was heavy, stained a dark charcoal and sitting low to the ground in a sterile, modern way. Over the bed was hanging a huge canvas of a blond-haired, blue-eyed girl. She was obviously young, though not so young that the painting could be deemed child pornography. It was certainly pornographic, though. The girl was naked, her chest thrust out, her legs wide open. There was a sexy twinkle in her eyes, a kittenish pout to her lips. Everything glistened unnaturally.

Charlie was sitting at a desk that was built into an armoire.

"His computer," Charlie said. "Look at this."

Faith saw that the monitor showed a live image of the second bedroom.

Will said, "The camera must be mounted in the Winnie the Pooh poster."

"Christ," Faith whispered. "Are there any files?"

Charlie was clicking through the directory. "I'm not seeing anything," he told them. "We'll have the forensic techs look at this, but it's my guess that an external hard drive was used." He pulled some loose cables out from behind the computer. "These would've recorded sound and video onto the drive. He could completely bypass the computer's hard drive."

"The main computer wouldn't keep any records?"

Charlie shook his head, opening and closing files as he checked for anything incriminating. Faith saw spreadsheets, homework assignments.

She asked, "What about e-mail?"

"There are two addresses on here. One is through the cable company for Internet service. All that's on there is spam—Viagra offers, Nigerian money laundering, that sort of thing. There's no address book, no sent mails, nothing. The other one looks like his school e-mail. I read through everything; they're just correspondences with parents, memos from the principal. Nothing suspicious and nothing personal."

"Could he have kept a new e-mail address on the hard drive?"

"You'd have to ask someone who knows more about computers than me," Charlie said. "Blood and guts I can tell you about. Computers are just a hobby."

Will said, "He wouldn't put a camera in that room unless he was taping himself so he could watch it later. We need to find that hard drive."

"I didn't find anything in Adam's room," Faith reminded him. "His computer was stolen a week

before the crime was committed.”

“What about Gabe Cohen?”

“Nothing jumped out,” Faith told him. “I checked his computer, but like Charlie said, I’m not an expert.”

“It’d be a stretch asking to see it again.”

She wondered if that was some kind of dig at her for not arresting Gabe Cohen. They were both frustrated and angry. She decided to let the comment pass. “Did you find anything in Bernard’s desk at school?”

“Nothing,” Will answered. “Maybe the accomplice is keeping the hard drive or a computer for him? Maybe there’s a laptop?”

“What about his car?”

“Cleaner than the house,” Will said. “Smells like bleach and vinegar.”

Charlie stated the obvious. “If you find the video files, that’s the smoking gun.”

Will said, “I’ll get copies of all his phone records, landline and cell.”

“This guy is smart,” Faith pointed out. “He’d have one of those pay-as-you-go lines. There’s no way we can trace them.”

“We’ve already fucked this up twice from making assumptions. Bernard is smart, but he can’t think of everything.” Will asked, “Charlie, can you check his Internet history?”

Charlie clicked the icon for the Internet browser. A page popped up with a scantily clad teenager doing a split over the words, “Barely Legal.” He opened the root directory. “Looks like he emptied the cache, but I can still recover some of the pages.” After a few more clicks, he found Bernard’s recently viewed pages. The first linked to Westfield Academy’s grading program. The next few were retail outlets you would expect a teacher to be interested in—Barnes & Noble, Wal-Mart. Apparently, Bernard had been searching for a copy of *Wuthering Heights*.

“Here we go,” Charlie said, pulling up a chat room. Faith leaned in for a closer look, but the site was one intended for teachers who were looking to retire. Another chat room was for West Highland terrier lovers.

Will asked, “What about the first site?”

Charlie went back to Barely Legal. “It’s got a disclaimer on the front that says all the girls are of age. As far as the Internet is concerned, as long as they’re not obviously underage, like, children, then that’s all you need.”

Faith looked around the room, feeling a slight sense of disgust as she thought about Evan Bernard sleeping here. She went to the bedside table and opened the drawer from the bottom with her foot. “More porn,” she said, not touching the magazines. There was a girl on the front cover who looked about twelve, but the masthead insisted otherwise, proclaiming, *Legal Horny Honeys*.

Will had slipped on a pair of gloves. He pulled out the magazines. All of them had teenage-looking cover girls. All of them implied that the girls were of legal age. “Perfectly legal.”

“Detective?” Ivan Sambor’s large frame filled the doorway. He held a couple of plastic evidence bags in his meaty hands. Faith saw a large pink vibrator and a set of fur-lined handcuffs, also pink. “Found these in the other room.”

Will said, “Tell the lab those have priority.”

Ivan nodded, leaving the room.

Faith told Will, “Bernard doesn’t have any other properties in his name either in the state of Georgia, the Carolinas, Tennessee or Alabama.”

“Let’s broaden the search,” Will said, though Faith thought that was a shot in the dark. Bernard would not use his real name if he had a silent partner to act as a front.

She said, “I’ve got a team calling all the storage rental places within a thirty-mile area.”

“Check under the names of any family members,” Will told her. “We need to know who his friends are. Maybe there’s an address book.” He glanced around the room, scanning every piece of furniture, every painting on the wall. “The judge limited the scope of our search warrant to evidence tying Kayla Alexander to Bernard. We could argue that we’re looking for names of other victims. Even if he’s convicted for Kayla, Bernard could be out in two to three with good behavior.”

“He’ll be a registered sex offender. He’ll never teach again.”

“That’s a small price to pay for kidnapping and murder.”

“You’re sure he’s involved in the other crimes, that it’s not just what he said: he had sex with her, she went her way, he went back to school?”

"You saw that bedroom, Faith. He's into young girls."

"All that means is that he is into raping them, not murdering them."

"He learned in Savannah that it's dangerous to leave witnesses."

"Sorry to interrupt," Charlie said, "but maybe you should consider the fact that he was also looking into retiring."

Will seemed puzzled. "How do you know that?"

"The Web site?" Faith asked, wondering how he had forgotten about it so quickly. "Charlie, pull it up again."

Charlie did as she asked, finding the correct Web page. He scrolled through the list of questions and responses. "I'm not sure what screen name he went by. They're all pretty innocuous." He clicked to the next page. "Basically, they're talking about what benefits they retain after retirement, consultancy jobs to help pay the bills—that sort of thing." The screen changed as he selected a new link. "Georgia's teacher retirement program." He leaned closer to the screen to read the details. "All right, this deals with private versus public school teaching. With the state retirement program, you have to have a certain number of years vested to qualify for a pension. Private, you're on your own." He scrolled down, skimming the text. "It says here that they have to go thirty years to get full retirement."

"Maybe he decided he couldn't wait it out," Faith said. "A million dollars would certainly help pave the way toward a comfortable early retirement."

Will told her, "Bernard's only been at Westfield for twelve years. He told us he was teaching in the public school system at one point. Let's find out where he taught before that."

"He would've left in the mid-nineties," Faith said, doing the math in her head. "Maybe there was some impropriety they swept under the rug."

"I know teachers don't make a lot of money, but don't you think it's odd that he's living in this crappy apartment at his age?"

Charlie suggested, "Maybe he's been spending all his spare cash on flights to Thailand to pick up underage girls."

Faith asked, "Do you think we have enough cause to look at his financial records?"

Will shook his head. "We didn't list financial documents in the search warrant."

Charlie cleared his throat. Faith looked at the computer screen. He had pulled up Evan Bernard's accounts at the local credit union. "Let this be a lesson not to store your passwords in your key-chains."

Will said, "Check to see if he made any payments to storage facilities."

Charlie moved the mouse around, highlighting each account as he read through the details. "Nothing's popping up. He pays twelve hundred a month for this place. His utilities are about what you'd expect. Groceries, dry cleaners, car payments, a couple of PayPal payments." He read through the rest. "It looks like most of his money goes into his 401-K. The guy's socking it away for retirement."

Faith asked, "What does he bring home every month?"

"Around twenty-three hundred."

Faith stared at the computer screen. She could hear policemen outside the window, laughing about something. Traffic noise from the street filled the air with a low hum. This was the sort of place you rented when you were fresh out of college, not heading toward your fifties and looking to retire. She said, "Evan Bernard's been teaching for how many years and he doesn't own his own house?"

"Could be divorced," Charlie suggested. "An ex-wife could have bled him dry."

"We'll check court records," Will said. "If he's got an ex, maybe she found out what he was doing and left him. If we can corroborate that Kayla was a pattern, we might be able to get a judge to deny bail."

"We already tried the neighbors. Most of them were gone—probably at work. There's a stay-at-home mom in the unit across the garden. She says she's never met Bernard, never seen anything suspicious going on."

"Send a couple of units back around seven tonight. More people should be home by then." Will went to the closet and checked the top shelves. "Maybe he's got a photo album or something."

"We won't find anything he doesn't want us to."

Will kept searching the closet, taking down boxes, checking their contents. "We know he was gone from the school for two hours." He pulled out a stack of yearbooks and dropped them on the bed. There were almost twenty in all, their cheerful covers screaming school spirit. He picked

up the top one, which was emblazoned with the Westfield Academy crest, and started thumbing through the pages. "That's not enough time to do the murders, hide Emma and get back to school. The accomplice must have done the heavy lifting. Bernard would have known Emma came from a wealthy family."

"Kayla's parents were well-off. Why not take her, too? Why kill her if she represents money?"

Will closed the yearbook and held it in his hand. "Are we sure Kayla wasn't involved?"

Faith glanced at Charlie, who was still checking out the computer files.

Will didn't seem to mind talking in front of the man. "Kayla Alexander was a nasty piece of work." He dropped the yearbook and picked up the next one. "We haven't found one person who's said otherwise."

"She'd have to be pretty sick to be screwing Bernard in her car while she knew that her best friend was about to be kidnapped." Faith considered something. "Maybe Kayla felt threatened by Emma's affair with Adam."

Will picked up on her train of thought. "Kayla might know that Adam and Emma were parking in the garage. The nosy neighbor told on the girls last year. They had to find somewhere else to park."

"I've been wondering why Kayla parked her white Prius in the driveway of the Campano house when she knew that the last time they were caught skipping, it was because the neighbor saw a car in the driveway."

He stopped searching the pages. "Something's bothered me since I saw the Prius in the parking lot. Everything the killer touched had blood smeared on it: the trunk, the door handles, the steering wheel. Everything except for the duct tape and the rope in the trunk."

"Do you think Kayla brought them for the killer to use?"

"Maybe."

"Hold on," Faith said, trying to process all of this. "If Kayla was involved, why did she get killed?"

"She had a reputation for being nasty."

"You've said all along that the killer must have known her."

His phone started ringing, and he slid it out of his pocket. The thing was pathetic, the pieces held together with Scotch tape. "Hello?"

Faith picked up one of the yearbooks and thumbed through it so she wasn't standing there doing nothing. She glanced up once at Will, trying to read his expression as he listened to the call. Impassive as usual.

"Thank you," he said, then ended the call. "Bernard's fingerprints don't match the thumbprint on the letter."

Faith held the yearbook to her chest. It felt heavy in her hands. "So his accomplice handled the threatening notes."

"Why send the notes? Why show their hand?"

Faith shrugged. "Could be they were trying to scare away Adam so Emma would be alone in the house." She contradicted herself. "In that case, why didn't Kayla just drive Emma to the house? It had to be that they weren't getting along."

Will opened the Westfield yearbook from last year and flipped through the pages. "We need to go back to the beginning. There's a second man out there." He traced his finger across the rows of student photographs. "Bernard's not the kind of guy who gets his hands dirty."

"My friend at Tech said he would probably have news today," Faith told him, hoping she wouldn't have to be more specific about the vial of gray powder she had asked Victor to have tested. Will might have been okay speaking freely around Charlie Reed, but Faith didn't know the man well enough to trust him with her career.

Will said, "Go to Tech. See if there are any results." He found Kayla Alexander's class picture and tore out the page from the yearbook. He handed it to Faith. "While you're there, ask Tommy Albertson if he's ever seen this girl hanging around either Adam or Gabe Cohen. Ask everybody in the dorm if you have to." He flipped to another page and found Bernard's faculty photograph. He tore it out, saying, "Show this one, too."

Faith took the photographs.

Will opened another yearbook, searching for his own copies of the photos. "I'm going to go to the Copy Right and do the same."

Faith looked at the bedside clock. "You said the next ransom call is supposed to come at four?"

Carefully, he tore out the right pages. "The killer is probably with Emma right now, getting the

second proof of life.”

Faith put the yearbook on the bed. She started to walk away, but stopped, knowing something was different. She fanned out the yearbooks, finding the three that did not belong. They were thicker, their colors not as vibrant. “Why does Bernard have yearbooks from Crim?” Faith asked. The Alonzo A. Crim High School was located in Reynoldstown, a transitional area in east Atlanta. It was probably one of the seedier schools in the system.

Will told her, “At least we know where Bernard taught before he moved to Westfield.”

Faith was silent as she thumbed through the pages. She had never been one to believe in fate or spirits or angels sitting on your shoulder, but she had long trusted what she thought of as her cop’s instinct. Carefully, she skimmed the index in the back for Evan Bernard’s name. She found his photo in the faculty section, but he also sponsored the newspaper staff.

Faith found the appropriate page for the staff photo. The kids were in the usual silly poses. Some of them wearing fedoras that had “press” tags sticking out of them. Some had pencils to their mouths or were eyeballing the camera over folded newspapers. A pretty young blonde stood out, not because she wasn’t hamming for the camera, but because she stood very close to a much younger-looking Evan Bernard. The photo was black-and-white, but Faith could imagine the color of her strawberry blond hair, the freckles scattered across her nose.

She told Will, “That’s Mary Clark.”



According to a very angry Olivia McFaden, within half an hour of Evan Bernard’s arrest, Mary Clark had abandoned her classroom. The teacher had simply taken her purse out of the desk, told her students to read the next section in their textbooks, then left the building.

Faith found the woman easily enough. Mary’s beat-up Honda Civic was parked outside her family’s home on Waddell Street in Grant Park. People took good care of their homes here, but it was nothing like the richer climes of Ansley Park, where professionally manicured lawns and expensive gray-water reclamation tanks made sure the lawns stayed green, flowers kept blooming, all through the summer. Trashcans lined the road, and Faith had to idle the Mini while the garbage truck slowly made its way up the hill, emptying the cans and crawling along to the next house.

Grant Park was a family-friendly neighborhood that managed to be barely affordable while still being in the city limits of Atlanta. Trees arched overhead and fresh paint gleamed in the afternoon sun. The houses were a mixed variety, some shotgun style, some Victorian. All of them had seen a whirlwind of remodeling and renovation during the housing boom, only to find all their paper equity gone when the boom went to a bust.

Still, a handful of houses had been passed by in the race for bigger and better—single-story cottages popped up here and there, neighboring homes looming two and three stories above them. Mary Clark’s house was one of these poor cousins. From the outside, Faith guessed the house probably had two bedrooms and one bathroom. Nothing about the house overtly pointed to disrepair, but there was a certain air of neglect to the place.

Faith walked up the stone steps. A large two-toddler stroller of the type used for runners seemed to be taking up permanent space on the front porch. Toys were scattered about. The porch swing looked weathered from its place on the ground. The hardware and chains rusted in a pile beside it. Faith gathered someone had started the weekend project with great intentions but never followed through. The front door was painted a high gloss black, the window curtained on the other side. There was no doorbell. She raised her hand to knock just as the door opened.

A short, bearded man stood in the doorway. He had a small child on either hip, each in various states of oblivious happiness at the prospect of a stranger at the door. “Yes?”

“I’m Detective Faith Mitchell with the—”

“It’s okay, Tim,” a distant voice called. “Let her in.”

Tim didn’t seem to want to comply, but he stepped back, letting Faith come into the house. “She’s in the kitchen.”

“Thank you.”

Tim seemed to want to say something more to her—a warning, perhaps?—but he kept his mouth closed as he left the house with the twins. The door clicked shut behind him.

Faith glanced around the room, not knowing whether she was expected to stay here or to find the kitchen. The Clarks had chosen a post-college eclectic style for the living room, mixing brand-new pieces with old. A ratty couch sat in front of an ancient-looking television set. The

leather recliner was modern and fashionable, but for faint scratches on the legs that showed signs of a recent visit from a cat. Toys were scattered all over the place; it was as if FAO Schwarz had fired off a bunker-buster from their New York headquarters.

A quick glance into the open doorway of what must have been the master bedroom showed even more toys. Even at fifteen, Faith had known not to let Jeremy have every room of the house. It was no wonder parents looked exhausted all of the time. There was no space in their homes that belonged completely to them.

"Hello?" Mary called.

Faith followed the voice, walking down a long hallway that led to the back of the house. Mary Clark was standing at the sink, her back to the window. She held a cup of coffee in her hand. Her strawberry blond hair was down around her shoulders. She was wearing jeans and a large, ill-fitting T-shirt that must have belonged to her husband. Her face was blotchy, her eyes red-rimmed.

Faith said, "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Do I have a choice?"

Faith sat down at the table, a 1950s metal and laminate set with matching chairs. The kitchen was cozy, far from modern. The sink was mounted onto a one-piece unit that had been painted a pastel green. All of the cabinets were the original metal. There was no dishwasher, and the stove tilted to the side. Matching pencil marks on either side of the doorway celebrated each growth spurt Mary's twins had experienced.

Mary tossed her coffee into the sink, put the cup on the counter. "Tim said that I should stay out of this."

Faith gave her back her earlier comment. "Do you have a choice?"

They both stared at each other for a moment. Faith knew the way people acted when they had something to hide, just as she knew how to spot the cues that they wanted to talk. Mary Clark showed none of the familiar traits. If Faith had to guess, she would say the woman was ashamed.

Faith clasped her hands in front of her, waiting for the woman to speak.

"I guess I'm fired?"

"You'll have to talk to McFaden about that."

"They don't really fire teachers anymore. They just give them the shittiest classes until they quit or kill themselves."

Faith did not respond.

"I saw them take Evan out of the school in handcuffs."

"He admitted to having sex with Kayla Alexander."

"Did he take Emma?"

"We're building a case against him," Faith told her. "I can't tell you details."

"He was my teacher at Crim thirteen years ago."

"That's a pretty bad neighborhood."

"I was a pretty bad girl." Her sarcasm was loud and clear, but there was pain underneath the boast, and Faith waited her out, figuring the best way to find the truth was to have Mary lead her there.

The woman slowly walked over to the table and pulled out a chair. She sat down with a heavy sigh, and Faith caught a whiff of alcohol on her breath. "Evan was the only bright spot," Mary told her. "He's the reason I wanted to be a teacher."

Faith was not surprised. Mary Clark, with her pretty blond hair, her piercing blue eyes, was exactly Evan Bernard's type. "He molested you?"

"I was sixteen. I knew what I was doing."

Faith wouldn't let her get away with that. "Did you really?"

Tears came into the woman's eyes. She looked around for a tissue, and Faith got up to get her a paper towel off the roll.

"Thank you," she said, blowing her nose.

Faith gave her a few seconds before asking, "What happened?"

"He seduced me," she said. "Or maybe I seduced him. I don't know how it happened."

"Did you have a crush on him?"

"Oh, yeah." She laughed. "Home wasn't exactly nice for me. My father left when I was little. My mother worked two jobs." She tried to smile. "I'm just another one of those stupid women with a father fixation, right?"

"You were sixteen," Faith reminded her. "You weren't a woman."

She wiped her nose. "I was a handful. Smoking, drinking. Skipping school."

Just like Kayla, Faith thought. "Where did he take you?"

"His house. We hung out there all the time. He was cool, you know? The cool teacher who let us drink at his place." She shook her head. "All we had to do was worship him."

"Did you?"

"I did everything he wanted me to do." Mary shot her a searing look. "Everything."

Faith could see how easily Mary had probably played into Bernard's hands. He had given her safe harbor, but he was also the person who could bring it all to an end with one phone call to her parents.

"How long did it last?"

"Too long. Not long enough." She said, "He had this special room. He kept the door locked. No one was allowed in there."

"No one?" Faith asked, because obviously, Mary Clark had seen it.

"It was all done up like a little girl's room. I thought it was so pretty. White furniture, pink walls. It was the kind of room I thought all the rich girls had."

The man certainly was a creature of habit.

"He was sweet at first. We talked about my dad leaving us, how I felt abandoned. He was nice about it. He just listened. But then he wanted to do other things."

Faith thought of the handcuffs, the vibrator they had found in Bernard's special room. "Did he force you?"

"I don't know," Mary admitted. "He's very good at making you think that you want to do something."

"What kinds of things?"

"He hurt me. He ..." She went very quiet. Faith gave her space, not pressing the woman, knowing that she was fragile. Slowly, Mary pulled down the collar of the baggy T-shirt. Faith saw the raised crescent of a scar just above her left breast. She had been bitten hard enough to draw blood. Evan Bernard had left his mark.

Faith let out a long breath of air. How close had she come as a kid to being just like Mary Clark? It was the luck of the draw that the older man in her life had been a teenage boy instead of a sadistic pedast. "Did he handcuff you?"

Mary put her hand over her mouth, only trusting herself to nod.

"Were you ever afraid for your life?"

Mary did not answer, but Faith could see it in the woman's eyes. She had been terrified, trapped. "It was all a game for him," she said. "We would be together one day, and then the next, he would break it off with me. I lived in constant fear that he would finally leave me, and I would be all alone."

"What happened?"

"He quit in the middle of the year," Mary told her. "I didn't see him again until my first day at Westfield. I just stood there like a gawking teenager, like it was thirteen years ago and he was my teacher. I felt all these things for him, things that I shouldn't feel. I know it's sick, but he was the first man I loved." She looked up at Faith, almost begging her to understand. "All the things he did to me, all the humiliation and the pain and the grief ... I don't know why I can't break this connection I have with him." She was crying again. "How sick is that, that I still have feelings for the man who raped me?"

Faith looked at her hands, not trusting herself to answer. "Why did Evan leave your school?"

"There was another girl. I don't remember her name. She was hurt really badly—raped, beaten. She said that Evan did it to her."

"He wasn't arrested?"

"She was a troublemaker. Like me. Another kid stood up for him, gave him an alibi. Bernard could always get kids to lie for him, but he still quit anyway. I think he knew they were onto him."

"Did you ever see him again? I mean, after he left school, did he try to get in touch with you?"

"Of course not."

Something in her tone made Faith ask, "Did you try to get in touch with him?"

The tears came back, humiliation marring her pretty features. "Of course I did."

"What happened?"

"He had another girl there," she said. "In *our* room. *My* room." Tears rolled down her cheeks. "I screamed at them, threatened to call the police, said whatever stupid thing I could think of to

get him back.” She stared at the markings on the doorjamb, the milestones of her children’s lives. “I remember it was pouring down raining, and cold—cold like it never gets here. I think it actually snowed that year.”

“What did you do?”

“I offered myself to him, whatever he wanted, however he wanted.” She nodded her head, as if agreeing with the memory that she had been willing to debase herself in any way for this man. “I told him I would do anything.”

“What did he say?”

She looked back at Faith. “He beat me like a dog with his hands and fists. I lay there in the street until the morning.”

“Did you go to the hospital?”

“No. I went home.”

“Did you ever go back?”

“Once, maybe three or four months later. I was with my new boyfriend. I wanted to park in front of Evan’s house. I wanted someone else to fuck me there, like I could pay him back.” She chuckled at her naiveté. “Knowing Evan, he would’ve stood at the window, watching us, jerking himself off.”

“He wasn’t there?”

“He had moved. I guess he was on to greener pastures, on to our illustrious Westfield Academy.”

“And you never spoke to him again—not until you saw him your first day at school?”

“No. I wasn’t so stupid that I didn’t understand.”

“Understand what?”

“Before, he never left bruises where people could see them. That’s how I knew it was over. He kicked my face so hard that my cheekbone fractured.” She put her hand to her cheek. “You can’t tell, can you?”

Faith looked at the woman’s pretty face, her perfect skin. “No.”

“It’s on the inside,” she said, stroking her cheek the way she probably soothed her children. “Everything Evan did to me is still on the inside.”



Will walked through the parking lot behind the Copy Right, feeling time start to crush in on him. Evan Bernard would be out of jail this time tomorrow. His accomplice was no closer to being identified. There were no clues to follow up on, no breaks on the horizon. The forensic evidence was a wash. The DNA would take days to process. Amanda was ruthless in her focus. She worked cases to win them, cutting her losses when she felt the odds stacking against her. Unless the four o’clock ransom call revealed something earth-shattering, she would soon start pulling resources, assigning priorities to other cases.

They thought Emma was dead. Will could feel it in the way Faith looked at him, the careful words Amanda chose when she talked about the teenage girl. They had all given up on her—everyone but Will. He could not accept that the girl was gone. He would not accept anything less than bringing a living, breathing child back to Abigail Campano.

He pressed the button beside the door and was buzzed in immediately. As Will walked down the hallway to the Copy Right, he could hear the high-pitched whir of the machines working at full speed. The construction crew on the street added to the cacophony, hammer drills and concrete mixers providing a steady beat. Inside the store, the plate-glass windows facing Peachtree Street were vibrating from the activity.

“Hey, man!” Lionel Petty called. He was sitting behind the front counter, his head bent over a paper plate that contained a very large steak and French fries. Will recognized the logo on the paper sack beside him as that of the Steakery, a fast-food place specializing in large portions of dubiously inexpensive meat.

“You got my phone call!” Petty said, obviously excited. “The construction crew came back this morning. I was shocked, man. Somebody must’ve screwed up their orders.” He looked closely at Will. “Damn, man, you got creamed.”

“Yeah,” Will said, stupidly touching his bruised nose.

The noise level died down a bit and Petty stood up to check the machines.

Will asked, “The contractors—is it the same crew?”

He stopped at one of the copiers and began loading in reams of paper. “Some of them look

familiar. The foreman's been coming in and out of the garage with his big-ass truck. Warren's pissed about it, but there's nothing we can do because we don't technically own the lot."

Will thought about what the manager had told him, how most of their customers never came to the building. "Why does he care?"

"The trash, man—all that litter. It's a matter of respect." He closed the machine and pressed a button. The copier whirled back to life, adding a deep hum to the chorus of spinning wheels and shuffling paper. Loud beeping came from outside as a Bobcat front loader backed into position to move the steel plates off the road.

Petty sat down in front of his meal. "The dust gets dragged all over the carpet. It's so fine that we can't vacuum it up."

"What dust?"

Petty cut into the meat, grease and blood squirting onto the paper plate. "The concrete they use underground."

Will thought of the gray powder. He glanced back at the construction workers. The Bobcat rammed its front shovel into the edge of one of the steel plates, revealing a gaping hole in the road. "What does it look like?"

Petty cupped his hand to his ear. "What?"

Will didn't answer. The hand at Petty's ear held a cheap-looking knife. The handle was wood, the grommets holding it together a faded gold. The blade was jagged but sharp.

Will tried to swallow, his mouth suddenly going dry. The last time he had seen a knife like that, it was lying inches from Adam Humphrey's lifeless hand.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Faith stood outside the conference room door in Victor's building. Behind the glass, she could hear the low murmur of male voices. Her mind was elsewhere—back in Evan Bernard's apartment where he kept his pink vibrator and handcuffs in his little-girl bedroom. Were these the same devices he had used on a teenage Mary Clark? What were some of the sadistic things he'd gotten up to with the girl? Mary wasn't telling, but the truth was written all over her face. He had damaged her deeply in ways the other woman could not articulate—would probably never be able to articulate. It made Faith sick just thinking about it, especially when she was certain that Mary was just one of many, many victims the schoolteacher had targeted over the years.

Faith had called the resource officer at Alonzo Crim High School as soon as she'd made her way out of Grant Park. There was no record of the alleged rape that had forced Evan Bernard to leave his position. Mary Clark could not remember the girl's name—or at least she claimed not to. No charges had been filed against Evan Bernard, so the local precinct had no records of an investigation. Of the hundred or so current faculty members, none had been around during the time Mary Clark was being sadistically abused. There were no witnesses, no evidence and no accomplices in sight.

Still, somewhere out there was another person who knew exactly where Emma Campano was. Will seemed to think there was a chance that the girl was still alive, but Faith held no such illusion. If the killer had a living victim, he would have recorded another proof of life for the second call. This was all well planned out. Bernard was the calm one, the one who remained in control. The Campano house told them that the killer, Emma's abductor, was not similarly gifted. Something must have gone horribly wrong.

Faith had ripped open the envelope her gas bill was supposed to be mailed in and used it to store the yearbook photos of Kayla Alexander and Evan Bernard. She opened it now and looked at Evan Bernard's school photo. He was a good-looking man. He could have easily dated women his own age. Without prior knowledge, Faith would have dated him in a heartbeat. A well-educated, articulate teacher who tutored kids with learning disabilities? There had probably been women lined up at his front door. And yet, he had chosen the young girls who didn't know any better.

Just being in the teacher's house this morning had made Faith feel filthy. His barely legal porn and the painting of the young woman on his bedroom wall all pointed to his sick obsession. She was just as furious as Will that he would easily make bail tomorrow. They needed more time to build a case against him, but right now, the only thing they had to go on was a missing hard drive and a fingerprint that did not belong to their only suspect. And still, there was a nagging question in the back of Faith's mind: was Bernard the key to all this, or was he just a disgusting distraction from the real murderer?

Faith could well understand what a forty-five-year-old man wanted with a seventeen-year-old girl, but could not fathom what had attracted Kayla Alexander to Evan Bernard. His hair was going gray. He had deep wrinkles around his mouth and eyes. He wore suit jackets with corduroy patches at the elbows and brown shoes with black pants. Worse, he had all the power in the relationship, and not just because of his job.

By virtue of the fact that Bernard had simply lived longer than Kayla, he was smarter than her. In the twenty-eight years that separated their ages, he'd garnered more life experiences, gotten more relationships under his belt. It must have been so easy for him to seduce the willful child. Bernard was probably the only adult in her life who encouraged Kayla's bad behavior. He would

have made her feel special, as if he was the one person who understood her. All he would have wanted in return was her life.

At the age of fourteen, Faith had been similarly tricked by a boy who was only three years her senior. He had compromised her in so many ways by holding the threat over her head that if she stopped seeing him, he would tell her parents all the things she had done with him. Faith had just dug herself deeper and deeper, skipping school, breaking curfew, being at his beck and call. And then she had gotten pregnant and he had tossed her aside like a piece of garbage.

The conference room door opened as the meeting adjourned. Men in suits poured out, blinking in the sunlight coming through the windows. Victor seemed surprised to find Faith waiting for him. There was an awkward moment where she reached out to shake his hand just as he went in to kiss her cheek. She laughed nervously, thinking she couldn't adjust to who she was supposed to be right now.

"I'm here for my job," she told him by way of an explanation.

He held out his hand, motioning for her to walk with him. "I got a message that you called earlier. I was hoping it was for a date, but I reached out to Chuck Wilson anyway."

Wilson was the scientist who was analyzing the gray powder Charlie Reed had found. "Does he have anything?"

"I'm sorry, but I haven't heard back from him yet. I made him promise he'd get to it today." He smiled. "We could go to lunch and check with him afterward."

"Sooner would be better. Is there a way to call him?"

"Of course."

They went down a small stairway. She told him, "I need to talk to one of your students, too."

"Which one?"

Faith played with the envelope in her hand, the pictures of Kayla and Bernard. "Tommy Albertson."

"You're in luck," Victor said, glancing at his watch. "He's been waiting for me in my office for the last hour."

"Is he in trouble?"

"That's what the meeting was about." Victor took her arm and led her down the hallway. He lowered his voice. "We've just gotten approval to begin the process of expelling him."

The parent side of Faith experienced a mild form of panic at the thought. "What did he do?"

"A series of extremely stupid pranks," Victor told her. "One of which resulted in destruction of school property."

"What property?"

"He backed up the toilets on his hall last night. We think he used socks."

"Socks?" Faith asked. "Why would he do that?"

"I've given up asking myself why young boys do anything," Victor commented. "My only regret is that I won't be the one who gets to tell him he's out of here."

"Why not?"

"He gets an opportunity to face the expulsion committee and explain his case. I'm a tad concerned because there are some kindred spirits on the panel. It's made up of Tech graduates, most of whom participated in their fair share of idiocy while they were on campus, and most of whom went on to excel in their chosen careers."

Victor reached in front of her and opened the door marked "Dean of Student Relations." His name was in gold letters under the title, and Faith felt a shocking thrill at the sight of it. Her brief bouts of dating were usually with men whose titles generally tended toward the more generic: plumber, mechanic, cop, cop, cop.

"Marty," Victor said to the woman behind the desk. "This is Faith Mitchell." He smiled at Faith. "Faith, this is Marty. She's worked with me for almost twelve years."

The women exchanged pleasantries, but there was a definite understanding between them that they were sizing each other up.

Victor put on his official voice as he told Faith, "Detective Mitchell, Mr. Albertson is a nineteen-year-old adult, so you don't need my permission to talk to him. You're more than welcome to use my office."

"Thank you." Faith tucked the envelope under her arm and walked to another door with Victor's name on it.

Her first thought as she entered the office was that it smelled like Victor's aftershave and looked as masculine and handsome as he was. The space was large with a bank of windows that

looked down on the expressway. His desk was glass on a chrome base. The chairs were low slung but comfortable looking. The couch in the corner was sophisticated, black leather, only marred by the teenage lump sitting on it.

"What are you doing here?" Tommy Albertson wanted to know.

"I'm here to help you with your grief counseling. Apparently, you've been so distraught about what's happened in your dorm over the last few days that you've been acting out."

The large lightbulb over his head flickered before finally turning on. "Yeah," he agreed. "I'm pretty worried about Gabe."

"Do you know if he has a gun?"

"I already answered that question," he reminded her. "No, I don't know if he had a gun. I didn't know he was depressed. I never met that girl—either of them. I just kept my head down, you know? Kept out of everybody's business."

"Is that why you're in Dean Martinez's office when you should be in class?"

"All just a big mix-up," he told her, his shoulders going up in a shrug.

She sat down in one of the chairs across from the couch.

"You're in a lot of trouble here, Tommy."

"I'll be fine," he assured her. "My dad's on his way here to straighten everything out."

"There's not a lot to straighten, considering you destroyed school property."

He shrugged again. "I'll pay for it."

"You will? Or your dad will?"

Again, he shrugged. "What does it matter? He'll make a donation or buy a couple of football uniforms and it'll all be over." He added, "Plus, you know, it's like you said—I was acting out." He grinned. "I'm really torn up about Adam, and then I find out my buddy's depressed and leaving school? Man, too much."

Faith clenched her jaw, trying not to let him know he had gotten to her. She opened the envelope and showed him Evan Bernard's photo. "Have you ever seen this man?"

The boy shrugged.

"Tommy, look at the photo."

He finally sat up on the couch and looked at the picture of Evan Bernard.

Faith asked, "Have you ever seen him?"

Albertson glanced up at her, then back at the photo. "Maybe. I don't know."

She had never in her life wanted so desperately to slap the truth out of anyone. "Which one is it?"

"I said I don't know."

She kept the picture out. "I need you to really look at this, Tommy. It's important. Does this man look familiar to you?"

He sighed, exasperated. "I guess. Was he on TV or something?"

"No. You would have seen him around campus. Maybe Adam or Gabe was with him?"

Albertson took the photograph from her and held it up, studying the face. "I don't know where I've seen him, but he looks familiar."

"Can you think about it some more?"

"Sure." He gave her the photo and slumped back on the couch.

Faith could not hide her irritation. "Now, Tommy. Can you think about it now?"

"I am," he insisted. "I told you, he looks familiar, but I don't know where I've seen him. He kind of reminds me of Han Solo. Maybe that's where I recognize him."

Faith slotted the picture back into the envelope, thinking she looked like Harrison Ford more than Evan Bernard did. "How about her?"

Albertson didn't have to be asked twice to look at Kayla Alexander. "Wow, she's fucking hot." He narrowed his eyes. "She's the chick who died, right?"

Faith knew that Alexander's photo had been all over television for the last three days.

He frowned, handing back the photo. "Man, that's sick, getting wood for a dead girl." When Faith did not take back the picture, he dropped it on the table, a sour expression on his mouth.

"You never saw her before?" Faith asked, tucking the photo back into the envelope.

He shook his head.

"Thanks a lot, Tommy. You've been a real big help." She stood up to leave.

"I can call you if I remember anything." He was smiling in a way that he obviously thought was charming. "Maybe give me your home number?"

Faith bit her lip so that she wouldn't say anything back. His lack of compassion was galling.

She wanted to remind him that Emma Campano was still missing—possibly dead—that a boy who was his age and in his school, someone who had slept less than ten feet from him, had been brutally murdered and that a killer was still at large. Instead, she got up and walked across the room, making herself pull the door to gently so as not to give him the satisfaction.

She kept her hand on the closed door, willing herself to calm down. Victor and his secretary were watching her expectantly. She wanted to rail against the kid, to curse him for being such a heartless bastard, but she did not. It was a bit early in their relationship for Victor to see her bitchy side.

“So?” He stood with his hands in his pockets, his usual smile on his face. “Was he useful?”

“As much as a bag of hair,” she told him. An idea occurred to her. “Did you search his room?”

“What for?”

Faith had thought it inconsequential at the time, but now she said, “For the pot I found in his sock drawer when I was searching Gabe Cohen’s things last night.”

Victor’s smile widened. “Marty, if you could have campus security check into that?”

“Certainly.” The secretary picked up the phone, giving Faith a look of approval.

Victor told Faith, “We have a strict policy on drugs. Automatic expulsion.”

“I think that might be the best news I’ve heard all day.”

“Here’s some more: Chuck Wilson called back. He says he’s got a pretty good guess on what your substance is. He’s across the street at the Varsity if you want to go over and find him.”

Faith felt a flash of heat in her face. She had put the stolen evidence in the back of her mind, treating it as an intangible thing, but now there was no turning away from what she had done.

“Faith?”

“Great.” She made herself smile.

He opened his office door. “Are you sure you can’t grab a quick bite? I know that fast food isn’t very romantic ...”

If Victor wasn’t ready to see her bitchy side, he certainly didn’t need to watch her wolfing down a chili steak sideways with a PC. “I appreciate the invitation, but I’ve got to meet my partner on this case.”

“How’s it going?” he asked, leading her to the building lobby and outside. “Any luck?”

“Some,” she admitted, but wasn’t more specific than that. Evan Bernard’s arrest did not feel like an accomplishment when they still had no idea where Emma Campano was.

“It must be hard for you,” he said, squinting in the sun as they walked past the football stadium. Large brick buildings were opposite; more student housing.

“The not knowing is hard,” she admitted. “I keep thinking about the girl, what it must feel like for her parents.”

He pressed his hand to the small of her back, indicating a one-way street on the right. Faith took the turn, and he continued talking. “I’ve dealt with a lot of students’ problems over the years, but nothing like this. The whole campus feels tense. I can’t imagine what it’s like at the girls’ school. We’ve lost students before, but never to violence.”

Faith was quiet, listening to the soothing sound of his voice, enjoying the sensation of his touch through her thin cotton blouse.

“This way,” Victor said, indicating where the sidewalk narrowed. A tall iron railing cut into the sidewalk, the ground sloping downward.

Faith stopped. They were about two blocks from the North Avenue bridge that crossed I-75 and led to the Varsity. “What’s this?”

“You’ve never used the tunnel before?” Victor asked. She shook her head and he explained, “It’s a shortcut under the interstate. I wouldn’t use it in the middle of the night, but it’s perfectly safe now.” He took her hand as if to assure her—as if she didn’t have a gun on her hip and the ability to use it.

He continued playing the part of tour guide as they walked. “The Varsity was founded by a Tech student by the name of Frank Gordy. He opened it mainly to service the school, but that’s changed quite a bit over the years. We try not to let our students know Gordy dropped out of school in 1925 to start the restaurant. Between Steve Jobs and Bill Gates, it’s hard enough to convince technology majors that there’s actually a reason to complete your degree.”

“You know I can’t say anything,” Faith commented. She’d told him last night that she had dropped out of college a year from graduating. Jeremy had inherited her love of math, and seeing him get his degree was more than enough.

Victor reminded, “Tech has a wonderful adult enrollment program.”

"I'll keep that in mind," she answered, humoring him. You didn't need trigonometry to arrest a vagrant for public intoxication.

They were inside the tunnel, but Victor did not move his hand from her back. Above, Faith could hear the rumble of traffic passing over their heads. She wondered how many Tech engineers had worked on the highway project, and whether or not the city planners had known about the secret passageway. The tunnel was large, about twelve feet wide and at least twenty yards long. The ceiling was low, and though Faith wasn't normally the type, she felt a bit claustrophobic.

Victor continued, "I'm sure you know that the Varsity is the largest drive-in fast-food restaurant in the world. It covers two city blocks. This tunnel comes out on the north side of the building at Third Street."

"I don't remember this part of the tour when Jeremy visited the campus."

"It's a well-kept secret. You should see this place during football games. It's wall to wall."

Faith felt herself sweating, even though it was cooler underground. Her heart started pounding for no reason and no matter how far they walked, the stairs lining the tunnel exit seemed to get farther away.

"Hey." He sounded concerned. "You okay?"

She nodded her head, feeling silly. "I just—" She realized she was clutching the envelope and slipped out the pictures to make sure she hadn't creased them. When she looked up at Victor, she felt her panic from a few moments before start to return. His face was hard, angry.

She asked, "What is it?"

He glared at her, his fury almost tangible. "What are you doing with pictures of Evan Bernard?"

"How do you—"

He quickly closed the space between them, grabbing her right arm. His grip was tight. He was left-handed. Why hadn't she noticed that before?

"Victor—" she breathed, panic taking hold.

"Tell me what you know," he demanded. "Tell me right now."

Faith felt her right arm go numb where Victor was grabbing her. "What are you talking about?" she asked, her heart beating hard enough to hurt.

He pressed, "Was this some kind of sting operation?"

"To catch you doing what?"

"I have no connection to that man. You tell them that."

"You're hurting me."

Victor let go of her. He looked down at her bare arm, the mark he had made. "I'm sorry," he said, walking back to his side of the tunnel. He ran his fingers through his hair, pacing nervously. "I don't know Evan Bernard. I had no idea what he was doing. I never saw him with students, I never even saw him on campus."

She rubbed her arm, trying to get the feeling back. "Victor, what the hell are you talking about?"

Victor put his hands in his pockets, rocked back on his heels. "Just tell me, Faith. Does this mean anything to you, or are you investigating me?"

"For what? What did you do?"

"I didn't *do* anything. That's what I'm trying to tell you." He shook his head. "I really liked you, and this was all some kind of game, wasn't it?"

"Game?" she demanded. "I've spent the last three days trying to find the sick fuck who killed two people and abducted another to do God knows what to her. You think this is some sort of game?"

"Faith—"

"No," she snapped. "You don't get to sound like the reasonable one here. Tell me exactly what's going on, Victor, starting with your connection to Evan Bernard."

"He's been a part-time tutor for over twenty years. Our students aren't exactly well versed in liberal arts. He helped them with their course work."

"Was Adam Humphrey one of his students?"

"No, we fired Bernard last year. He taught remedial classes during summer term. We found out he was having an affair with a student. Several students. He's suing us—he's suing me—for wrongful termination."

"Why you personally?"

"Because the program fell under student services. Bernard's suing anyone who was remotely connected with the tutoring program. He lost his state pension, his benefits, his retirement."

"It's illegal for him to have sex with students."

"Not unless you catch him red-handed," he countered in disgust. "None of the girls would testify against him."

"Then how did you find out?"

"One of them came forward. He was pretty rough with her. There was some kind of fight and she got hurt. She didn't come to us until a few weeks later. I tried to get her to go to the police, but she wouldn't. Her word against his, right? She was scared of being paraded in front of the media. She was scared of being ostracized by the campus." His lips went into a thin line. "It's disgusting enough that it happened, but for him to sue us ..."

"Why isn't this public knowledge?"

"Because he wants money, not headlines, and the university sure as hell isn't going to call up CNN and give them the scoop. It's only about the money, Faith. That's all it ever boils down to." He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"He teaches at a high school. Did you know that?"

"The lawyers told us not to contact them. He could sue us for slander."

"It's not slander if you're telling the truth."

"That's a high-minded attitude when you're not looking at fifty thousand dollars in legal bills to defend yourself against a bastard you've never even met." He crossed his arms over his chest. "I'm sorry, Faith. I saw the photos and I thought they sent you to get me."

"It's not a criminal case."

"I know that," he said. "I'm just so ..." He shook his head, leaving her to fill in the blanks. "I'm paranoid. I worked damn hard to get where I am and I don't want to lose my job and my house because of some asshole who can't keep his dick in his pocket." He shook his head again. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't use that kind of language. I shouldn't have grabbed you, either. I'm under a tremendous amount of stress. That's not an excuse. I know that."

"Why didn't you tell me about this before? We spent the night together talking about everything *but* this."

"For the same reason you didn't talk about your case. It was nice to just talk to a human being about normal stuff. I've been dealing with this lawsuit all summer. I just wanted somebody who sees me as Victor the nice guy, not the administrator who's being sued because students got poached on his watch."

Faith wrapped her arms around her waist, frustration building to the boiling point. Emma Campano had been abducted by a madman. How many more people had been standing idly by while the girl was being brutalized, her friends were being killed? "You have no idea what you've done." He tried to respond and she shook her head. "This man could be connected to my case, Victor. He was sleeping with one of the girls who died. His sperm was found inside her body."

His mouth opened in shock. "What are you saying?"

"That Evan Bernard is a suspect in our case."

"He kidnapped that girl? He killed ..." Victor seemed truly horrified by the prospect.

She was so angry that she felt tears come into her eyes. "We don't know, but if you'd shared this information with me two days ago, you might have spared another girl from—"

Footsteps echoed in the tunnel. Faith shielded her eyes from the harsh lights and made out a round figure making its way toward them. As the man got closer, she could see that he was wearing shorts, a T-shirt and a white lab coat that was stained with catsup.

"Chuck," Victor said, his voice strained as he tried to get back his composure. He reached toward Faith, but she shrugged him off. He still managed introductions. "This is Faith Mitchell. We were just coming to find you."

By way of greeting, Chuck said, "Shockrete."

Faith asked, "Sorry?"

"Your gray powder is Shockrete. It's a high-density concrete that's reinforced with titanium fibers."

"What's it used for?"

"Retaining walls, wine cellars, skateboard parks, swimming pools." He glanced around. "Tunnels."

"Like this one?"

"This baby's old," he said, patting the low ceiling. "Besides, I found granite in the mix."

"Like Stone Mountain?" she asked, referencing a mountain that was several miles outside the city.

"That particular granite is known for its clusters of tourmaline, which aren't common to other granites. I'm no igneous petrologist, but my guess is that it's our trusty three-hundred-million-year-old Atlanta bedrock."

She tried to put him back on point. "So it came from a tunnel in the city?"

"I'd say a construction site."

"What kind?"

"Any kind, really. Shockcrete's sprayed on the walls, the ceiling, to hold back soil."

"Would it be used in water main construction, fixing lines under the road?"

"Almost exclusively. As a matter of fact—"

There was more, but Faith was running too fast to hear him.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Will repeated his question. “What does the concrete powder look like?”

“Like you’d expect,” Petty answered, indicating the glass door Will had just walked through.

He could see it now. Light gray footprints across the blue carpet. Will glanced around the room, the furiously working copiers, the empty storefront. Anyone who had been in the Copy Right or the parking lot could have tracked through the concrete dust and deposited it anywhere, but only one of them was holding a knife that matched the one used to kill Kayla Alexander and Adam Humphrey.

He asked Petty, “Are you the only one here?”

The man nodded, chewing another bite of steak. “Warren should be back soon. He’s out making a delivery.”

“He has a van?”

“Nah, it’s just down the street. We walk over the deliveries sometimes. It kind of breaks the monotony.”

Outside, the jackhammer kicked in, the vibrations so hard that Will could feel the floor shaking under his feet.

Will raised his voice, asking, “Do you ever make deliveries?”

He shrugged. “Sometimes.”

“What?” Will asked, though he had heard the man well enough. “I can’t hear you over the jackhammer.”

“I said sometimes.”

Will shook his head, pretending he still couldn’t hear. This wasn’t going to be like Evan Bernard. Will would not leave this building without a suspect in handcuffs and a solid case to back the arrest. Petty had the knife, he had the opportunity and he certainly had the motive—what better way to end his illustrious career at the Copy Right than to retire with a million dollars cold hard cash in his pocket? Having Emma Campano in the process would be icing on the cake.

Was that enough, though? Was this pathetic pothead the kind of man who could beat a girl to death and take another away for his own pleasure? Faith had said she’d be the ruler of the world if she could spot a killer from a hundred paces. Was Lionel Petty someone who hid murder in his heart, or was he just caught up in something bad—the wrong place at the wrong time?

Either way, Will wanted to get Petty away from the exit and in an enclosed space where he could talk to him. He especially wanted him to put down the knife.

He told the man, “I still can’t hear you.”

Petty cupped his hands to his mouth, making a joke of it. “Sometimes I make deliveries!”

Will knew the office was in back of the room. He guessed that all the paperwork would be kept there. He yelled to Petty, “I need to see who you deliver to.”

Petty nodded, dropping the knife and standing up. He started to leave, then changed his mind. Will reached around to his paddle holster as Petty’s fingers moved toward the knife, but the man only scooped up a handful of French fries. He ate them as he led Will to the back of the store. At the door to the office, he pulled out a ring of keys.

Will asked, “Does Warren always leave those with you?”

“Never, man.” He jammed a key into the lock, pushed open the door and sat down in front of the desk. The noise was somewhat buffered in the small room, and Petty spoke in a normal tone. “Warren forgot his keys last night. I don’t know what’s up with him. He keeps forgetting things.” He opened a desk drawer and started to riffle the files. “It’s hilarious, because he really hates to

fuck up.”

Will stood in the doorway, feeling the breeze of the air-conditioning freeze the sweat on his back, gluing his shirt and vest together. He leaned into the door frame, reaching his hand around to his back, finding his gun snugly tucked into the paddle holster.

Petty mumbled to himself as he searched the files. “Sorry, man, Warren has his own system for filing things.”

“Take your time,” Will said. He looked at the CDs lining the walls, the way the colored jewel cases were stacked together in their own particular order. It reminded him of his own CD collection at home, the way he identified certain albums not by their words, but by their colors, their recording logos, their artwork.

Will felt a prickling sensation work its way up his spine. “What about the customer files on the shelves? Does Warren have a system for those, too?”

“The CDs?” Petty laughed. “Shit, man, I can’t even begin to tell you how he’s got those filed. I’m not even allowed to *touch* them.”

“But Warren knows where everything is, right?”

“He can find it with his eyes closed.”

Will doubted that. Warren would need to see the colors, the patterns, before he could find the disc he needed. “Were you working here the day Emma was abducted?”

“I was off, man. Total headache.”

“Is Warren left-handed?”

Petty held up his hand in response. Will couldn’t tell which one it was; discerning between left and right was something his brain could not easily manage.

“Here we go,” Petty said, pulling out a file. “Ignore the typos. Warren’s such a freaktard. He’s, like, incapable of spelling anything, but he won’t admit it.”

“What do you mean?” Will asked, though he already knew the answer. Warren color-coded the CDs, relying on visual cues to help him find the right file. The evidence had been staring Will in the face the first time he’d come into the manager’s office to look at the security tape. Warren used the color-coding system for the same reason as Will: he could not read.

Petty said, “Warren’s all right most of the time, but the dude won’t admit he’s wrong about anything. It’s like working in the fucking White House around here.”

“I meant the typos. You said he can’t spell. What do you mean?”

Petty shrugged, handing him a sheet of paper. “Like that, man. I mean, it’s like he’s in kindergarten, right?”

Will glanced down at the sheet. His stomach roiled. He couldn’t see anything but lines.

“Wait till you see this.” Petty opened another drawer, and between the hanging files, Will saw several knives like the one Petty had been gripping.

“Where did you get those?”

Petty leaned down, stretching his hand to the back of the drawer. “Uh, the cafeteria down the street. Are you going to report us?”

“Warren steals them, too?”

“We both do, man. The Steakery only gives you those cheap-ass plastic knives.” He sat up, holding a book in his lap. “I’ll take ‘em back, dude. I know it’s stealing.”

Will motioned toward the book. “Let me have that.”

Petty handed it over. “Pathetic, man. He’s always acting like he’s perfect, right, that he’s some kind of mental genius, and then he sneaks in with this? Classic Warren. What a loser.”

Will stared at the front cover. He couldn’t read the title, but he instantly recognized the multicolored triangles and squares. Evan Bernard had shown him a similar book this morning. It was the same kind that Emma Campano used.

“Open it up,” Petty said. “‘See spot run.’ ‘See Jill wet her pants.’ I mean, it’s, like, a book for retarded one-year-olds. Cracks me up, man.”

Will didn’t open the book. “Where did he get this?”

Petty shrugged, leaning back in the chair. “I go through his stuff sometimes when I get bored. I found it shoved in the back of the drawer about a week, two weeks ago.” He didn’t seem ashamed of the habit, but he offered another piece of information to redeem himself. “Warren’s got these weekly reports that he’s supposed to send to corporate. I go through his computer and make it look less like a moron did it.”

“He doesn’t use spell-check?”

“Dude, spell-check is not Warren’s friend.”

There was no computer on his desk. "Where's his computer?"

"He used to keep it here, but lately he's been carrying it with him in his briefcase." He pumped his fist up and down suggestively. "Probably trolling porn on the wireless we pick up from the coffee shop."

"What kind of computer is it?"

"Mac. Pretty sweet."

"Does he have a car?"

"He hoofs it."

"He lives close by?"

"Not far. He takes MARTA." Petty finally got suspicious. "Why are you asking all these questions about Warren, man?"

Will thumbed through the book. The pages fell open to the center where someone had used a plastic laminated card to mark the page. Will looked at the card, saw Adam Humphrey's picture.

There was a buzzing sound. Petty turned around in the chair to squint up at the security cameras. He pressed a button on the desk, saying, "Speak of the devil."

Will watched the monitor as Warren Grier opened the glass door out in the parking deck.

"Stay here," he told Petty. "Lock the door and call 9-1-1. Tell them that an officer needs immediate assistance." Petty sat frozen in his chair, and Will told him, "I'm not fooling around, Lionel. Do it."

Will pulled the door closed behind him. The jackhammer had stopped, but the copiers were still running, the clack of papers humming in his ears. Will was at the counter by the time Warren made his way to the front. The man was wearing his blue Copy Right shirt and carrying a beat-up brown briefcase in his hand.

He was understandably alarmed to see Will standing behind the counter. Warren asked, "Where's Petty?"

"Bathroom," Will told him. Warren was on the other side of the counter, just a few feet away. Will could have reached out and grabbed him by the collar, yanked him over the counter without missing a beat. "I told him I'd catch the phones for him."

Warren glanced down at Petty's lunch, the knife. "Is everything okay?"

"I'm here to show you guys some photos." Will reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out the yearbook pages, hoping the fact that his heart was about to beat out of his chest was not as evident as it felt. He fanned out the photos so that Kayla was in front, half of Evan Bernard's face obscured behind her. "Do you mind taking a look at these for me?"

Slowly, Warren put his briefcase on the floor. He stared at the pictures a good while before he took them. "I've seen this girl on the news," he said, his tone of voice a few octaves higher than normal. "She's the one who was stabbed, right?"

"Beaten," Will corrected, leaning down on the counter so he could get closer to Warren. "Someone beat her to death with his fists."

There was a slight tremble to the young man's hand, a nervousness that Will shared. The photo of Bernard was still visible, and Warren moved his fingers to cover it with Kayla's image. "I thought she was stabbed."

"No," Will said. "The boy was stabbed—just once in the chest. His lung collapsed."

"The mother didn't kill him?"

"No," Will lied. "He died from the knife wound. We got the coroner's report this morning." He added, "It's sad, really. I think he just got in the way. I think whoever killed him was just trying to keep him away from Emma."

Warren kept staring at the photo of Kayla Alexander.

"Kayla wasn't raped," Will told him, trying to imagine Warren Grier in a fury, straddling Kayla Alexander, plunging the knife into her chest over and over again. Adam Humphrey would have been next, a single stab wound to the chest. And then Emma ... what had he done to Emma?

Will said, "We don't think the killer is that kind of person."

"You don't?"

"No," Will said. "We think whoever killed Kayla just got angry. Maybe she said something to him, goaded him into it. She wasn't a very nice person."

"I ... uh ..." He still stared at the photo. "I could guess that from looking at her."

"She could be very cruel."

He nodded.

"The other man," Will began, fanning out the pictures so that Evan Bernard was fully visible.

"We've arrested him for raping Kayla."

Warren did not respond.

"His sperm was inside her. He must have had sex with her right before she went to see Emma Campano."

Warren kept his eyes on the photos.

"We just want her back, Warren. We just want to return Emma to her family."

He licked his lips, but said nothing.

"Her mother looks just like her. Have you seen her picture on the news?"

Warren nodded again.

"Abigail," Will provided. "In the pictures they're showing, she's beautiful, don't you think? Just like Emma."

His shoulders went up slowly in a shrug.

"She doesn't look like that now, though." Will felt the tension between them almost as if another person was standing there. "She can't sleep. She can't eat. She cries all the time. When she realized that Emma was missing, she had to be sedated. We had to call in a doctor to help her."

Warren spoke so quietly that Will had to strain to hear. "What about Kayla? Is her mom upset?"

"Yeah," Will said. "Not as much, though. She understood that her daughter was not a very nice person. I think she's relieved."

"What about the guy's parents?"

"They're from Oregon. They flew down last night to collect his body."

"Did they take it back?"

"Yes," Will lied. "They took him back home to bury him."

Warren surprised him. "I didn't have parents."

Will forced a smile, conscious that there was a twitch to his lip. "Everybody has parents."

"Mine left me," Warren said. "I don't have anybody."

"Everybody has somebody," Will said.

Without warning, Warren dropped to the floor. Will leaned over the counter, trying to stop him, but he wasn't fast enough. Warren was on his back, flat to the ground. He held a short-nosed revolver in his hands. The muzzle was a few inches from Will's face.

"Don't do this," Will said.

"Hands where I can see them," Warren ordered, wriggling to stand. "I've never used a gun before, but I don't think it matters when you're this close."

Slowly, Will straightened up, keeping his hands in the air. "Tell me what happened, Warren."

"You're never going to find her."

"Did you kill her?"

"I love her," Warren said, taking a step back, keeping the gun trained on Will's chest. "That's what you don't understand. I took her because I love her."

"Evan just wanted the money, didn't he? He pushed you to take Emma so he could cash in. You never wanted to do it. It was all his idea."

Warren did not answer. He took another step toward the hall that led to the parking garage.

"Emma wasn't his type, right? He likes girls like Kayla, the ones who fight back."

Warren kept inching toward the exit.

Will's words came out in a rush. "I grew up in care, too, Warren. I know what it's like on visiting days. Sitting there, waiting for someone to pick you. It's not about having a place to live, it's about having someone there who looks at you and really sees you and wants you to belong to them. I know you felt like that when you saw Emma, that you wanted to—"

Warren put his finger to his lips, the way you would quiet a child. He took another step, then another, and he was gone.

Will vaulted the counter. As he reached the hallway, he saw Warren shouldering open the back door. He pursued the man, bursting through the exit, rounding into the parking lot in time to see Warren slam into a bright red Mini.

Will jogged toward the car as Faith got out. Warren was obviously dazed, but adrenaline kicked in as he realized Will was closing in. He stepped on the bumper and jumped clear of the car, making a break for the street.

"It's him!" Will screamed at Faith, bolting over the Mini. He ran out into the street, furiously searching for any sign of Warren. He spotted the man almost a block down the road and gave

chase, his arms pumping, his legs screaming.

The afternoon heat was intense, nearly suffocating him as he ran after the younger man. Will gulped hot air and exhaust into his lungs. Sweat poured into his eyes. Will saw a red blur in his periphery and realized that Faith was in her car, driving against traffic. The Mini bumped furiously up and down as it careened over metal plates in the road.

Warren saw Faith, too. He veered off the main road, going down one of the side streets that led into Ansley Park. The younger man was fast, but Will's stride was twice his. He managed to close the gap between them as he took the turn down the side road. Even when Warren ran into the woods, Will was able to make up time. He had always been a marathoner, not a sprinter. Long distances were his passion, endurance the only thing he could offer to any competition.

Warren was obviously the opposite. As he maneuvered through the thick woods, he started to lag, and the space between the two men got shorter and shorter. The man kept looking over his shoulder, his mouth gaping open as he gasped for breath. Will was inches from him, close enough to reach out and grab the collar of his shirt. Warren knew this, could obviously feel the heat on the back of his neck. He did the only thing he could. He stopped short and Will was going so fast that he practically flipped over Warren's head as they both slammed into the ground.

Dirt and leaves kicked up as each man scrambled to stand. Will tried to roll over, but his foot was caught in something. He jerked his leg, furiously trying to free himself. Warren seized the advantage, straddling him, pointing the gun at Will's face and pulling the trigger.

Nothing happened.

He pulled the trigger again.

"Hold it!" Faith screamed. She had somehow gotten in front of them. Her body blocked out the sunlight, her hands casting a shadow across Will's face. Her gun was trained squarely between Warren's eyes. "Drop it, motherfucker, or I will blow your brains back to Peachtree."

Warren stared up at her. Will could not see the man's eyes, but he knew what Warren was looking at. Faith was tall and blond and pretty. She could be Emma or Kayla or even Abigail Campano. The sun was behind her. Maybe it gave Warren the impression that an angel was standing over him. Maybe you did what you were told when there was a gun in your face.

Warren dropped his weapon. It hit Will's chest, then fell onto the ground.

Will put his hand on the revolver as he rolled out from under the man. His leg came free from the vines with a gentle pull. He realized he had stopped breathing. He felt light-headed and slightly ill.

"You have the right to remain silent," Faith said, her handcuffs clicking around Warren's wrist. "You have the right to an attorney."

Will sat up, the dizziness taking over for a few seconds. He held the gun in his hands. Smith & Wesson classic model 36, 17/8" with a blue case. The serial number was gone. Duct tape covered the grip to keep fingerprints from transferring. The weapon had been professionally prepped.

He guessed that Adam had bought a gun, after all.

Will opened the cylinder and turned it upside down. The revolver was designed to hold five rounds. Three bullets fell into the palm of his hand. Will stared at the shiny brass, smelling the scent of powder mixed with oil.

If Warren had pulled the trigger one more time, Will would be dead right now.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



Faith was struck by how normal she found Warren Grier. He was average looking, the sort of young man you wouldn't think twice about letting into your house to fix your toilet or check for a gas leak. Considering what had happened to Kayla Alexander and Adam Humphrey, what had most likely been done to Emma Campano, Faith had expected a monster, or at the very least an arrogant sociopath like Evan Bernard.

Instead, she found Warren Grier almost pitiable. His body was thin and wiry. He couldn't make eye contact with her. Sitting in the chair across from her in the interrogation room, his shoulders hunched, his hands clasped low between his knees, he reminded her more of Jeremy that time he'd gotten caught stealing candy from the store than a cold-blooded killer.

She cleared her throat and he glanced up at her, shy, as if they were in high school and she was the cheerleader who was nice to him when her friends were not looking. He seemed almost grateful to be sitting across from her. Had she not seen him with her own eyes less than an hour ago pointing a gun in Will Trent's face, Faith would have laughed at the prospect of this introspective, awkward man being capable of such a thing.

Faith had only drawn her gun twice in her career. It was not a thing a police officer did lightly. You did not pull your weapon unless you were ready to use it, and there were a finite number of circumstances that justified that happening. Standing there in the woods, looking down at Warren Grier, watching his finger pull back on the trigger, she had been fully prepared to pull back her own finger.

But it would have been too late. Faith had been following procedure. She could have safely told any review panel that she was doing the job as she had been trained to do: you give a warning first, then you shoot. Faith knew now that she would never again give that warning. Warren had already pulled the trigger twice by the time she got there. The only thing that had kept him from pulling it a third time, sending the firing pin into the back of a bullet, the bullet through the back of Will's brain, was ... what?

She felt a rush of heat just thinking about the close call. Faith had to remind herself that the irrational side of Warren Grier was the one that they needed to keep in mind at all times. Evan Bernard was the cool and collected one. Warren was the reactionary, the person who was capable of a frenzied murder. He had abducted Emma Campano. He had stabbed Adam Humphrey. He had beaten Kayla Alexander to death.

Faith realized that over the last twelve hours, she had allowed herself to think that Emma Campano was probably dead. Now she found herself coming to terms with the possibility that Emma was still alive, and that the only way to find her was through the killer sitting on the other side of the table.

She hoped to God that Will was up to the challenge.

Warren said, "The construction guys say that the water main should be fixed soon. That'll be nice to have the street clear, finally."

Faith turned slightly in her chair, facing away from him. There was a camera on a tripod at the head of the table, their every movement being recorded. She thought about Evan Bernard's little-girl room and wondered if Warren Grier had sat in front of the computer next door, watching him. They hadn't found a hard drive in the man's apartment. They hadn't found a laptop computer or anything remotely incriminating.

"They sure were busy this afternoon," he said. "It was very noisy."

She felt her pity seep away, her disgust take hold.

According to Lionel Petty, Warren spent a lot of time in his office with the door closed. Had he

watched Emma and Adam in the parking lot on the security monitor? Is that when he'd first spotted Emma? How did Kayla fit into all of this? Where did Evan Bernard come in?

Faith had been processing Warren through the system, watching him get photographed and fingerprinted and searched. Will had told her about Warren's dingy apartment on Ashby Street downtown. It was a one-room affair with a toilet down the hall, the sort of place you moved into when you just got out of jail. Warren's landlady was shocked to hear that her quiet tenant of ten years had been arrested. He never went out except for work, she had told Will. He never had friends around.

So where was he keeping Emma Campano?

As if he could read her mind, Warren said, "You won't find her."

Faith did not respond, did not try to read any sense of hope in his words. Warren had tried several times to engage her in conversation. She had taken the bait the first few times, but quickly learned that he was playing her. He wanted to talk about the weather, the news story about the drought—anything to engage her in meaningless conversation. Faith had learned a long time ago that you never gave suspects what they wanted. It put the relationship on the wrong foot if they thought that they were the ones in control.

There was a knock at the door, then Will came into the room. He had several neon-colored file folders in his hand. He nodded at Faith as he checked the camera, making sure everything was working properly.

Warren said, "I'm sorry I tried to kill you."

Will smiled at him. "I'm glad you didn't succeed."

It showed remarkable restraint, and Faith was again struck by how very little Will Trent acted like a cop. He straightened his vest, making sure his tie was tightly tucked in, as he sat down beside Faith. The man looked more like an accountant who was about to start an audit than a cop.

Will told Warren, "Your fingerprint matches the note that was slipped under Adam Humphrey's door last week."

Warren nodded his head once. He stayed hunched over the table, his hands between his knees. His chest was pressed into the metal top the way babies do when they're trying to stand.

Will asked, "Did you try to warn Adam away?"

Warren gave a single nod again.

"May I tell you what I think happened?"

He seemed to be waiting for just that.

"I think that you planned this out well ahead of time. Evan Bernard needed money to pursue his legal case against Georgia Tech. He lost his pension, his retirement benefits, everything," Will told Faith. "We found out that he sold his house last summer to pay his legal bills." He shook his head, indicating they had checked the house and found nothing.

Faith wondered what other information he had unearthed while she had been sitting on Warren. She glanced at the colored file folders, and Will gave her an uncharacteristic wink.

Warren asked, "Did you get adopted out?"

Faith didn't understand the question, but Will obviously did.

"No," he answered. "I left when I was eighteen."

Warren smiled, a kindred spirit. "Me, too."

"Did you meet Bernard when you got fostered out? Did he teach at your school?"

Warren's face was placid.

"I think that Evan Bernard introduced you to Kayla Alexander. He needed Kayla to open the front door for you, to make sure that Emma was at home. Maybe she was supposed to keep Adam calm while you took her away." Warren did not confirm anything. "Was Kayla the one who told Emma to start parking in the garage?"

Warren said, "Kayla told Emma to park there last year so her parents wouldn't find out they were skipping."

"Let's go back three days ago, the day of the crime. Did you use the path in the woods behind the Copy Right to walk to the Campanos?"

"Yes."

"Did you have the knife and the gloves with you?"

"Yes."

"So you went there intending to kill somebody."

He hesitated, then shrugged in answer.

Will thumbed through the files in his hand and opened the green one. "We found this in your desk at the copy center." He showed Faith the photograph before sliding it toward Warren. The picture showed Emma Campano walking with Adam Humphrey. The two teenagers had their arms around each other. Emma's head was tilted back as she laughed.

Will said, "You liked watching her."

Warren did not respond, but then Will hadn't really asked a question.

"Did you think that Adam wasn't good enough for her?"

He remained silent.

"You knew Emma was special. Who told you she had a reading problem like you?"

"I don't have a reading problem." His tone was defensive, a radical change from the conversational manner he had adopted before.

Will opened another folder, this one blue, and showed Faith an official-looking form. "This is an evaluation from a clinical psychologist who interviewed Warren when he was released from the state's care." Will put the sheet of paper down on the table, turning it toward Warren. Faith saw that there were colored dots on the page. Will put his finger on the blue one. " 'Antisocial,' " he read, moving down to the red dot. " 'Sociopathic tendencies.' " He moved his finger down to the next dot, then the next, calling out, " 'Anger control issues.' 'Poor aptitude.' 'Poor reading skills.' Do you see this, Warren? Do you see what they said about you?" He paused, though obviously he didn't expect an answer. Will tucked the form back into the folder, and the tone of the interview suddenly changed when he said, "Well, I guess it doesn't matter if you can see it, because it clearly says that you can't read it."

Pain flashed in the other man's eyes as if he had been betrayed.

Will kept chipping away, his tone soft, as if he could be both the good and the bad cop rolled into one. "Is that why you dropped out of school when you were sixteen?"

Warren shook his head.

"I guess school wasn't that fun since they stuck you with the stupid kids." For Faith's benefit, Will explained, "Warren was put into special education classes when he was fifteen, even though his IQ tested within the normal range."

Warren looked down at the table, his eyes still glistening.

Will said, "It's kind of sad when the short bus pulls up in front of the orphanage."

Warren cleared his throat, struggling to speak. "You're never going to find her."

"And you're never going to see her again."

"I have her up here," he insisted, pressing his finger to his temple. "I have her with me all the time."

"I know she's alive," Will said, sounding so certain of himself that Faith almost believed him. "You wouldn't kill her, Warren. She's special to you."

"She loves me."

"She's terrified of you."

He shook his head. "She understands why I had to do it. I had to save her."

"What does she understand?"

"That I'm protecting her."

"Protecting her from Bernard?"

He shook his head, biting his lip, refusing to give up the teacher.

Will opened a red file folder and took out yet another sheet of paper, which he slid Warren's way. " 'It is my opinion that Warren Grier has an undiagnosed reading and written language disability. This, combined with his average IQ and antisocial behavior—' "

Warren whispered, "She's going to die, and it's all going to be on you."

"I'm not the one who took her from her family. I'm not the one who killed her best friend."

"Kayla wasn't her friend," Warren said. "She hated her. She couldn't stand her."

"Why?"

"Kayla made fun of her all the time," Warren said. "She said she was stupid because she had to have special help after school."

"Was Kayla mean to you, too?"

He shrugged, but the answer to that question was lying dead down in the morgue right now.

"Tell me what happened that day, Warren. Did Kayla let you into the house?"

"She was just supposed to let me into the house and shut up, but she wouldn't stop. She was pissed about Adam, that he was upstairs having sex with Emma. She kept going on and on about how stupid Emma is, and how she doesn't deserve to have a boyfriend. She said Emma is stupid

like me.”

“Did Kayla start yelling?”

“When I hit her.” Warren amended, “Not hard, though. Only to get her to shut up.”

“Then what happened?”

“She ran up the stairs. She kept screaming. I told her to stop, but she wouldn’t. She was supposed to help with Adam. I was supposed to hold the knife to her neck so he wouldn’t try anything, but she just went crazy. I had to hit her.”

“Did you stab Kayla?”

“I don’t know. I don’t remember. I just felt someone grab my hand, and it was him, it was Adam. I didn’t mean to hurt him. I just stood up, and the knife went into his chest. I didn’t want to hurt him. I tried to help him. I tried to warn him to go away.”

“Where was Emma when all of this was happening?”

“I heard her crying. She was in the closet in one of the rooms. She had ...” His voice caught. “The room was so nice, you know? It had a big TV, and a fireplace, and all these clothes and shoes and everything. She had everything.”

“Did you hit her?”

“I wouldn’t hurt her.”

“But she was unconscious when you carried her down the stairs.”

“We went outside. I don’t know what was wrong with her. I carried her. I put her in the trunk, then I went to the parking garage like I was supposed to.”

“Like Bernard told you to?”

He looked back at the table again, and Faith wondered what kind of hold Evan Bernard had over the young man. For all appearances, Bernard preferred girls. Was there another side to his depravity that they had yet to find out about?

Will asked, “Where did you take her, Warren? Where did you take Emma?”

“Somewhere safe,” he said. “Somewhere we could be together.”

“You don’t love her, Warren. You don’t kidnap somebody if you love them. *They* come to *you*. *They* choose *you*. Not the other way around.”

“It wasn’t like that. She said she loved me.”

“After you took her?”

“Yeah.” He had a grin on his face, as if the news still surprised and astounded him. “She really fell in love with me.”

“You really think that?” Will asked. “You really think you belong in her world?”

“She loves me. She told me.”

Will leaned closer. “Guys like you and me, we don’t know what it means to be in a family. We don’t see how deep that bond is, we never feel how much parents love their children. You broke that bond, Warren. You took Emma away from her parents just like you were taken away from yours.”

Warren still shook his head, but with sadness more than certainty.

“What was that like for you, being in her room, seeing the good kind of life she had when you had nothing?” His voice was low, confidential. “It all felt wrong, didn’t it? I was there, man. I felt it, too. We don’t belong around normal people like that. They can’t take our nightmares. They don’t understand why we hate Christmas and birthdays and summer vacations because every holiday reminds us of all the time we spent alone.”

“No.” Warren shook his head, vehement. “I’m not alone now. I have her.”

“What do you picture for yourself, Warren? Some kind of domestic scene where you come home from work and Emma’s cooking you dinner? She’ll kiss you on the forehead and you’ll drink some wine and talk about your day. Maybe after, she’ll wash the plates and you’ll dry?”

Warren shrugged, but Faith could tell that was exactly the sort of life the man envisioned.

“I saw your booking photos when they arrested you downstairs. I know what cigarette burns look like.”

He whispered a quiet, “Fuck you.”

“Did you show your burns to Emma? Did she get sick the same way you do every time you see them?”

“It’s not like that.”

“She had to feel the scars, Warren. I know you took your clothes off. I know you wanted to feel her skin against yours.”

“No.”

"I don't know which is worse, the pain or the smell. First, it's like little needles digging into you—a million at a time just burning and stinging. And then the smell hits you. It's like barbecue, isn't it? You smell it in the summer all over the city, that raw flesh burning in the flames."

"I told you, we love each other."

Will's tone was almost playful, as if he was giving the windup for a joke. "You ever feel your skin in the shower sometimes, Warren? You're soaping up and your hand goes to your ribs and you feel the little holes that were burned into your flesh?"

"That doesn't happen."

"They're like little suction cups when they're wet, right? You put your finger in them and you feel yourself get trapped all over again."

He shook his head.

"Did you beg for it to be over, screaming like a pussy because it hurt so bad? You told them you'd do anything, right? Anything to make the pain stop."

"Nobody hurt me like that."

Will's tone got harder, his words came faster. "You feel those scars and it makes you so angry. You want to take it out on someone—maybe Emma with her perfect life and her rich daddy and her beautiful mother who has to have a doctor come knock her out because she can't bear the thought of being without her precious little girl."

"Stop it."

Will slammed his hand against the table. They all jumped. "She doesn't belong to you, Warren! Tell me where she is!"

Warren's jaw clenched as he glared at the table in front of him.

Spit flew from Will's mouth as he moved even closer. "I know you. I know how your mind works. You didn't take Emma because you love her, you took her because you wanted to make her scream."

Slowly, Warren looked up, facing Will. His anger was barely controlled, his lips trembling like a rabid dog's. "Yeah," he said, his voice a hoarse whisper. "She screamed." His face was as controlled as his tone. "She screamed until I shut her up."

Will sat back in his chair. There was a clock on the wall. Faith listened to it slowly ticking away the time. She looked at the cinder-block wall in front of her rather than give Warren the satisfaction of her curiosity or Will the intensity of her concern.

She had worked with cops who could stand in the pouring rain and swear on a stack of Bibles that the sun was shining. Many times, she had sat in this very interrogation room and listened to Leo Donnelly, a man with no children and four divorces, rhapsodize about his love of God and his precious twin baby girls in order to lure a suspect into a confession. Faith herself had at times fabricated an invisible husband, a doting grandmother, an absent father, in order to get suspects to talk. All cops knew how to spin a yarn.

Only, this time, she was certain that Will Trent was not lying.

Will put his hand on the stack of folders. "We found your adoption records."

Warren shook his head. "Those are sealed."

"They are unless you commit a felony," Will said, and Faith studied him, knowing that this was a lie, trying to figure out what cues he gave when he was not telling the truth. His face was just as impassive as before, and she ended up turning her attention back to Warren so that she did not drive herself mad.

Will said, "Your mother is still alive, Warren."

"You're lying."

"She's been looking for you."

For the first time since Will had entered the room, Warren glanced at Faith, as if he could engage her maternal instinct. "That's not fair."

Will said, "All this time, she's been looking for you."

He opened the last folder. There was a sheet of paper inside. He turned the page around and slid it toward Warren. From where Faith sat, she could see that he had copied a memo about appropriate attire for on-duty, undercover officers. The city's seal at the top had been duplicated so many times that the rising phoenix looked like a blob.

Will asked, "Don't you want to see your mother, Warren?"

His eyes filled with tears.

"There she is," Will said, tapping the paper. "She lives less than ten miles from where you

work.”

Warren started rocking back and forth, his tears wetting the page.

“What kind of son is she going to find in you?”

“A good one,” the young man insisted.

“You think what you’ve done is good? You think she’s going to want to be around the man who kept a young girl from her family?” Will pressed a little harder. “You’re doing the same thing to Emma’s parents that was done to your mom. You think she’s going to be able to love you after finding out that you knew how to get Emma back to her family, but you wouldn’t do it?”

“She’s safe,” he said. “I just wanted to keep her safe.”

“Tell me where she is. Her mother misses her so much.”

He shook his head. “No,” he answered. “You’re never going to find her. She’s going to be with me forever. There’s nothing that can come between us now.”

“Stop the bullshit, Warren. You didn’t want Emma. You wanted her *life*.”

Warren looked at the file folders in front of Will as if he expected something even worse to be pulled out, some information even more damaging to be thrown into his face.

Will tried again. “Tell us where she is, and I’ll tell you your mother’s address.”

Warren’s eyes did not stray from the files, but he started whispering something so quietly that Faith could not make out what he was saying.

“I’ll go get her myself. I’ll drive her over to see you.”

Warren kept whispering, his mouth moving in an unintelligible mantra.

Will said, “Speak up, Warren. Just tell us where she is so we can give her back to her parents who love her.”

Faith finally understood his words. “Blue, red, purple, green. Blue, red, purple, green.”

“Warren—”

His voice got louder. “Blue, red, purple, green.” He stood up, screaming, “Blue, red, purple, green!” He started waving his hands, his tone rising to the top of his voice. “Blue! Red! Purple! Green!” He ran toward the door, trying the knob. Faith was closest to him, so she tried to pull him away. Warren’s elbow caught her in the mouth and she fell back against the table.

“Blue! Red! Purple! Green!” he screamed, running full on into the concrete wall. Will went after him, wrapping his arms around the man. Warren kicked, screaming, “No! Let me go! Let me go!”

“Warren!” Will let go of him, keeping his hands out wide in case he needed to grab him again.

Warren stood in the middle of the room. Blood dripped down his face where he had slammed his head into the wall. He lunged toward Will, swinging his fists wildly.

The door flew open and two cops rushed in to help. Warren tried to run out the door, but they wrestled him to the floor, where he wriggled frantically, jerking his hands away from them as they tried to cuff him, screaming all the while. His foot kicked up, catching one of the officers in the face.

The Taser came out. Thirty thousand volts screamed through his body. Almost immediately, Warren went limp on the floor.

Will sat back on his heels, his breath coming in pants. He leaned over Warren, hand on his chest. “Please,” he begged. “Just tell me. Tell me where she is.”

Warren’s lips moved. Will leaned down to listen to him. Something passed between the two men. Will nodded once, very much like the curt affirmations Warren had given them earlier. He sat up slowly, hands in his lap, telling the cops, “Take him away.”

The officers scooped up Warren like a bag of potatoes, dragging him toward the door. They would take him to his cell and let him sleep off the shock.

Faith looked at Will, trying to understand. “What did he say to you?”

He pointed to his file folders on the table, leaning over as if he was still too breathless to speak. Faith looked at the files. They were in the wrong order, but she could see it now: blue, red, purple, green.

Warren had been yelling out the colors of the folders.



The homicide squad room had not improved during Faith’s three-day absence. Robertson’s jockstrap still dangled from the top drawer of his desk. A blow-up doll marked as “evidence” during the last birthday party sat on top of the filing cabinet, her mouth still opened in a suggestive O even as the air slowly drained out of her once curvaceous body. Leo Donnelly’s desk

was cleared but for a famous old photograph of Farrah Fawcett that he had obviously cut out of a magazine. Over the years, the margins of the photo had been embellished with graffiti and artwork that was more suitable for a middle school boys' bathroom.

Adding to the overall masculine effect, the shift was changing, an event Faith always likened to a football locker room during halftime. The noise was deafening, the smells alarming. Someone had turned on the television that hung from the ceiling. Someone else was trying to find a station on the ancient radio. A burrito heated in the microwave, the odor of burned cheese wafting through the air. Baritone bellows filled the room as detectives tromped in and out, turning over cases, giving each other the business about whose dick was bigger, who would solve a case first, who was turning over a dog of an investigation that would never be solved. In short, the whole room was filling with testosterone the way a cloth diaper filled with shit.

Faith glanced at the television set as she recognized Amanda's voice saying, "... *proud to announce that an arrest has been made in the Campano kidnapping.*"

Someone yelled, "Thanks to APD, you cunt."

There were more words tossed Amanda's way—bitch, snatch, whatever base and degrading terms other cops could conjure to denigrate a woman who would have them all pissing in their pants if she got them alone in a room for more than five minutes.

The handful of detectives closest to Faith's desk gave her curious glances—not because she was working the case, but because of the language. Faith shrugged, looking back at the television set, watching Amanda expertly handle the reporters. She could still feel their eyes on her, though.

This sort of testing took place almost on a daily basis. If Faith told them to shut up, she was a ballbuster who couldn't take a joke. If she ignored it, they took her silence for tacit approval. It didn't stop there. If she spurned their sexual advances, she was a lesbian. If she dated any of them, she would be labeled a whore. Faith couldn't win either way, and striking back in similar terms took up too much of her time. The pouting, the passive-aggressive whining—Faith had already raised one child, and she wasn't ready to take on twenty more.

And yet, she had always loved working here, loved feeling like she was part of a brotherhood. This was why Will Trent did not act or talk like a cop. He didn't sit in a squad room. He didn't bullshit over beers with Charlie Reed and Hamish Patel. He was certainly part of a team, but working with him was like working in a bubble. There was never the hum of people in the background, the jostling of egos and assignments. His was a more focused way of doing the job, but it was so different from what Faith was used to that, now that she was back among her fellow detectives, she felt like she no longer belonged. She had to admit that for all Will's faults, at least he listened to what she had to say. It was nice to have a discussion with a colleague who didn't ask "What're you, on the rag?" every time she disagreed with him.

Faith looked back at the television. Amanda was nodding as a reporter asked about Westfield Academy, the arrest of Evan Bernard. She looked absolutely radiant, and Faith had to admit she was in her element on camera. The reporters were eating out of the palm of her hand. "Mr. Bernard is certainly a person of interest."

"You interested in this?" one of the detectives yelled. Faith did not have to glance over to know the man was probably cupping his genitals.

Amanda answered another question. "The suspect is a twenty-eight-year-old man with a storied past."

Off camera, a reporter asked, "Why aren't you releasing his name?"

"The arraignment in the morning will make it part of the public record," she said, sidestepping the obvious, which was that they were keeping Warren's name out of the press as long as they could in order to keep some helpful do-gooder from offering him legal advice. The fact that Lionel Petty had already submitted an I-Report to CNN.com of him and Warren Grier standing beside one of the copy machines at work would soon work against them.

Another reporter was obviously thinking the same thing as Faith. "What about the missing girl? Any leads on her whereabouts?"

"We believe it's only a matter of time before Emma Campano is found."

Faith noted that the woman did not say whether the girl would be found dead or alive. She felt a sudden pang of envy for Amanda and her position. Like Faith's mother, Amanda had worked her way to the top. If Faith had to put up with a little misogyny now and then, she could not imagine what it was like for her mother's generation.

Amanda had started in the secretarial pool, just like Evelyn Mitchell, back when the women officers had to wear below-the-knee wool skirts as they fetched coffee and typed up requisitions.

Amanda had clawed her way to the top, only to have a bunch of idiots with primordial ooze dripping out of their noses heckle her as she broke one of the biggest cases the city had seen since Wayne Williams was spotted tossing a body into the Chattahoochee.

And where was Faith after all those years of progress and women's lib? She was still in the equivalent of the secretarial pool, she supposed. To be fair, she had volunteered for the task of cataloguing all the evidence Will had taken from Warren Grier's tiny abode. That was before she'd seen the piles of boxes they had taken from the boardinghouse and stacked around her desk. There were at least six of them, all filled to the top with papers. Warren was a pack rat, the kind of man who couldn't throw out a receipt or a movie ticket. He still had pay stubs from the copy center that went back almost ten years.

Faith touched her jaw, bruised and tender from where Warren's elbow had caught her. She had found an ancient Lean Cuisine in the back of the freezer in the break room. The bag was hard as a rock, but it felt good on her mouth. She hated getting hit. Not that anyone particularly enjoyed it, but Faith had learned a long time ago that puking was her natural response to pain. Holding a bag of frozen spaghetti and meatballs was not helping matters. A small price to pay considering what Emma Campano had probably gone through.

Will was escorting Warren Grier to the holding cells. There was only one question he had yet to get answered: Where was Emma? Even if the girl was still alive, time was running out. Faith thought about the conditions in which she might be kept: locked up in a room somewhere or, worse, shoved in the trunk of a car. Today, the temperature had hit one hundred before noon. The heat was unrelenting, even at night. Did Emma have water? Did she have food? How long before her supplies ran out? Death by dehydration took a week to ten days, but that was without a head wound and the broiling heat. Were they going to spend the next two weeks counting off the hours until Emma Campano could no longer draw breath?

"Hey, Mitchell. How's it working with that rat?" Robertson asked. He was sitting at his desk, leaning so far back in his chair that it looked like it might break.

"Fine," she told him, wondering why no one was giving Will credit for letting the Atlanta police duckwalk Evan Bernard out of Westfield Academy in front of the rolling cameras.

Robertson wagged his finger at her. "Be careful around that fucker. Never trust a Statey."

"Gotcha. Thanks."

"Fucking GBI. Taking our case, making it look like they did all the heavy lifting." There were noises of agreement from around the room.

What selective memory they all seemed to have. Faith would've probably been joining in if she hadn't been there that first day, watching Will connect the dots that had been in front of them all along.

Robertson seemed to be waiting for her to say something else, maybe take a jibe at Will or make a nasty comment about the GBI, but Faith was at a loss. A week ago, the words would have rushed out like beer from a tap. Now, the well had run dry.

Faith turned back to the work in front of her, trying to block out the noises of the squad room. She didn't have the strength at the moment to start going through the boxes from Warren's apartment, so she concentrated on her computer screen. Will had used a digital camera to take pictures of Warren Grier's living quarters, and she scrolled through the series of shots, which showed basically the same small room from six different angles.

Every mundane detail of Warren's existence had been captured, from his toiletries to his sock drawer. There were boxes and boxes of papers under his bed, overflowing with school report cards and official-looking forms from his time in the foster care system. There was a close-up of a manual for a Mac laptop computer, a phone number scribbled on the front. Faith tilted her head, wondering why Will had turned the camera upside down.

She picked up her cell phone and dialed the number, sticking her finger in her other ear to block out the noise. The phone rang once, twice, then a local theater picked up and started giving movie times for the next shows. No news flash there. The six billion ticket stubs sitting in a box at Faith's feet revealed his passion for the silver screen.

Faith went back to the pictures, trying to divine a clue that might lead to the missing girl. All she saw was the sad one-room apartment where Warren had lived all of his adult life. There were no photographs of family, no calendars with dates marked for dinners with friends. From all appearances, he had no friends, no one he could turn to.

That was no kind of excuse, though. By his own admission, Will had grown up under similar circumstances. He had lived in state care until he was eighteen. He'd become a cop—and a damn

good one. His social skills left something to be desired, but there was something underneath all his awkwardness that was oddly endearing.

Or maybe it was something her mother had told her ages ago: the easiest way for a man to get into your heart was if you imagined what he was like as a child.

Faith clicked through the photos again, trying to see if anything stood out. She ran through the usual suspects: a garage, a storage facility, an old family cabin in the woods. None of these seemed to be likely hiding places that Warren could use. He had no car, no extra belongings to store, no family to speak of.

Something had to break. There had to be a path back to Emma Campano that was not yet illuminated. Evan Bernard was going to make bail in less than twelve hours. He would be back on the street, free to do what he wanted until his trial date for having sex with Kayla Alexander. Unless they found something to link him to the crimes at the Campano house, he was looking at nothing more than a slap on the wrist, probably three years in jail, then he would get his life back.

And then what would he do? There were too many other ways for a man with an interest in girls to find victims. Church. SAT tutoring. Youth groups. Evan Bernard would probably move out of state. Maybe he would fail to register as a sex offender in his new town. He might live near a swimming pool or a high school or even a day care center. Warren Grier was not going to flip. Whatever hold Bernard had on the young man was unbreakable. The only thing Faith and Will had done was make Bernard's life from here on out more difficult. They had found absolutely nothing to keep him locked up for the rest of his miserable existence, and nothing that brought them closer to finding Emma Campano.

And then there was the fact that Faith knew how these guys tended to work. Bernard had raped the girl in Savannah, but that couldn't have been his first time, and Kayla would not be his last. Was there another girl out there that he was grooming for his sick fantasies? Was there another teenager who was going to have her life turned upside down by the sick bastard?

Faith put down the frozen bag, working her jaw to make sure no permanent damage had been done. She put her hand to her face and, unbidden, the memory of Victor stroking her cheek came back to her. He had called three times on her cell phone, each message progressively more apologetic. In the end, he had resorted to blatant flattery, which, being honest, had done a good deal to help crack her resolve. Faith wondered if there was ever going to be a time when she understood any of the men in her life.

Will Trent was certainly an enigma. The way he had spoken to Warren in the interrogation room had been so intimate that Faith found herself unable to look him in the eye. Had all of that really happened to Will? Was he the damaged product of the state adoption program, just like Warren Grier?

What Will had said about the cigarette burns had felt so real. Under the jacket and the vest and the dress shirt, was he hiding similar scars? Faith had been in central booking when they took the photographs of Warren's damaged torso. As a police officer, she had seen many cigarette burns on many victims as well as suspects. They were unsurprising at this point, the kind of thing you expected alongside the tattoos and the track marks. People did not generally choose a life of crime for the adventure. They were junkies and criminals for a reason, and the reason usually could be found in their early home life.

Was Will just a really good liar? When he talked about what it felt like to touch the burn marks, was he speaking from experience, or making a calculated guess? Three days had passed since she'd first met the man and she knew as much about him now as she had on that very first day. And she still did not understand how he worked the job. Warren had tried to kill him, but instead of sticking the younger man in with pedophiles and rapists, Will had walked him down to the cells to make sure he got one to himself. And then there was Evan Bernard. Any cop worth his salt knew that the best way to sweat out someone like that arrogant prick was to stick him in with the nastiest motherfuckers on the cell block, yet Will had basically given him a pass, sticking him in with the shemales.

Faith figured it was too late in the day to guess his strategy—and besides, it wasn't as if he ever consulted her on anything. He kept all the details of the case locked up in his head and maybe, if Faith was lucky, he let some of it out when the mood struck him. He worked like no other cop she had ever met. There wasn't even a murder board in his office—a chronological listing of what happened when, who did what, the suspects and the victims pictured side by side so that clues could be tracked, leads could be followed. There was no way he could keep it all in

his head. Maybe he kept it all on his precious tape recorder. Either way, if something happened to Will, there would be no logical point for the next lead investigator to pick up on. It was such a blatant disregard for procedure that Faith was shocked Amanda allowed it to happen.

Analyzing Amanda and Will's relationship was just wasting time. Faith went back to the computer, her hand resting on the mouse. The screen flickered up, showing a photograph of Warren Grier's bookshelf. Faith hadn't put it together before, but she found it pretty odd that a man who could not read would have books in his home.

She squinted her eyes at the titles, then thought better of it, giving her eyes a break and clicking the button to zoom in on the photo. There were several graphic novels, which made sense, and what looked like manuals for various pieces of office equipment. The spines were all sectioned together by color rather than title. The books on the bottom shelf were taller, the words blurred from being out of the camera lens's center frame. Faith guessed from their size that they were art books—the expensive type that you put on your coffee table for show.

Faith zoomed in closer on the bottom shelf, but still could not make out any of the titles. Something was familiar about the thick gray spines of three of the books. She put her chin in her hand, wincing at the pain from her bruised jaw. Why did the spines look so familiar?

She opened one of the boxes from Warren's apartment, looking to see if any of the books had been packed. They all seemed to contain papers and receipts from over the last ten years. Faith skimmed through the stacks, wondering why in the hell Will had taken all of this crap from the scene. Was it really necessary for them to know that Warren had paid a hundred ten dollars to Vision Quest for an eye exam six years ago?

More important, why would Will waste Faith's time asking her to go through stuff that was basically trash? She felt her irritation building as she skimmed page after page of useless documentation. Faith could understand why Warren would keep all of this—he would have no way of knowing whether or not it would be important one day, but why would Will want it catalogued into evidence? He didn't strike her as a needle-in-a-haystack kind of person, and with Bernard and Warren behind bars, there were certainly better uses to make of her time.

Slowly, Faith sat up in her chair, holding the dated bill in her hands but not really looking at it. Her mind flashed on different scenes from the last few days: Will reaching for the directory at the dorm even though the sign clearly said it was broken. The way she had found him at the school yesterday morning, his head bent over the newspaper as he touched his finger to each word on the page. Even at Evan Bernard's house today, he had thumbed through every page of the yearbooks rather than simply turning to the index and looking up the man's name, as Faith had done when she'd found the photograph of Mary Clark.

Two days ago, after Evan Bernard's insightful diagnosis that the abductor was functionally illiterate, Faith had had but one question: How can someone get through school without learning how to read and write?

"It happens," Will had told her. He had sounded so certain. Was that because it had happened to him?

Faith shook her head, though she was only arguing with herself. It didn't make sense. You had to have an advanced degree to get into the GBI. They didn't let just anybody in. Barring that, every government agency functioned on mounds and mounds of paperwork. There were reports to fill out, requisitions to be filed, casebooks to be submitted. Had Faith ever seen Will fill out anything? She thought about his computer setup, the fact that he had a microphone. Why would he need a microphone for his computer? Did he dictate his reports?

Faith rubbed her fingers into her eyes, wondering if lack of sleep was making her see things that weren't there. This simply was not possible. She had worked with the man almost every hour of the day since this whole thing started. Faith was not so stupid that she missed something that glaringly obvious. For his part, Will was too smart to be bad at anything so basic.

She looked back at her computer screen, concentrating on the books Warren had stacked along the bottom shelf. Questions about Will still pulled at her thoughts. Could he read the titles? Could he even read the threatening notes that had been slid under Adam Humphrey's door? What else had he missed?

Faith blinked, finally realizing why the three books on the bottom shelf looked so familiar. Here she had been questioning Will's abilities when an important piece of evidence practically glowed right in front of her.

She pulled out her spiral-bound notebook, looking for the phone number she had scribbled down at the school this morning. Tim Clark answered the phone on the third ring.

"Is Mary there?"

Again, he seemed reluctant to let his wife speak to the police. "She's taking a nap."

She was probably exactly where Faith had left her, staring into the backyard, wondering how she was going to cope with her memories. "I need to speak to her. It's very important."

He sighed, letting her know he wasn't happy. Minutes later, Mary came onto the line. Faith felt bad for thinking her husband was lying. The woman sounded as if she'd just been woken from a very deep sleep.

"I'm sorry for disturbing you."

"Doesn't matter," the woman said, her words slurring. Faith didn't feel so bad when she realized Mary Clark had obviously been drinking.

"I know you don't remember the name of the girl Evan was accused of raping back at Crim," Faith began. "But remember you said he had an alibi?"

"What?"

"Back at Crim," Faith repeated, wanting to reach through the phone and shake her. "Remember you said that Evan left the school because of a rape allegation?"

"They couldn't prove anything." Mary gave a harsh laugh. "He always gets away with it."

"Right," Faith coaxed, staring at her computer screen, the familiar gray spines of the Alonzo Crim High School yearbooks on Warren Grier's bookshelf. "But that time, you said he got away with it because there was a student who served as an alibi."

"Yeah," Mary conceded. "Warren Grier." She almost spit out the words. "He said they were together after school for some tutoring or something."

Faith had to be sure. "Mary, are you telling me that Warren Grier gave Evan Bernard an alibi for a crime thirteen years ago?"

"Yeah," she repeated. "Pathetic, right? That little retard was even farther up Evan's ass than I was."

CHAPTER TWENTY



Will reached for a paper cup but found the dispenser empty. He peered into the long cylinder mounted to the water cooler, making sure there wasn't a cup stuck in the tube.

"I got more in the back," Billy Peterson offered. He was an older cop who had been in charge of the cells for as long as anyone could remember.

"Thanks." Will stood with his hands in his pockets, afraid the tremble would come back and give him away. He felt a familiar coldness building inside of him, the same coldness he had developed when he was a child. Watch what's happening, but keep yourself removed from the fear, the pain. Don't let them know they've gotten to you, because all that will do is inspire them to get more creative.

Will never talked about the things that had happened to him—not even with Angie. She had seen some of it go down, but Will had managed to keep most of his dark secrets stored tightly in his mind. Until now. The things he had told Warren Grier, the awful secrets he had shared with him, were thoughts that had been building up inside Will for a long time. Instead of feeling catharsis, he felt exposed, vulnerable. He felt like a fraud. And a heel. There was no telling what was going through Warren's mind right now as he sat alone in his tiny cell. He was probably wishing he had pulled that trigger a third time.

For just a split second, Will found himself not blaming the man. He couldn't block out the Warren from the interrogation room, the sadness in his posture, the guarded way he looked up at Will as if he expected to be kicked in the face at any moment. Will had to remind himself of what Warren had done, the people whose lives he had ruined—and still might be ruining even as he was in custody.

The cell Will had put Warren in was not much larger than the room that the killer called home—a hovel compared to Emma Campano's palatial bedroom with its professionally designed throw pillows and giant television. Will had been struck by the sense of loneliness he'd felt as he went through the younger man's meager belongings. The neatly stacked CDs and DVDs, the carefully arranged sock drawer and color-coded hanging clothes, all reminded Will of a life he could have just as easily lived himself. The heady sense of freedom he'd felt at eighteen, out in the world on his own for the first time, had quickly been replaced by panic. The state did not exactly teach you to fend for yourself. You learned from a very young age to accept whatever they gave you and not ask for more. It was through sheer luck that Will had ended up working for the state. With his problems, he did not know what other job he was qualified to do.

Warren must have been in a similar position. According to his personnel record at the Copy Right, Warren Grier had worked there since dropping out of high school. Over the last twelve years, he had been promoted to the position of manager. Still, he only made around sixteen thousand dollars a year. He could've afforded a nicer place than the one-room dive on Ashby Street, but living below his means must have given Warren some sense of safety. Besides, it wasn't as if he could fill out an application to get a nicer apartment. If he lost the Copy Right position, how would he go about looking for a new job? How could he fill out an employment application? How could he bear the humiliation of telling a stranger that he could barely read?

Without his job, Warren couldn't pay his rent, couldn't buy food, clothes. There was no family to fall back on, and as far as the state was concerned, their responsibility had ended when Warren had turned eighteen. He was completely and totally on his own.

The Copy Right had been the only thing standing between Warren Grier and homelessness. Will felt his own stomach clench in a sense of shared fear. If not for having Angie Polaski in his life, how close to Warren Grier's meager existence would Will be?

"Here you go," Billy said, handing Will a cup.

"Thanks," Will managed, heading toward the water cooler. Many years ago, Amanda had kindly volunteered Will for a Taser demonstration. Memories of the pain had receded quickly, but Will could still recall that for hours afterward, he'd suffered from a seemingly unquenchable thirst.

Will filled the cup and stood at the gate to the cells, waiting to be buzzed back through. Inside the lockup, he kept his eyes straight forward, aware of the stares he was getting through the narrow panes of steel-enforced glass in the cell doors. Evan Bernard was on this wing, at the opposite end of Warren's cell. Billy had put him in with the transgendered women, the ones who still had their male equipment. News had already leaked out that Evan Bernard liked raping young girls. The tranny cell was the only place they could think of where Bernard would not get a big dose of his own medicine.

Will opened the narrow slot in Warren's cell door. He put the cup on the flat metal. The cup was not taken.

"Warren?" Will looked through the glass, seeing the tip of Warren's white, jail-issued slipper. The man was obviously sitting with his back to the door. Will crouched down, putting his mouth close to the metal slot. The opening was little more than twelve inches wide by three inches high, just enough to slide a meal tray through.

Will said, "I know you're feeling alone right now, but think about Emma. She's probably feeling alone, too." He paused. "She's probably wondering where you are."

There was no response.

"Think about how lonely she is without you," Will tried. "No one is there to talk to her or let her know that you're okay." His thigh started to cramp, so he knelt on one knee. "Warren, you don't have to tell me where she is. Just tell me that she's okay. That's all I want to know right now."

Still there was no response. Will tried not to think about Emma Campano, how terrified she would be as time slowly passed and no one came for her. How merciful it would have been if Warren had just killed her that first day, sparing her the agony of uncertainty.

"Warren—"

Will felt something wet on his knee. He looked down just as the slight odor of ammonia wafted into his nostrils.

"Warren?" Will looked through the slot again; the white slipper was tilted to the side, unmoving. He saw the bed was stripped. "No," Will whispered. He jammed his arm through the open slot, feeling for Warren. His hand found the man's sweaty hair, felt his cold, clammy skin.

"Billy!" Will screamed. "Open the door!"

The guard took his time coming to the gate. "What is it?"

Will's fingers grazed Warren's eyes, his open mouth. "Call an ambulance!"

"Shit," Billy cursed, flinging open the gate. He slammed his fist into a red button on the wall as he jogged toward the cell. The master key was on his belt. He slid it into the lock and jerked open the door to Warren's cell. The hinge squeaked from the weight of the door. One end of the bedsheet was looped around the knob, the other end wrapped tightly around Warren Grier's neck.

Will dropped to the floor, starting CPR. Billy got on his radio, calling out codes, ordering an ambulance. By the time more help arrived, Will was sweating, his hands cramping from pressing into Warren's chest. "Don't do this," he begged. "Come on, Warren. Don't do this."

"Will," Billy said, his hand resting on Will's shoulder. "Come on. It's over."

Will wanted to pull away, to keep going, but his body would not respond. For the second time that evening, he sat back on his knees and looked down at Warren Grier. The younger man's last words still echoed in his ears. "Colors," Warren had said. He had figured out Will's filing system, the way he used the colors to indicate what was inside the folders. "You use colors just like me." Warren Grier had finally found a kindred spirit. Ten minutes later, he had killed himself.

Another hand went around Will's arm. Faith helped him stand. He hadn't realized she was there, hadn't seen the circle of cops that had formed around him.

"Come on," she said, keeping her hand on his arm as she walked with him up the hallway. There were catcalls, the kind of remarks you expected men behind bars to make when a pretty woman walked by. Will ignored them, fighting the urge to slump against Faith, to do something foolish like reach out to her.

Faith sat him down at Billy's desk. She knelt in front of him, raised her hand to his cheek. "You

had no way of knowing he'd do that."

Will felt the coolness of her palm against his face. He put his hand over hers, then gently pulled it away. "I'm not much good at taking comfort, Faith."

She nodded her understanding, but he could read the pity in her eyes.

"I shouldn't have lied to him," Will said. "The stuff about the cigarette burns."

Faith sat back, looking up at him. He could not tell whether she believed him or was simply humoring him. "You did what you had to do."

"I pushed him too hard."

"He put that sheet around his own neck." She reminded him, "He also pulled the trigger, Will. You would be dead now if those chambers had been full. He may have been more pathetic than Evan Bernard, but he was just as cold and calculating."

"Warren was doing what he was programmed to do. Everything he had in his life—everything—was a struggle. No one gave him anything." Will felt his jaw clench. "Bernard's educated, well liked, he has a good job, friends, family. He had a choice."

"Everyone has a choice. Even Warren."

She would never understand because she had never been completely alone in the world. He told her, "I know Emma's alive somewhere, Faith."

"It's been a long time, Will. Too long."

"I don't care what you say," he told her. "She's alive. Warren wouldn't have killed her. He wanted things from her, things he was in the process of taking. You heard how he talked in the interview. You know he was keeping her alive."

Faith did not respond, though he could see the answer in her eyes: she was just as certain Emma Campano was dead as Will was that the girl was alive.

Instead of arguing with him, she changed the subject. "I just talked to Mary Clark." She walked him through the discovery of the yearbooks in the photographs Will had taken of Warren's apartment, the phone call to the teacher wherein Mary Clark confirmed that Warren had given Bernard an alibi all those years ago. As Faith spoke, Will could finally see everything coming into focus. Bernard would have been the only anchor in Warren's life. There was nothing the young man would not have done for his mentor.

Faith told him the other things the teacher had said. "Bernard let them come to his house and drink, smoke, do whatever they wanted. Then, when he was finished using them, he tossed them away."

"He probably tutored Warren," Will guessed. "He would've been the only adult in his life who tried to help him instead of treating him like there was something wrong with him." Warren would have lain in front of an oncoming train if Bernard told him to. The young man's refusal to implicate the teacher suddenly made sense.

"This shows a pattern with the girls," Faith told him. "Bernard will get more time in prison if Mary tells a jury what happened to her."

Will did not believe for a second that Mary Clark finally had the strength to confront her abuser. "I want him to die," he mumbled. "All those girls he raped—he might as well have killed them. Who was Mary Clark going to be before Evan Bernard got hold of her? What kind of life was she going to have? All that went out the door the minute he set his sights on her. That girl Mary was going to be is dead, Faith. How many other girls did he kill like that? And now Kayla and Adam and God knows what Emma's going through." He stopped, swallowing back his emotions. "I want to be there when they put the needle in his arm. I want to jam it in myself."

Faith was so taken aback by his vehemence that, for a few seconds, she could not trust herself to speak. "We can look for other witnesses," she finally told him. "There have to be other girls. Tie it in with the allegations at Georgia Tech and he could get thirty, forty years."

Will shook his head. "Bernard killed Adam and Kayla, Faith. I know he didn't do it with his own hands, but he knew what Warren was capable of. He knew that he had complete and total control over him, that he could pull the trigger and Warren would shoot." Will thought about Warren, how desperately he must have wanted to fit in. Sitting around Bernard's house with the other kids, drinking beer and talking about all the losers who were still at school, must have been the closest he ever came to being part of a family.

Faith said, "The room in his house thirteen years ago was just like the one we found in Bernard's apartment. He's been doing this for years, Will. As soon as his picture goes out on the news, we're going to have—"

"Where?" Will interrupted. "Did Mary say where the house was?"

"I thought you checked his last residence?"

"I did." Will felt the final piece click into place. "Bernard's background check showed another house. He bought it fifteen years ago and sold it three years later. I didn't think anything about it, but—"

Faith took out her cell phone, dialed in a number. "Mary knows where the house is."



Faith drove, following the Atlanta police cruiser down North Avenue. The lights were on, but the siren was silent. Will was silent, too. He kept thinking about Warren Grier, the soft give to his chest as Will tried to press the life back into his heart. What had compelled the man to wrap the sheet around his neck, to take his own life? Was he afraid that he would not be able to hold out much longer, that Will would push him so hard that he would end up betraying Evan Bernard? Or was it just a means to an end, Warren's desperate, grand plan to make sure that he spent the rest of his life with Emma Campano?

The cruiser bumped along construction sites in front of the Coca-Cola building, streetlights illuminating the road. Faith slowed so that the bottom of her car would not be ripped apart.

She said, "I don't want to find the body."

Will looked at her profile, the way the blue lights flashed against her pale skin. He understood what she meant: she wanted Emma Campano to be found, she just didn't want to be the one who discovered her. "She's going to be alive," Will insisted. He could not think otherwise—especially after Warren. "Emma is going to be alive, and she's going to tell us that Evan Bernard did this, that he put Warren up to everything."

Faith kept her own counsel, staring at the road ahead, probably thinking that Will was a fool.

Houses started to appear on the side of the road, dilapidated Victorians and cottages that had been boarded up long ago. Ahead, the cruiser's lights cut off as they approached Evan Bernard's old address. There were no streetlights here. The moon was covered in clouds. At almost midnight, the only source of light came from the automobile headlights.

"Look," Faith said, pointing to the car Adam Humphrey had purchased from a departing grad student. The blue Chevy Impala was one car among many rusted-out heaps parked along a desolate stretch of North Avenue. There had been a priority alert out for two days to locate the vehicle. No one had reported seeing it. Had the car been sitting here the whole time, Emma Campano rotting in the trunk? Or had Warren left her alive to let nature run its course? Even at this time of night, the heat was unbearable. Inside the car would have been twenty to thirty degrees hotter. Her brain would have literally fried in the heat.

Will and Faith got out of the Mini. He shined his Maglite on the houses and vacant lots that lined the street as they walked toward the car. Most of the homes had been torn down, but three had survived. They were utilitarian, wood-frame structures that had probably been thrown up after the Second World War to accommodate Atlanta's population explosion.

Bernard's house was at the end, the street numbers still nailed to the front door. The windows and doors were boarded over. Hurricane fencing had been erected to keep out vagrants, but that hadn't stopped them from digging under in several places. Various drug paraphernalia on the sidewalk and littering the street indicated that some hadn't even bothered to do that.

One of the cops from the cruiser was checking the interior of the Impala. His partner stood beside the car, a crowbar in his hand. Will took the bar and wedged it into the trunk. Without pause, he popped the lock, the metal lid creaking open. They all gagged from the smell of feces and blood.

The trunk was empty.

"The house," Faith said, shining her flashlight back at the looming structure. It was two stories tall, the roof sagging in the middle. "There could be junkies in there. There are needles all over the place."

Wordlessly, Will walked toward the house. He dropped down, wriggling under the fence, pulling himself up on the other side. He did not stop to help Faith as he headed up the broken concrete walk to the house. The front door was nailed shut. Will thought one of the boards over the window looked loose. He pulled it free with his hands. His flashlight showed the dust on the sill had been rubbed away. Someone had been here before him.

He hesitated. Faith was right. This could be a crack house. Dealers and junkies could be conducting business inside. They could be armed, high or both. Either way, they would not exactly welcome the police into their shooting den.

One of the porch boards squeaked. Faith stood behind him, her flashlight shining on the ground.

He kept his voice low. "You don't have to do this."

Faith ignored him as she slid in between the rotted boards.

Will checked on the other cops, making sure they were guarding the front and the rear of the house, before going in after her. Inside, Faith had her gun drawn, the flashlight tucked up beside the muzzle, the same way every cop had been trained to do. The house felt claustrophobic, with its low ceilings and trash piled into the corners. There were more needles than he could count, clumps of tinfoil and a few spoons—all the signs that the space was an active shooting den.

Faith pointed down, meaning she would search this level. Will drew his gun and went toward the stairs.

He tested his foot on each tread, hoping he would not step on rotted wood and end up in the basement. There was a tingling at the base of his spine. He reached the top of the stairs, keeping his flashlight aimed low. There was a sliver of moonlight coming through the boarded windows, just enough to see by. Will turned off the light and gently placed it on the floor. He stood there, listening for sounds of life. All he heard was Faith walking downstairs, the house groaning as the heat soaked into the wood.

Will smelled pot, chemicals. They could be in a meth lab. There could be a junkie hiding behind one of the doors, waiting to stick Will with a needle. He stepped forward, his foot crunching broken glass. There were four bedrooms upstairs with one bathroom between them. The door at the end of the hall was closed. All the other doors had been taken off their hinges, probably stolen for scrap. In the bathroom, the fixtures were gone, the copper pipe pulled out of the wall. Holes had been punched into the ceiling. The plaster walls were broken along the light switches where someone had checked for copper wire in the wall. It was aluminum, Will saw, the kind that he had ripped out of his own house because building codes had outlawed its use many years ago.

Faith whispered, "Will?" She was making her way up the stairs. He waited until she was with him, then indicated the closed door at the end of the hallway.

Will stopped in front of the only door. He tried the knob, but it was locked. He indicated that Faith should step back, then lifted his foot and kicked open the door. Will knelt, pointing his gun blindly into the room. Faith's flashlight cut through the dark like a knife, searching corners, the open closet.

The room was empty.

They both holstered their weapons.

"It's just like the other one." Faith shone her flashlight over the faded pink walls, the dirty white trim. There was a bare double mattress on the floor, dark stains flowering at the center. A tripod with a camera was mounted in front of it.

Will took the flashlight and checked the slot for the memory stick. "It's empty."

"We should call Charlie," Faith said, probably thinking about the evidence that needed to be collected, the DNA on the mattress.

"He knows better than to leave traces of himself," Will said. He could not get Evan Bernard's smug face out of his mind. The man was so certain that he wouldn't get caught. He was right. At the moment, all they could charge Bernard with was having sex with Kayla Alexander. Will did not know what the statute of limitations was for Mary Clark, nor was he certain that the woman would testify against a man whom she still considered in many ways to have been her first lover.

There was a scraping noise. Will turned around to see what Faith was doing, but she was standing completely still in the middle of the room. He heard the scrape again, and, this time, he realized it was coming from the ceiling.

Faith mouthed, *Junkie?*

Will skimmed the low ceiling with his flashlight, checking every corner of the room. Like the rest of the house, the plaster had been busted out around the light switch. Will saw a dark stain around the hole, what might be a footprint. There was a hole above his head, insulation and Sheetrock hanging down in pieces.

"Emma?" He almost choked on the girl's name, afraid to say the word, to give himself hope. "Emma Campano?" He slammed his hand into the ceiling. "It's the police, Emma."

There was more scraping, the distinctive sound of rats.

"Emma?" Will reached up, tearing chunks of Sheetrock down from the low ceiling. His hands did not work fast enough, so he used the flashlight to make the opening larger. "Emma, it's the

police.” He dug his foot into the hole in the wall, propelling himself up into the attic.

Will stopped, halfway in the attic, his foot firmly supported by the lath in the wall. Hot air enveloped him, so intense that his lungs hurt from breathing it. The girl lay in a heap up against the eaves. Her skin was covered in a fine, white powder from the Sheetrock. Her eyes were open, her lips together. A large rat was inches from her hand, his retinas flashing like mirrors in the beam of the flashlight. Will pulled himself the rest of the way into the attic. Rats scrambled everywhere. One darted across the girl’s arm. He saw scratch marks where the animals had dug into her skin.

“No,” Will whispered, crawling on his hands and knees across the supports. Blood congealed on her abdomen and thighs. Welts strangled her neck. Will swung the flashlight at a greedy rat, his heart aching at the sight of the girl. How could he tell Paul that this was how he had found his daughter? There was no smell of decay, no flies burrowing into her flesh. How could any of them go on knowing that only a few hours had separated the girl from life and death?

“Will?” Faith asked, though he could tell from her tone of voice that she knew what he had found.

“I’m sorry,” Will told the girl. He could not stand her blank, lifeless stare. He had not believed once during the investigation that she was dead—even when evidence had stacked up to the contrary. He had insisted that there was no way she was gone, and now, all he could think was that his hubris had made the truth that much more unbearable.

Will reached over to close her eyes, pressing his fingers into the lids, gently lowering them. “I’m sorry,” he repeated, knowing that would never be enough.

Emma’s eyes popped back open. She blinked, focusing on Will.

She was alive.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



Faith stood in Emma Campano's hospital room, watching Abigail with her daughter. The room was dark, the only light coming from the machines that were hooked up to the girl. Fluids, antibiotics, various mixtures of chemicals designed to make her well again. Nothing could heal her spirit, though. No medical device could revive her soul.

While Faith was pregnant, she had secretly decided that the baby in her womb was a little girl. Blond hair and blue eyes, dimples in her cheeks. Faith would buy her matching pink outfits and braid ribbons into her hair while her daughter talked about school crushes and boy bands and secret wishes.

Jeremy had pretty quickly shattered that dream. Her son's feelings ran toward uncomplicated matters involving football and action heroes. His musical tastes were deplorable and hardly worth talking about. His wishes were hardly secret: toys, video games and—to Faith's horror—the slutty little redhead who lived down the street.

The past few days, Faith had let her mind go to that dark place every parent visits at one time or another: what would I do if the phone rang, the police knocked on the door, and some stranger told me that my child was dead? That was the terror that lurked in every mother's heart, that gruesome fear. It was like knocking on wood or making the sign of the cross—letting the thought come into your mind served as a talisman against the thing actually happening.

Watching Emma sleep, Faith realized there were worse things than getting that phone call. You could get your child back, but her identity—her essence—could be gone. The horrors Emma experienced were written on her body: the bruises, the scratches, the bite marks. Warren had taken his time with the girl, living out every sick fantasy that he could conjure. He had given her neither food nor water. Emma had been forced to defecate and urinate in the same room in which she slept. Her hands and feet had been tied. Repeatedly, she had been strangled to the point of passing out, then resuscitated. The girl had screamed so much that her voice was nothing more than a raw whisper.

Faith could not help herself. Her pity did not lie with the child, but with the mother. She thought about what Will had said earlier, how Evan Bernard had by all rights killed Mary Clark. There were two Emma Campanos now—the one before Warren, and the one after. That little girl Abigail had nursed and played peekaboo with, the pretty child she had taken to school in the mornings and dropped off at movie theaters and malls on the weekends, was gone. All that was left was the shell of her girl, an empty vessel that would be filled with the thoughts of a stranger.

Abigail was obviously thinking of these things. She could barely touch the girl, seemed to have to force herself to hold Emma's hand. Faith herself could not even meet the mother's eyes. How could you mourn the death of your child when she was still alive?

Abigail spoke softly. "She's awake."

Slowly, Faith walked over. They had tried to question the girl on the way to the hospital, firing questions at her one after the other. Emma had lain on the gurney, her eyes staring blankly at the ambulance ceiling, her answers coming out in monosyllabic bites. She had gotten progressively agitated until she was cowering against the rails, the impact of her ordeal slowly sinking in. She had become so hysterical that they had sedated her so that she would not hurt herself. Her reaction was strikingly similar to her mother's.

"Hi, honey," Faith began. "Do you remember me?"

The girl nodded. Her eyelids were heavy, though the medication had long worn off. The clock on the heart monitor read 6:33 a.m. Light peeked out around the edges of the metal blinds over the window. The sun had risen unnoticed as she slept.

They had figured out quickly that it was the men who set her off. The male paramedics touching and prodding, even Will trying to hold her hand, had made her panic like a trapped animal. Emma could not stand the sight of any of them, could not tolerate the male doctors. Even her own father upset the girl so much that she became physically ill.

Faith asked Emma, "You sure you want to do this?"

She nodded.

"I need to ask you some questions," Faith told her. "Do you think you can talk to me?"

She nodded again, wincing at the pain when she moved.

Abigail's fingertips touched her daughter's arm. "If it's too much—"

"I want to," Emma insisted, her voice strained, like a person much older than her few years.

"Tell me what you remember," Faith urged, knowing that the girl had probably been doing everything she could to forget.

"It was Kayla," she said, her tone certain. "We heard her screaming. Adam went out in the hall, and I saw the man stab him."

"Warren?"

She nodded.

Abigail reached for the glass of water beside the bed. "Drink something, honey."

"No," she refused. "I need to say."

Faith was surprised at her courage, but then she remembered that twice now, Emma Campano had been written off for dead and twice the girl had fought back. "Tell me what happened."

"Adam told me to hide in the closet." She paused, some of her resolve breaking. "The next thing I remember, I was in the room, and the man was on top of me."

Faith asked, "Did he say anything to you?"

"He said that he loved me." She glanced quickly at her mother. "I told him that I did, too. He was nicer when I did."

"That was smart," Faith told her. "You did what you needed to do to keep him from getting angry."

"Are you sure ..." The girl squeezed her eyes shut. The heart monitor beeped. Cold air came out of the vent over the bed. "You're sure he's dead?"

"Yes," Faith told her, putting all the certainty she could in her voice. "I saw him myself. He died last night."

She kept her eyes tightly closed.

"Are you sure that no one else came?" Faith asked. This had been the first question put to the girl, and she was just as unequivocal in her answer then as she was now.

"No."

Faith could not let it go. She had to be sure. "Warren didn't talk about anyone he was working with? No one came into the room with you?"

Her eyes were still closed. Faith thought that she had fallen asleep, but the girl's head moved slowly from side to side. "No one," she said. "I was completely alone."

Abigail reached out, but pulled back her hand, not knowing where she could touch her daughter, which spots would cause comfort or pain. She admitted as much, saying, "I don't know what to do."

Faith took the woman's hand and wrapped it around her daughter's. "You already lost her once. It's up to you to make sure you don't lose her again."



Faith could see Will and Amanda standing at the end of the hallway outside Emma's room. Both of them looked up at her expectantly. She shook her head, letting them know that Evan Bernard was still in the clear.

Amanda took out her phone and Will said something to stop her. Faith could not hear his voice and, frankly, she did not care. She went back to the row of plastic chairs lining the hallway and sat down with a groan. Her exhaustion was so deep that she felt dizzy. Sleep was all she needed, just a few minutes and then she could go with Will to scour Warren Grier's apartment again. They would turn the man's office upside down at the Copy Right, interview everyone who had ever known him or come into contact with him. Mary Clark had remembered Warren and Bernard together. There was bound to be someone else out there who knew even more than she did.

Faith's head jerked up as she caught herself dozing. Her phone was ringing. She took it out of

her pocket, checking the caller ID. It was Victor again. He was nothing if not persistent.

"You gonna get that?" Will asked.

Faith looked up at him. He looked as tired as she felt. "He'll call back." She tucked the phone back into her pocket. "What was that about?"

He slumped into the chair beside her, his long legs blocking the hallway. "The prosecutor says the judge won't deny bail." He rubbed his eyes. "Bernard's going to be out on the streets before noon."

"Did yelling at Amanda help?"

"It's easier to blame her for all the evil things that happen in the world." He put his face in his hands, exhaustion slowing down every move. "What did I miss on this, Faith? How can we keep him locked up?"

Faith thought about what was behind the door across the hall. Warren was dead, but there was still someone out there who should be punished for the crime. They had to make a case against Bernard. Will was right—he had to be punished.

She asked, "What did Amanda say?"

"She's moving on. Emma is back, we've got one dead prisoner and a lawsuit from the Alexanders to deal with. This case has basically been downgraded because we have a living victim." He shook his head. "What kind of job is this where a dead seventeen-year-old is more important than a living one?"

"My boss hasn't taken me off this yet," Faith told him. "I'll work with you as long as they let me."

"Well, that's the other thing."

Faith could hear the trepidation in his voice and it shot a cold chill through her. "Did Amanda find out about the gray powder?"

He looked at her, confused. "Oh," he said, understanding. "No, worse than that. Amanda is going to ask you to be my partner."

Faith was so tired that she was certain she had heard wrong. "Your partner?"

"I understand if you don't want to do it."

"It's not that," she said, still not sure she'd heard correctly. "Your partner?" she repeated. "Amanda's been keeping me off every important event in this case," Faith said, thinking the missed press conference was just the icing on the cake. "Why would she want me on her team?"

Will had the grace to look guilty. "That was actually me keeping you out of the loop," he admitted. "But not on purpose. Honest."

She was too tired to manage anything but an exasperated, "Will."

"I'm sorry," he said, holding out his hands in an open shrug. "But, listen, it's best you know what you'd be getting into."

"This is the last thing I expected," Faith admitted. She was still unable to wrap her head around the offer.

"I told you about the crappy dental." He held up his hand, showed her the scar from the nail gun. "And keep in mind that Amanda doesn't take prisoners."

Faith rubbed her face. She let the enormity of the situation sink in. "I keep hearing those clicks in my ear from Warren dry-firing on you." She paused, not trusting herself to speak. "He could have killed you." She added, "And I would have killed him."

Will tried for levity. "You seemed pretty cool to me." His voice went up in a falsetto as he mimicked, "'Drop it, motherfucker!'"

She felt her cheeks redden. "I guess my inner Police Woman came out."

"Pepper Anderson was a sergeant. You're a detective."

"And you are pathetic for knowing that."

He smiled, rubbing his jaw. "Yeah, you're probably right." He waited a few seconds before saying, "I mean it, Faith. I won't take it personally if you say no."

She cut to the heart of the matter. "I don't know if I can do this kind of job every day. At least with the murder squad, we know where to look."

"Boyfriend, husband, lover," Will said, a familiar refrain. "I'm not going to lie. It takes the life out of you."

She thought of Victor Martinez, his many phone calls. Jeremy was finally out of the house. She had met a man who might possibly be interested in her despite the fact that she was painfully ill-prepared for an adult relationship. She'd finally managed to get some grudging respect around the homicide squad, even if their highest compliment so far was, "You're not that stupid for a

blonde.”

Did Faith want to invite more complications into her life? Shouldn't she just coast through on her detective's shield, then work private security like every other retired cop she knew?

Will glanced up and down the hallway. “Did Paul just disappear?” he asked, and she realized it was a question meant to put them back on more comfortable footing.

Faith was glad for the familiar ground. “I haven't seen him.”

“Typical,” he remarked.

Faith turned in her chair to look at Will. His nose was still bruised, a sliver of blue tracing beneath his right eye. “Did you really grow up in foster care?”

He didn't register the question. His face stayed blank.

“I'm sorry,” she apologized, just as he answered, “Yes.”

Will leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. Faith waited for him to say something, but he seemed to be doing the same thing with her.

She blurted out, “Moms I'd like to fuck.”

“What?”

“That first day with Jeremy. You asked me what a MILF is. It stands for ‘Moms I'd Like to Fuck.’” He narrowed his eyes, probably trying to put it into context. He must have remembered, because he said, “Ouch.”

“Yeah,” Faith agreed.

Will clasped his hands together. He twisted around his watch and checked the time. Instead of making a comment, pulling some small talk out of the air, he simply stared at the floor. She saw that his shoes were scuffed, the hem of his pants caked with dirt from climbing under the fence to the North Avenue house.

“What did Warren say to you?” she asked. “I know that he said something. I saw the way your face changed.”

Will kept staring at the floor. She thought he was not going to answer, but he did. “Colors.”

Faith did not believe him any more now than she had before. “He told you the colors on the file folders?”

“It's a trick,” he answered. “Remember what Bernard said, about how dyslexics are good at hiding their problem from other people?” He looked back at her. “The colors tell you what's inside the folders.”

With all that had happened in the last few hours, Faith had almost forgotten her earlier revelation about Will's inability to read. She thought about the psych evaluation Will had shoved in Warren's face, the way he had pressed his finger to each differently colored dot as he called out the findings. Will had never looked at the words. He had let the colors guide him.

“What about the last sheet?” she asked. “Warren was functionally illiterate. He had *some* ability to read. Why couldn't he see that it was a dress-code memo?”

Will kept his eyes trained at the wall opposite. “When you get upset, it's harder to see the words. They move around. They blur.”

So Faith wasn't crazy, after all. Will did have some sort of reading problem. She thought about the way he always patted his pockets, looking for his glasses, when there was something to read. He hadn't noticed the rural route address on Adam Humphrey's license or read the Web page on Bernard's computer that talked about teacher retirement. Still, she had to admit if you stacked him up against Leo Donnelly or any other man in the homicide division, he came out the better cop.

She asked, “What other tricks would Warren use?”

“A digital recorder. Voice recognition software. Spell-check.”

Faith wondered if she could have been any more blind. She was supposed to be a detective and she had missed all of the obvious signs right under her nose. “Is that why Warren fixated on the colors?” she asked. “Did he see the different colors on your file folders and figure out you—”

“Colors,” Will interrupted. “He said the colors.” A big, sloppy grin spread across his face. “That's what Warren was trying to tell me.”

“What?”

He stood up, excitement replacing exhaustion. “We need to go to the copy center.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



Will walked down through the cells, not looking at the crime-scene tape covering the open doorway where Warren Grier had hanged himself. He could feel the cold stares of the prisoners follow him to the end of the hall. There were the usual sounds of jail: men talking trash, other men weeping.

Evan Bernard was in one of the larger holding cells. Men who raped young girls were always targeted by other prisoners. The ones who were attached to sensational cases could pretty much kiss their lives good-bye. The transgendered cell was the only safe place for a man like Bernard. The women were usually arrested for crimes of circumstance: stealing food, public vagrancy. Most of them were too feminine to get construction work and too masculine to turn tricks. Like Evan Bernard, they would have been torn apart in the general population.

The teacher had his hands hanging outside the bars, his elbows on the supports. The cell was a large one, at least fifteen feet wide. Beds were stacked three high across the space. As he walked up, Will noticed that the women were all huddled around a single bunk, as if they, too, could not stand the sight of Evan Bernard.

Will had a sheet folded up under his arm. The material was thick prison issue, bleached and starched to within an inch of its life. When he propped it up between the bars, it stayed that way.

Bernard made a point of looking at the sheet. "Poor kid. The girls are crazy upset."

Will glanced into the cell. The girls looked ready to rip him apart.

Bernard said, "I'm not talking to you without my lawyer present."

"I don't want you to talk," Will said. "I want you to listen."

He shrugged. "Nothing else to pass the time."

"Do you know how he did it? How he strangled himself?"

"I assumed he was the victim of some sort of police brutality."

Will smiled. "Do you want to know or not?"

Bernard raised his eyebrow, as if to say, *Go on*.

Will took down the sheet, unfolding it. He explained as he worked. "It's hard to figure out, right? It doesn't make sense that you can asphyxiate yourself just sitting on the floor." He looped the sheet through his hand, wrapping the material around his arm.

"What you do is, you tie one end around the doorknob, and then you loop it around your neck like this." Will jerked the sheet tight, his skin pressing out between the folds. "You kneel down with your head close to the knob, and then you start breathing really fast and really hard until you hyperventilate."

Bernard smiled, as if he finally understood.

"And then, just before you pass out, you kick your legs out from underneath yourself." Will pulled the sheet away. "And then you wait."

"It wouldn't take long," Bernard said.

"No, just a few minutes."

"Is that why you came down here, Mr. Trent, to tell me this tragic tale?"

"I came down here to tell you that you were right about something."

"You'll have to narrow that down for me. I've been right about so many things."

Will looped the sheet through the bars, letting the material hang down either side. "You told me that dyslexics were good at developing tricks so that they can blend in with everybody else. True?"

"True."

"It got me to thinking about Warren, because that day he went to Emma Campano's house,

there were lots of things for him to remember.” Will listed them out. “What time Kayla was going to let him into the house. Where Emma’s room was. How many pairs of gloves to bring. Where to transfer her from one car to the other.”

Bernard shook his head. “This is fascinating, Mr. Trent, but what on earth does it have to do with me?”

“Well,” Will began, digging in his jacket pocket for his digital recorder. “Since Warren couldn’t write down lists, he made recordings.” Bernard shook his head again. He wouldn’t have recognized the recorder because it belonged to Will. “Warren used his cell phone to make recordings,” Will explained. “He transferred them to compact discs that he kept filed along with customer artwork at the copy store.”

Bernard seemed less sure of himself.

“Blue, red, purple, green,” Will repeated. “That was the sequence he used for his discs.” He clicked on the player. Evan Bernard’s voice was easily distinguishable. “*No, Warren, the rope and tape will be in the trunk. Kayla will give you the keys.*”

Warren mumbled, “*I know, I know.*”

On the tape, Bernard was obviously agitated. “*No, you don’t know. You need to listen to what I’m saying. If you do this right, none of us will get caught.*”

A girl’s voice they had verified was Kayla Alexander’s, said, “*You want me to write it down for you, Warren? You want me to make a list?*”

Will clicked off the recorder. “You can hear the rest in court.”

“I’m going free in an hour,” Bernard said. “My lawyer told me—”

“Your lawyer doesn’t know about the DVDs.” Charlie Reed had been wrong about the cables in back of Bernard’s home computer. They had been attached to a recordable DVD drive.

Will told the man, “We have at least a dozen videos showing you in your special room, Evan. My partner is at Westfield Academy with Olivia McFaden right now. We made stills from the videos—pictures that show the girls’ faces right alongside yours. So far, they’ve identified six students from the school.” Will asked, “How many more do you think we’ll find? How many women do you think are going to come forward?”

“I want my lawyer. Now.”

“Oh, he’s coming. He seemed really eager to talk to you when I told him about the new charges.” Will put his hand on the sheet, pushing it into the cell. “Here you go, Evan. I don’t want you to ever think that I didn’t leave you enough rope to hang yourself with.”



Betty was on the couch when Will came home, which meant that Angie wasn’t there. He took off his jacket and loosened his tie as he adjusted the thermostat. He had been in the house less than a minute and he was already annoyed. Angie knew he liked to keep the air on for Betty. She tended to get nasty heat rashes in the summer.

The answering machine was flashing. There was one message.

Will pressed the button and heard Paul Campano’s voice come out of the speaker.

“Hey, Will,” he said, and that was enough. Will stopped the tape, not wanting to know what the rest of the message said. He didn’t want to hear Paul humbled or grateful. The man had said his name instead of calling him Trash. That was all that Will had ever wanted to hear.

He scooped the dog off the couch and took her to the kitchen, where he was surprised to find her water bowl was filled. He examined Betty’s bug-eyed face, as if he could tell whether or not she had stopped drinking just by looking at her. He was fairly certain Angie hadn’t bothered to fill up the bowl during the day. Betty licked Will’s face and he gave her a pet before putting her down on the floor. He scooped some kibble in her food bowl, then tossed her a piece of her favorite cheese, before going into the bedroom.

It was like an oven in the back of the house. He stripped out of his vest, shirt and pants as he walked to the bed, tossing them all on a chair. Will wasn’t sure what time it was, but he was so tired that it didn’t make a difference. The fact that Angie never made the bed actually seemed like a good thing as he slid between the sheets.

Unbidden, a long, heavy sigh came out of his chest as he closed his eyes. He put his hands on his chest, then he put them down at his sides. He rolled over. He kicked the sheets off. Finally, he ended up on his back again, staring up at the ceiling.

The phone rang, piercing the solitude. Will debated whether or not to answer. He checked the clock. It was ten in the morning. There was no one in the world right now that he wanted to talk

to. Amanda wasn't about to pat him on the back, the press would not know how to get his phone number and Angie was off doing her own thing—whatever that was.

He picked it up before the machine clicked on.

"Hi," Faith said. "Are you busy?"

"Just lying around in my underwear." There was no response. "Hello?"

"Yes." She said the word like a statement, and he realized that yet again he'd blurted out the wrong thing. He was about to apologize when she said, "I told Amanda I'm taking the job."

Several responses came to mind, but Will weighed them out, not trusting himself not to say something stupid. "Good," he managed, more like a croak.

"It's because we caught him." Bernard, she meant. "If we hadn't, I probably would've been fine going back to my little desk in the murder squad and biding my time until retirement."

"You've never struck me as the type of cop who works on a time clock."

"It was a really easy habit to fall into when I was partnered with Leo," she admitted. "Maybe it'll be different with you."

He laughed. "I can honestly say that I've never had a woman look at being stuck with me as a positive thing."

She laughed, too. "At least I can help you with your reports."

Will felt his smile drop. They had not discussed Faith's obvious realization that there were second-graders in her neighborhood who could read better than Will. He said, "I don't need help, Faith. Really." To cut some of the tension, he added, "But, thank you."

"All right," she agreed, but the strain was still there.

He tried to think of something else to say—a joke, a bad pun about his illiteracy. Nothing came except the glaring reminder that there was a reason he did not tell people about his problem. Will did not need help with anything. He could pull his own weight, and had for years.

He asked, "When do you start?"

"It's complicated," she said. "I've got a provisional certificate until I finish my degree, but, basically, I'll be in your office first thing a week from Monday."

"My office?" Will asked, getting a sinking sensation. He knew how Amanda worked. She had come down to his office a year ago and noted that, if Will kept his knees up around his ears, another desk could easily be wedged into the space. "That'll be great," he said, trying to keep things upbeat.

"I've been thinking a lot about Kayla."

He could tell as much from her tone of voice. "You mean the lawsuit?"

"No. Her motivation." Faith was silent again, but this time she seemed to be gathering her thoughts. "Nobody liked Kayla except Emma. Her parents were shitty. The whole school hated her."

"From all reports, she was reviled for a reason."

"But Bernard's such a manipulative bastard, it's hard to tell whether or not she was in it for the thrill or because he told her to do it."

Will did not want to accept that it was possible for a seventeen-year-old girl to be so sadistic. The only thing he knew for certain was that with Warren dead and Bernard pointing his finger at everyone but himself, they would never really know the truth. "I doubt even Kayla knew the difference."

"Mary Clark *still* doesn't know."

He considered the poor woman, the damage that had been done to her psyche. On the surface, Mary was living a good life: well educated, married with children, teaching at an upscale school. And yet, all of that meant nothing because of something tragic that had happened to her over a decade ago. It was the same way he had thought of Emma early on in this case: everything she survived would make her want to die every day for the rest of her life. If the GBI and the Atlanta police and every other police force in America really cared about stopping crime, they would take all the money they poured into prisons and the courts and homeland security and spend every nickel on protecting children from the bastards who preyed on them. Will could pretty much guarantee the investment would pay off in saved lives.

"I should go," Faith told him. "I'm having lunch with Victor Martinez in two hours and I'm still wearing the same clothes he saw me in last time."

"The guy from Tech?"

"We'll see how long it takes for me to screw it up."

"I can give you some pointers."

"I think I manage that sort of thing well enough on my own."

She made noises about going, and he stopped her. "Faith?"

"Yes?"

Will struggled to make a grand statement, to welcome her into his life, to find a way to make it clear that he was going to do whatever it took to keep things running smoothly. "I'll see you in a week."

"All right."

Will hung up the phone, and a million better things to say came to mind, starting with telling her that he was glad she had made the decision and ending with him begging her to forgive any and all future monkey business. He lay in bed, eyes on the ceiling, and ran through their phone conversation. Will realized that he knew exactly when she had decided to take the job. They were at the copy center, listening to Evan Bernard, Kayla Alexander and Warren Grier planning the abduction of Emma Campano. Both of them were punch-drunk with exhaustion, and their foolish grins must have alarmed Charlie Reed, though the man had held his tongue.

She was right about one thing: as bad as the last few days had been, catching Evan Bernard made it all worthwhile. They had brought Emma Campano home. Warren Grier had meted out his own punishment, but there had been value in what he'd left behind. Kayla Alexander had gotten justice, too, no matter what her involvement had been in the crime. There was a certain satisfaction in those resolutions, a certain reassurance that what you did out on the streets actually mattered.

Yet, Will wondered if Faith knew that her father had an out-of-state bank account with over twenty thousand dollars in it. Will was two weeks into the Evelyn Mitchell case before he thought to check for accounts under her dead husband's name. The savings account was at least twenty years old and the balance had fluctuated over the years but never dropped below five thousand dollars. The last withdrawal had been three years earlier, so it was hard to track where exactly the money had been spent. Evelyn Mitchell was a cop. She would know better than to keep receipts. As a matter of fact, if Will hadn't found the account, he would have assumed from the way she lived her life that she was clean. She had a small mortgage, modest savings and a six-year-old Mercedes she had bought used.

It must have been expensive raising your child's child. Doctor appointments, field trips, schoolbooks. Jeremy wouldn't have had insurance. Will doubted fifteen-year-old Faith's policy covered childbirth. Maybe that's where the money had gone. Maybe she had figured there was nothing wrong with using drug dealers' money to take care of her family.

There were tax issues, of course, but Will did not work for the IRS. He worked for the GBI, and it was his job to present the evidence to the lawyers and let them decide what case they were going to bring. Will had been mildly surprised when he heard that Evelyn Mitchell was being forcibly retired instead of prosecuted. He had been on the job long enough to know that the higher up you were, the less likely you were to swing, but the bank account was the proverbial slam dunk. Now he knew why the woman had escaped with her pension. Amanda must have pulled some pretty long strings to keep her almost-sister-in-law out of prison.

The front door slammed. "Willy?"

He was silent for just a moment, feeling the painful sting of his solitude being interrupted. "In here."

Angie narrowed her eyes when she found him lying in bed. "You're not watching porn, are you?"

Considering Evan Bernard's sex tapes, it would be many hours before he could think about porn again. "Where were you?"

"I went to see Leo Donnelly in the hospital."

"You hate him."

"He's a cop. Cops go to see cops when they're in the hospital."

Will would never understand that code, the secret language that came with wearing a uniform.

Angie said, "I heard you got your guy."

"Did you hear my prisoner killed himself while he was in my custody?"

"It wasn't your fault." Automatic, the cop's *gesundheit* of absolution.

"He was one of us," Will told her, not wanting to say Warren Grier's name aloud, to make him a living person again. "He was in and out of foster homes all his life. He finally left at eighteen. He was all alone."

Angie's eyes softened for just a moment. "Were you with him when he died?"

Will nodded. He had to believe that he had been there for Warren, even as the man took his last breath.

She said, "Then he wasn't alone, was he?"

Will rolled over on his side so that he could look at her. She was wearing shorts and a white blouse that was so thin it showed the black bra she was wearing underneath. Leo Donnelly must have loved that. He was probably telling half the squad room about it right now.

Will said, "I know you know you're not pregnant."

"I know you know."

There was nothing much more that he could say on the topic.

She asked, "Do you want a sandwich?"

"You let the mayonnaise go bad."

She gave a sly smile. "I bought a new jar at the store."

Will felt himself smiling back. It was, he thought, the nicest thing she had done for him in a really long while.

She started to leave, then stopped. "I'm glad you solved your case, Will. No one else would've gotten that girl back alive."

"I'm not so sure about that," he admitted. "You know a lot of this stuff is just chance."

"Be sure to tell that to your asshole teacher."

Evan Bernard. Was the reading teacher's impending prosecution the product of chance, or was that all down to Will's insight? Eventually, whoever was leading the investigation would have checked all of the CDs in Warren's office. Evan Bernard might have been in the wind by then, but they would have found the evidence.

She said, "Maybe if you're good, we can buff the coffee table again."

"Maybe the chair. My knees are hurting."

"I'm not going to marry an old man."

He didn't say the obvious, which was that she wasn't going to marry anybody. Angie hadn't put her house on the market, she wore her engagement ring only when it suited her and as long as Will had known her, the only commitment she had ever stuck to was one to never stick to commitments. The only promise she had ever kept was that she kept popping back up in his life no matter how many times she told him she was not going to.

She had bought him mayonnaise, though. There was some kind of love in the gesture.

Angie leaned over the bed and gave him an uncharacteristic kiss on the forehead. "I'll let you know when your sandwich is ready." Will fell onto his back and stared up at the ceiling. He tried to remember what it felt like to be alone. As far back as he could remember, there had never been that sense of complete isolation you got when there was no one else out there in the world who even knew your name. Angie had always been a phone call away. Even when she was seeing other men, she would drop everything to come to Will's side. Not that he had ever asked her to, but he knew that she would, just as he knew that he would do the same for her.

Did having Angie in his life mean that Will would never be as alone as Warren Grier? He thought about the scene he had described to the younger man during the interrogation, the picture Will had painted of domestic bliss: Warren would come home to find Emma cooking dinner for him. They would share a bottle of wine and talk about their day. Emma would wash the dishes. Warren would dry. Describing the scenario had been so easy for Will because he knew in his heart that Warren's dreams would closely parallel his own.

Until recently, Will's house had looked like Warren's tiny room on Ashby Street—everything neat, everything in its place. Now Angie's stuff was strewn about, the imprint of her daily existence firmly melding into Will's. Was that a bad thing? Was the inconvenience, the disruption, the price that human beings paid for companionship? Will had told Warren that guys like them didn't know how to be in normal relationships. Maybe Will had landed himself right in the middle of one without having the capacity to recognize the signs.

Clicking announced Betty's entrance in the bedroom as her toenails struck the wood floor. It was as if the dog had been waiting for Angie to leave. She jumped onto the bed and looked at him expectantly. Will covered himself with the sheet, thinking it was mildly inappropriate to be undressed in front of the dog. Betty seemed to have her own issues. He saw what looked like potting soil on her snout.

Will closed his eyes, listening to the creaks and groans of the old house, the compressor kicking in as the air conditioner whirled to life. Betty crawled onto his chest and took three turns before settling down. She had a little wheeze when she breathed. Maybe her hay fever was back.

Will would have to take her to the doctor for some antihistamine tomorrow.

He heard Angie cursing in the kitchen. There was the sound of a knife hitting the floor, probably covered in mayonnaise. He could picture her wiping it up with her foot, tracking it across the tile. Betty would probably find the spots and lick the greasy residue. Will wondered if dogs could get food poisoning and decided the risk was too great.

Carefully, he scooped Betty off his chest, then put on his pants and went to help Angie in the kitchen.

EPILOGUE



The Ansley Park house sat vacant. The furniture had been auctioned. The walls and floors had been stripped. Special cleaning crews had erased the blood, the scenes of crime. Yet everything was still exactly the same in Abigail Campano's head. Sometimes she would be in the kitchen of their new house or walking up the staircase and remember Adam Humphrey's face, the dark red of his eyes as she squeezed the life out of him.

Despite—or maybe because of—the objection of their lawyers, Abby had written his parents a letter. She had told them what Emma had said about their boy, how he was kind and good and gentle. She had apologized. She had freely admitted her guilt. She offered them everything she had and was fully prepared to give it. Abigail had herself been a lawyer and she knew full well what she was doing. Two weeks later, a note had arrived in the mailbox among the various detritus strangers send strangers in times of catastrophe. There was no return address, but the postmark showed a rural town in Oregon. Two short sentences were on the card inside: *Thank you for your letter. We pray that we all find the strength to carry on.*

It seemed like such a trite statement, the sort of thing Jay Gatsby would say, or the parting line at the end of an old black-and-white war movie: *Carry on, old sport! Carry on to freedom!*

Two months later, life continued around them, but there was still the underlying threat of menace, as if they all expected it to be taken away from them. And how much they had to lose! The new house in Druid Hills was spectacular, even larger than the Ansley one. There were eight bedrooms and nine bathrooms. There was an office, a gym, a sauna, a wine cellar, a screening room, a keeping room, a mudroom. The carriage house offered two full baths and two more bedrooms. Walking around the apartment over the garage, Abigail had wryly commented that should tragedy ever befall their family again, at least she and Paul would have more space to get away from each other.

He did not laugh at her observation.

She bought furniture, ordered bed linens, spent so much money online that the credit card companies called to make sure her identity had not been stolen. Everyone else seemed to be getting back to normal, or what Abigail thought of as the “new normal.” Beatrice was back in Italy. Hoyt had returned to his mistress. His wife was safely ensconced in the Puerto Rico house. Abigail was certain there was another mistress in there somewhere. Her father had been talking an awful lot about London lately.

Even the press had finally moved on. *People* magazine and the television producers had dropped out early on when it was made clear that the Campano family had no desire to share their story with the world. There were the requisite self-proclaimed friends who came out of the woodwork to talk about Emma, and the ex-friends who talked about Abigail and Paul. Worse were the tabloids. They stood on the other side of the gate at the end of the driveway, screaming at anyone who left the house. “Hey, killer!” they would say, spotting Abigail. “Killer, how does it feel to know you murdered someone?”

Abigail would keep her face neutral, her back to the vultures as much as she could, then go into the house and collapse in tears. They called her cold one day, then praised her as a savage mother bear protecting her cubs the next. They asked her what she thought of Evan Bernard, the man who had brought all of this misery to their door.

Every time Bernard opened his mouth, a news team was there, reporting live from the jail where he was being kept. If coverage started to die down, he made statements, gave surprise jailhouse interviews and presented exclusive documents from his troubled past. Then the analysts would have their field day, expert after expert dissecting every nuance of Bernard's life: where he

had gone wrong, how many kids he had helped during his career. Women came forward, so many young women. They all insisted that despite the tape, despite the video evidence, he was innocent. The Evan Bernard they knew was a kind man, a gentle man. Abigail itched to be alone with the bastard, to wrap her hands around his kind and gentle neck and watch the pathetic life drain from his beady black eyes.

Listening to it all was maddening, and Abigail and Paul had gotten into the habit of turning off the news, skipping the talk shows, because they could not contribute anymore to Bernard's celebrity. They had been doing this anyway whenever Emma walked into the room. The truth was that it had made Abigail feel dirty, as if she were reading her daughter's diary behind her back. Paul had even canceled his subscription to the morning paper. Dispatch had failed to get the notice. There were so many wet bags of newsprint clumped at the end of the driveway that the woman from the neighborhood association had left a letter in their mailbox.

I regret your misfortunes, but Druid Hills is an historical district, and as such, there are rules.

"An historical district," Abigail had mimicked, thinking the woman had an historic stick up her ass. She had written a furious letter in response, full of condescension and vitriol. "Do you know what it's like to know an animal raped your child?" she had demanded. "Do you think I give a rat's ass about your fucking rules?"

The screed had turned into a journal of sorts, page after page filled with all the horrible things that Abigail had kept choked in the back of her throat. She hadn't even bothered to read it before tearing it to shreds and burning it in the fireplace.

"Bit warm for a fire," Paul had said.

"I'm cold," she had told him, and that was that.

It wasn't until recently that they could even go to the mailbox without having a reporter document their every step. Even the last, desperate tabloids had moved on when, a few weeks ago, a pregnant woman in Arizona had gone missing and her husband had started to look awfully suspicious. Abigail had secretly watched the television down in the gym, studying pictures of the twenty-six-year-old brunette, thinking, jealously, that Emma was much prettier than the mother-to-be. Then the woman had shown up dead in a vacant lot and she had felt petty and small.

With the reporters gone, they were all alone. There was nothing in their lives to complain about but each other, and that was patently forbidden. Emma had only left the house once a week since they had moved here. Paul literally brought the rest of the world to her doorstep. She was homeschooled. Her yoga instructor came to the house. The hairdresser paid a monthly visit. Occasionally, a girl would show up to do her nails. Kayla Alexander and Adam Humphrey had been Emma's only close friends, so there were no other teenagers knocking on her door. The only person Paul could not bribe to come see her was her therapist. The woman's office was less than a mile up the road and Paul drove Emma there every Thursday, sitting outside the door, ready to rush in if she called for him.

Father and daughter were closer than ever now, and Abigail was hard-pressed to think of reasons why he should not give Emma everything she wanted. The irony was that she wanted so little now. She didn't ask for clothes or money or new gadgets. She just wanted her father by her side.

Paul had started working five days a week rather than his usual six. He ate breakfast with them every morning and supper every evening. There were no business trips or late-night dinners. He had turned into the perfect husband and father, but at what cost? He was not the same anymore. Sometimes Abigail would find him alone in his office or sitting in front of the muted television. The look on his face was painful to see. It was, she knew, the exact look she must have during ungarded moments.

And then there was Emma. Often, Abigail would stand in the open doorway of her daughter's room just to watch her sleep. This was her angel of old. Her face was smooth, the worry lines on her forehead erased. Her mouth was not tense, her eyes not filled with darkness. Then there were times Abigail went into the room and Emma was already awake. She would be sitting in the window seat, staring blankly out the window. She was there in the house, sitting not less than ten feet from where Abigail stood, but it felt as if somehow time had fractured, and Emma was no longer in her room but a million miles away.

For years, Abigail had worried that her daughter would turn out exactly like her mother. Now she worried that she would not turn out at all.

How could this have happened to them? How could they survive? Paul wouldn't argue about it anymore. He got up and went to work. He drove Emma to her appointment. He made phone calls

that kept their lives moving. They had sex more frequently, but it seemed utilitarian more than anything else. When she noticed there was a pattern, that Paul seemed to be interested in her exclusively on Wednesday and Saturday nights, she felt relieved rather than insulted. She wrote X's in her calendar, marking out the days. It was something to plan for, something that she knew would happen.

Abigail found herself looking for more patterns in her life, more things she could rely on. Because of therapy, Emma was crankier on Thursdays, so Abigail started making pancakes for breakfast. On Fridays, she seemed sad, so movie night was instituted. Tuesdays were the worst. All the bad things had happened on a Tuesday. None of them talked much those days. The house was quiet. The stereo in Emma's room was not turned on. The television was kept low. The dog no longer barked. The phone seldom rang.

This was the new normal, then—the little tricks they all learned to cope with what had happened to them. Abigail supposed it wasn't so far removed from how things were before. She met with decorators, she spent money on things for their new home. Paul still had his secrets, though this time there was no other woman involved. Emma was still lying to them about where she went during the day, even though she never left the house. "I'm fine," she would say, even though just seconds before she had been a million miles away. They would believe her, because the truth hurt more than the lie.

So Abigail went about the process of going about her life. The days were getting shorter now, and she knew that they could not go on like this forever. Eventually, things would have to change, but for now, this new status quo was the only thing that was keeping them all going. She supposed in the end that Adam Humphrey's parents were right.

Sometimes, all you could do was pray for the strength to carry on.

For Irwyn and Nita ...
for everything ...

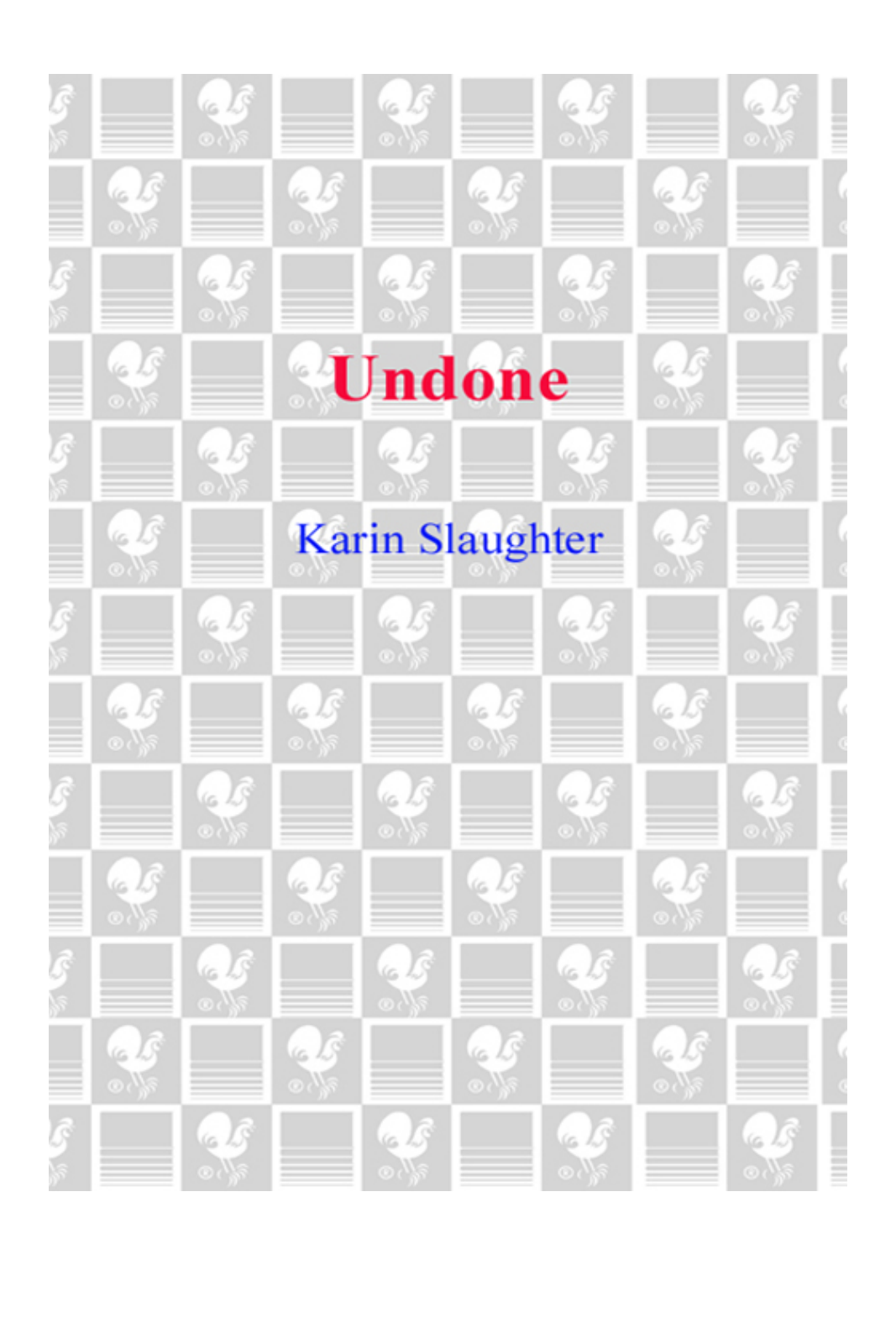
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Kate Miciak, Kate Elton and Victoria Sanders were their usual intrepid selves while I was working on this novel, and I would like to thank all three ladies for their continued support. Add to that list Irwyn Applebaum, Nita Taublib, Betsy Hulsebosch, Barb Burg, Sharon Propson, Susan Corcoran, Cynthia Lasky, Carolyn Schwartz, Paolo Pepe, Kelly Chian and all of the other champs at Bantam. I feel very fortunate to be working with a group of people who are so dedicated to books.

I feel very lucky to have my friends around me—you know who you are. DT, my hero, I am humbled by your kindness. FM, your pithy observations are a constant source of humor. DM, how far we've come together thanks to your gentle heart. And as for you, Mo Hayder, don't pretend you don't try to freak me out just as much. I am not the one who clogged up a sewer with a pair of amputated hands.

At any rate—

My daddy brought me chocolate cake one night while I was hard at work on this book, thus confirming my view that he is the best father in the world. As for DA ... all the love from my lips ...



Undone

Karin Slaughter

**KARIN
SLAUGHTER**

UNDONE

A NOVEL



A DELL BOOK
NEW YORK

Undone is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2009 by Karin Slaughter

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by Delacorte Press,
an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group,
a division of Random House, Inc., New York.

DELACORTE PRESS is a registered trademark
of Random House, Inc., and the colophon is
a trademark of Random House, Inc.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Slaughter, Karin, 1971–

Undone : a novel / Karin Slaughter.— 1st ed.

p. cm.

eISBN: 978-0-440-33866-6

1. Linton, Sara (Fictitious character)—Fiction.
2. Women physicians—Fiction. 3. Atlanta (Ga.)—Fiction.
4. Psychological fiction. I. Title.

PS3569.L275U54 2009

813'.54—dc22

2009013477

www.bantamdell.com

v3.0_r2

Contents

Master - Table of Contents

Undone

Title Page

Copyright

Prologue

Day One

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Day Two

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Day Three

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Day Four

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Three Days Later

Chapter 25

Epilogue

Dedication
Acknowledgments

PROLOGUE

They had been married forty years to the day and Judith still felt like she didn't know everything about her husband. Forty years of cooking Henry's dinner, forty years of ironing his shirts, forty years of sleeping in his bed, and he was still a mystery. Maybe that was why she kept doing all these things for him with little or no complaint. There was a lot to be said for a man who, after forty years, still managed to hold your attention.

Judith rolled down the car window, letting in some of the cool spring air. Downtown Atlanta was only thirty minutes away, but out here in Conyers, you could still find areas of undeveloped land, even some small farms. It was a quiet place, and Atlanta was just far enough away so that she could appreciate the peace. Still, Judith sighed as she caught a quick glimpse of the city's skyscrapers on the distant horizon, thinking, *Home*.

She was surprised at the thought, that Atlanta was now a place she considered her home. Her life until recently had been suburban, even rural. She preferred the open spaces to the concrete sidewalks of the city, even while she admitted that it was nice living in so central a location that you could walk to the corner store or a little café if the mood struck you.

Days would pass without her even having to get into a car—the type of life she would have never dreamed of ten years ago. She could tell Henry felt the same. His shoulders bunched up around his ears with tight resolve as he navigated the Buick down a narrow country road. After decades of driving just about every highway and interstate in the country, he instinctively knew all the back routes, the doglegs and shortcuts.

Judith trusted him to get them home safely. She sat back in her seat, staring out the window, blurring her eyes so that the trees bordering the road seemed more like a thick forest. She made the trip to Conyers at least once a week, and every time she felt like she saw something new—a small house she'd never noticed, a bridge she'd bumped over many times but never paid attention to. Life was like that. You didn't realize what was passing you by until you slowed down a little bit to get a better look.

They'd just come from an anniversary party in their honor, thrown together by their son. Well, more likely thrown together by Tom's wife, who managed his life like an executive assistant, housekeeper, babysitter, cook and—presumably—concubine all rolled up into one. Tom had been a joyful surprise, his birth an event doctors had said would never come about. Judith had loved every part of him on first sight, accepted him as a gift that she would cherish with every bone in her body. She had done everything for him, and now that Tom was in his thirties, he still seemed to need an awful lot of taking care of. Perhaps Judith had been too conventional a wife, too subservient a mother, so that her son had grown into the sort of man who needed—expected—a wife to do everything for him.

Judith certainly had not enslaved herself to Henry. They had married in 1969, a time when women could actually have interests other than cooking the perfect pot roast and discovering the best method to get stains out of the carpet. From the start, Judith had been determined to make her life as interesting as possible. She'd been a room mother at Tom's school. She'd volunteered at the local homeless shelter and helped start a recycling group in the neighborhood. When Tom was older, Judith took a job doing light bookkeeping for a local business and joined a running team through the church to train for marathons. This active lifestyle stood in stark contrast to that of Judith's own mother, a woman who toward the end of her life was so ravaged from raising nine children, so drained from the constant physical demands of being a farmer's wife, that some days she was too depressed to even speak.

Though, Judith had to admit, she had herself been a somewhat typical woman in those early years. Embarrassingly, she was one of those girls who had gone to college specifically to find a husband. She had grown up near Scranton, Pennsylvania, in a town so small it didn't merit a dot on the map. The only men available to her were farmers, and they were hardly interested in Judith. Judith could not blame them. The mirror told no lies. She was a bit too plump, a bit too bucktoothed, and a bit too much of everything else, to be the sort of woman Scranton men took for a wife. And then there was her father, a stern disciplinarian whom no sane man would seek out for a father-in-law, at least not in exchange for a bucktoothed, pear-shaped girl who had no natural talent for farming.

The truth was that Judith had always been the odd one in the family, the one who didn't quite fit in. She read too much. She hated farmwork. Even as a young girl, she was not drawn to animals and did not want to be responsible for their care and feeding. None of her sisters and brothers had been sent away for higher education. There were two brothers who had dropped out of ninth grade, and an older sister who had married rather quickly and given birth to her first child seven months later. Not that anyone bothered to do the math. Enveloped in a constant state of denial, her mother had remarked to her dying day that her first grandchild had always been big-boned, even as an infant. Thankfully, Judith's father had seen the writing on the wall so far as his middle girl was concerned. There would be no marriage of convenience with any of the local boys, not least of all because none of them found her remotely convenient. Bible college, he decided, was not just Judith's last—but her only—chance.

At the age of six, Judith had been struck in the eye by a flying piece of debris as she chased after the tractor. From that moment on, she'd always worn glasses. People assumed she was cerebral because of the glasses, when in fact the opposite was true. Yes, she loved to read, but her tastes ran more toward trashy dime novel than literary. Still, the egghead label had stuck. What was it they used to say? "Men don't make passes at women who wear glasses." So, it was surprising—no, more like shocking—when on Judith's first day of college in her first class, the teaching assistant had winked at her.

She had thought something was in his eye, but there was no mistaking Henry Coldfield's intentions when, after class, he had pulled her aside and asked her if she'd like to go down to the drugstore and have a soda with him. The wink, apparently, was the beginning and end of his gregariousness. Henry was a very

shy man in person; strange, considering he later became the top salesman for a liquor distribution company—a job he passionately despised even three years past retirement.

Judith supposed Henry's ability to blend had come from being the son of an Army colonel, moving around the country so often, never staying at one base more than a few years at a time. There was no passionate love at first sight—that came later. Initially, Judith had simply been attracted to the fact that Henry was attracted to her. It was a novelty for the pear from Scranton, but Judith had always been at the opposite spectrum of Marx's philosophy—Groucho, not Karl: She was more than willing to join any club that would have her as a member.

Henry was a club unto himself. He was neither handsome nor ugly; forward nor reticent. With his neatly parted hair and flat accent, *average* would be the best way to describe him, which Judith later did in a letter to her older sister. Rosa's response had been something along the lines of, "Well, I suppose that's the best you can hope for." In her defense, Rosa was pregnant at the time with her third child while her second was still in diapers, but still, Judith had never forgiven her sister for the slight—not against herself, but against Henry. If Rosa failed to notice how special Henry was, it was because Judith was a poor writer; Henry too nuanced a man for mere words on a page. Perhaps it was all for the best. Rosa's sour observation had given Judith a reason to break from her family and embrace this winkingly introverted, mercurial stranger.

Henry's gregarious shyness was only the first of many dichotomies Judith had observed in her husband over the years. He was terrified of heights, but had earned his amateur pilot's license as a teenager. He sold alcohol but never imbibed. He was a homebody, but he spent most of his adult life traveling through the Northwest, then the Midwest, as promotions moved them around the country much like the Army had done when Henry was a child. His life, it seemed, was all about making himself do things he did not want to do. And yet, he often told Judith that her company was the one thing that he truly enjoyed.

Forty years, and so many surprises.

Sadly, Judith doubted her son held any such surprises for his spouse. While Tom was growing up, Henry was on the road three weeks out of every four, and his parenting came in spurts that didn't necessarily highlight his more compassionate side. Subsequently, Tom became everything his father had shown him during those growing years: strict, unbending, driven.

There was something else to it as well. Judith didn't know if it was because Henry saw his sales job as a duty to his family rather than his passion, or because he hated being away from home so much, but it seemed that every interaction he had with their son held an underlying tension: *Don't make the same mistakes I've made. Don't get trapped in a job you despise. Don't compromise your beliefs to put food on the table.* The only positive thing he recommended to the boy was marrying a good woman. If only he had been more specific. If only he hadn't been so hard.

Why was it that men were such exacting parents to their male children? Judith guessed they wanted their sons to succeed in places they had not. In those early days, when Judith was first pregnant, the thought of a daughter had spread a rapid warmth through her body, followed by a searing cold. A young girl like Judith, out there in the world, defying her mother, defying the world. It

gave her an understanding of Henry's desire that Tom do better, be better, have everything that he wanted and more.

Tom had certainly succeeded at his job, though his mouse of a wife was a disappointment. Every time Judith came face-to-face with her daughter-in-law, she itched to tell the woman to stand up straight, speak up and, for the love of God, grow a backbone. One of the volunteers at the church had said the other week that men married their mothers. Judith hadn't argued with the woman, but she'd defy anyone to find a lick of similarity she shared with her son's wife. Except for the desire to spend time with her grandchildren, Judith could never see her daughter-in-law again and be perfectly happy.

The grandchildren were the sole reason they had moved to Atlanta, after all. She and Henry had uprooted their retirement life in Arizona and moved almost two thousand miles to this hot city with its smog alerts and gang killings just so they could be close to two of the most spoiled and ungrateful little things this side of the Appalachia.

Judith glanced at Henry as he tapped his fingers on the steering wheel, humming tunelessly as he drove. They never talked about their grandchildren except in glowing terms, possibly because a fit of honesty might reveal that they didn't much like them—and then where would they be? Their lives turned upside down for two small children who were on gluten-free diets, strictly regimented nap-times and tightly scheduled playdates, but only with "like-minded children who shared the same goals."

So far as Judith could see, the only goal her grandchildren had was to be the center of attention. She imagined you couldn't sneeze without finding a like-minded, self-centered child, but according to her daughter-in-law, it was an almost impossible task. Wasn't that the whole point of youth, to be self-centered? And wasn't it the job of the parent to drill that out of you? Certainly, it was clear to all involved that it wasn't the job of the grandparents.

When little Mark had spilled his unpasteurized juice on Henry's slacks and Lilly had eaten so many of the Hershey's Kisses she'd found in Judith's purse that she'd reminded Judith of a homeless woman at the shelter last month who was tweaking so badly on methamphetamines that she'd wet herself, Henry and Judith had merely smiled—chuckled, even—as if these were merely wonderful little quirks that the children would soon grow out of.

Soon was not coming soon enough, however, and now that they'd reached the ages of seven and nine, Judith was starting to lose faith that one day, her grandchildren would turn into polite and loving young adults who did not feel the urge to constantly interrupt adult conversation and run around the house screaming at such high decibels that animals two counties over started howling. Judith's only consolation was that Tom took them to church every Sunday. She of course wanted her grandchildren exposed to a life in Christ, but more importantly, she wanted them to learn the lessons taught in Sunday School. *Honor thy mother and father. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Don't think you're going to waste your life, drop out of school and move in with Grandma and Grandpa any time soon.*

"Hey!" Henry barked as a car in the oncoming lane shot past them so close that the Buick actually shook on its tires. "Kids," he grumbled, gripping the wheel tightly in his hands.

The closer he got to seventy, the more Henry seemed to embrace the role of cranky old man. Sometimes, this was endearing. Other times, Judith wondered how long it would be before he started shaking his fist in the air, blaming all the ills of the world on “kids.” The age of these kids seemed to range anywhere from four to forty, and his irritation ticked up exponentially when he caught them doing something that he used to do himself, but now could no longer enjoy. Judith dreaded the day they took away his pilot’s license, something that might come sooner rather than later, considering that his last checkup at the cardiologist had shown some irregularities. It was one of the reasons they had decided to retire to Arizona, where there was no snow to shovel or lawn to maintain.

She said, “Looks like rain.”

Henry craned up his neck to see the clouds.

“Good night to start my book.”

His lips curled up in a smile. Henry had given her a thick historical romance for their anniversary. Judith had given him a new cooler to take to the golf course.

She squinted her eyes at the road ahead, deciding she should have her vision checked again. She was not so far from seventy herself, and her eyes seemed to be getting worse every year. Dusk was a particularly bad time for her, and her vision tended to blur on objects that were at a distance. So it was that she blinked several times before she was sure of what she was seeing, and only opened her mouth to warn Henry when the animal was right in front of them.

“Jude!” Henry yelled, one arm shooting out in front of Judith’s chest as he wrenched the steering wheel to the left, trying to avoid the poor creature. Judith thought, oddly, about how the movies were right. Everything slowed down, time inching by so that each second seemed to take an eternity. She felt Henry’s strong arm bolt across her breasts, the seatbelt biting into her hip bones. Her head jerked, slamming into the door as the car swerved. The windshield cracked as the animal bounced against the glass, then hit the roof of the car, then the trunk. It wasn’t until the car shuddered to a stop, spinning a full 180 degrees on the road, that the sounds caught up with Judith: the *crack, thunk, thunk*, all overlaid with a high-pitched screaming that she realized was coming from her own mouth. She must have been in shock, because Henry had to yell at her several times, “Judith! Judith!” before she stopped screaming.

Henry’s hand was tight on her arm, sending pain up her shoulder. She rubbed the back of his hand, saying, “I’m all right. I’m all right.” Her glasses were askew, her vision off-kilter. She put her fingers to the side of her head, feeling a sticky wetness. When she took away her hand, she saw blood.

“It must’ve been a deer or ...” Henry put his hand to his mouth, stopping his words. He looked calm but for the telltale up and down of his chest as he tried to catch his breath. The air bag had deployed. A fine, white powder covered his face.

Her breath caught as she looked ahead. Blood had spattered the windshield like a sudden, violent rain.

Henry pushed open the door but did not get out. Judith took off her glasses to wipe her eyes. The lenses were both broken, the bottom part of her bifocal on the right side missing. She saw that the glasses were shaking, and realized that

the tremor came from her own hands. Henry got out of the car, and she made herself put on her glasses and follow him.

The creature was on the road, legs moving. Judith's head ached where it had smacked into the door. Blood was in her eyes. That was the only explanation she had for the fact that the animal—surely a deer—appeared to have the shapely white legs of a woman.

"Oh, dear God," Henry whispered. "It's—Judith—it's—"

Judith heard a car behind her. Wheels screeched against asphalt. Doors opened and closed. Two men joined them on the road, one running toward the animal.

He screamed, "Call 9-1-1!" kneeling down beside the body. Judith stepped closer, then closer yet. The legs moved again—the perfect legs of a woman. She was completely nude. Bruises blackened her inner thighs—dark bruises. Old bruises. Dried blood caked around her legs. A burgundy film seemed to cover her torso, a rip at her side showing white bone. Judith glanced at her face. The nose was askew. The eyes were swollen, lips chapped and split. Blood matted the woman's dark hair and pooled around her head as if in a halo.

Judith stepped closer, unable to stop herself—suddenly a voyeur, after a lifetime of politely looking away. Glass crunched beneath her feet, and the woman's eyes shot open in panic. She stared somewhere past Judith, a dull lifelessness to her gaze. Just as suddenly, her eyelids fluttered closed, but Judith could not suppress the shudder that went through her body. It was as if someone had walked over her grave.

"Dear Lord," Henry mumbled, almost in prayer. Judith turned to find her husband gripping his hand to his chest. His knuckles were white. He stared at the woman, looking as if he might be ill. "How did this happen?" he whispered, horror twisting his face. "How in God's name did this happen?"

DAY ONE



CHAPTER ONE

Sara Linton leaned back in her chair, mumbling a soft “Yes, Mama” into her cell phone. She wondered briefly if there would ever come a point in time when this felt normal again, when a phone call with her mother brought her happiness the way it used to instead of feeling like it was dragging a piece of her heart out of her chest.

“Baby,” Cathy soothed. “It’s all right. You’re taking care of yourself, and that’s all Daddy and I need to know.”

Sara felt tears sting her eyes. This would hardly be the first time she had cried in the doctor’s lounge at Grady Hospital, but she was sick of crying—sick of feeling, really. Wasn’t that the reason that, two years ago, she had left her family, left her life, in rural Georgia, and moved to Atlanta—so that she would no longer have the constant reminder of what had come before?

“Promise me you’ll try to go to church next week.”

Sara mumbled something that might sound like a promise. Her mother was no fool, and they both knew that the possibility of Sara ending up on a pew this Easter Sunday was highly unlikely, but Cathy didn’t press.

Sara looked at the stack of charts in front of her. She was at the end of her shift and needed to call in her dictation. “Mama, I’m sorry, but I need to go.”

Cathy exacted a promise of another phone call next week, then rang off. Sara kept her cell phone in her hand for a few minutes, looking at the faded numbers, her thumb tracing the seven and five, dialing out a familiar number but not sending through the call. She dropped the phone into her pocket and felt the letter brush against the back of her hand.

The Letter. She thought of it as its own entity.

Sara normally checked her mail after work so she didn’t have to drag it around with her, but one morning, for some unknown reason, she had checked her mail as she was heading out. A cold sweat had come over her as she recognized the return address on the plain white envelope. She had tucked the unopened envelope into the pocket of her lab coat as she left for work, thinking she would read it at lunch. Lunch had come and gone, and the letter had remained unopened, traveling back home, then out to work again the next day. Months passed, and the letter went everywhere with Sara, sometimes in her coat, sometimes in her purse to the grocery store or on errands. It became a talisman, and often, she would reach her hand in her pocket and touch it, just to remind herself that it was there.

Over time, the corners of the sealed envelope had become dog-eared and the Grant County postmark had started to fade. Every day pushed Sara further away from opening it and discovering what the woman who had killed her husband could possibly have to say.

“Dr. Linton?” Mary Schroder, one of the nurses, knocked on the door. She spoke in the practiced code of the ER. “We’ve got a P-O-P-T-A female, thirty-

three, weak and thready.”

Sara glanced at the charts, then her watch. A thirty-three-year-old woman who had passed out prior to admission was a puzzle that would take time to solve. It was almost seven o'clock. Sara's shift was over in ten minutes. “Can Krakauer take her?”

“Krakauer *did* take her,” Mary countered. “He ordered a CMP, then went to get coffee with the new bimbo.” She was obviously perturbed by this, and added, “The patient's a cop.”

Mary was married to a cop; hardly shocking considering she had worked in the emergency room at Grady Hospital for almost twenty years. Even without that, it was understood at every hospital in the world that anyone in law enforcement got the best and quickest treatment. Apparently, Otto Krakauer hadn't gotten the memo.

Sara relented. “How long did she lose consciousness?”

“She says about a minute.” Mary shook her head, because patients were hardly the most honest reporters when it came to their health. “She doesn't look right.”

That last part was what got Sara out of her chair. Grady was the only Level One trauma center in the region, as well as one of the few remaining public hospitals in Georgia. The nurses at Grady saw car wrecks, shootings, stabbings, overdoses, and any number of crimes against humanity on an almost daily basis. They had a practiced eye for spotting serious problems. And, of course, cops usually didn't admit themselves to the hospital unless they were at death's door.

Sara skimmed the woman's chart as she walked through the emergency department. Otto Krakauer hadn't done more than take a medical history and order the usual bloodwork, which told Sara there was no obvious diagnosis. Faith Mitchell was an otherwise healthy thirty-three-year-old woman with no previous conditions and no recent trauma. Her test results would hopefully give them a better idea about what was going on.

Sara mumbled an apology as she bumped into a gurney in the hallway. As usual, the rooms were overflowing and patients were stacked in the halls, some in beds, some sitting in wheelchairs, all looking more miserable than they probably had when they'd first arrived for treatment. Most of them had probably come here right after work because they couldn't afford to miss a day's wages. They saw Sara's white coat and called to her, but she ignored them as she read through the chart.

Mary said, “I'll catch up with you. She's in three,” before letting herself get pulled away by an elderly woman on a stretcher.

Sara knocked on the open door of exam room 3—privacy: another perk afforded cops. A petite blonde woman was sitting on the edge of the bed, fully dressed and clearly irritated. Mary was good at her job, but a blind person could see that Faith Mitchell was unwell. She was as pale as the sheet on the bed; even from a distance, her skin looked clammy.

Her husband did not seem to be helping matters as he paced the room. He was an attractive man, well over six feet, with sandy blond hair cut close to his head. A jagged scar ran down the side of his face, probably from a childhood accident where his jaw slid across the asphalt under his bicycle or along the hard-packed dirt to home plate. He was thin and lean, probably a runner, and his three-piece

suit showed the broad chest and shoulders of someone who spent a lot of time in the gym.

He stopped pacing, his gaze going from Sara to his wife and back again. "Where's the other doctor?"

"He got called away on an emergency." She walked to the sink and washed her hands, saying, "I'm Dr. Linton. Can you catch me up to speed here? What happened?"

"She passed out," the man said, nervously twisting his wedding ring around his finger. He seemed to realize he was coming off as a bit frantic, and moderated his tone. "She's never passed out before."

Faith Mitchell seemed aggravated by his concern. "I'm fine," she insisted, then told Sara, "It's the same thing I said to the other doctor. I feel like I've been coming down with a cold. That's all."

Sara pressed her fingers to Faith's wrist, checking her pulse. "How are you feeling now?"

She glanced at her husband. "Annoyed."

Sara smiled, shining her penlight into Faith's eyes, checking her throat, running through the usual physical exam and finding nothing alarming. She agreed with Krakauer's initial evaluation: Faith was probably a little dehydrated. Her heart sounded good, though, and it didn't seem like she'd suffered from a seizure. "Did you hit your head when you fell?"

She started to answer, but the man interjected, "It was in the parking lot. Her head hit the pavement."

Sara asked the woman, "Any other problems?"

Faith answered, "Just a few headaches." She seemed to be holding something back, even as she revealed, "I haven't really eaten today. I was feeling a little sick to my stomach this morning. And yesterday morning."

Sara opened one of the drawers for a neuro-hammer to check reflexes, only to find nothing there. "Have you had any recent weight loss or gain?"

Faith said "No" just as her husband said "Yes."

The man looked contrite, but tried, "I think it looks good on you."

Faith took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Sara studied the man again, thinking he was probably an accountant or lawyer. His head was turned toward his wife, and Sara noticed another, lighter scar lining his upper lip—obviously not a surgical incision. The skin had been sewn together crookedly, so that the scar running vertically between his lip and nose was slightly uneven. He had probably boxed in college, or maybe just been hit in the head one too many times, because he obviously didn't seem to know that the only way out of a hole was to stop digging. "Faith, I think the extra weight looks great on you. You could stand to gain—"

She shut him up with a look.

"All right." Sara flipped open the chart, writing down some orders. "We'll need to do an X-ray of your skull and I'd like to do a few more tests. Don't worry, we can use the blood samples from earlier, so there won't be any more needles for now." She scribbled a notation and checked some boxes before looking up at Faith. "I promise we'll rush this as much as we can, but you can see we've got a pretty full house today. X-ray's backed up at least an hour. I'll do what I can to push it through, but you might want to get a book or magazine

while you wait.”

Faith didn't respond, but something in her demeanor changed. She glanced at her husband, then back at Sara. “Do you need me to sign that?” She indicated the chart.

There was nothing to sign, but Sara handed her the chart anyway. Faith wrote something on the bottom of the page and gave it back. Sara read the words *I'm pregnant*.

Sara nodded as she crossed through the X-ray order. Obviously, Faith hadn't yet told her husband, but there was a different set of questions Sara needed to ask now, and she couldn't do so without giving away the news. “When's the last time you had a pap smear?”

Faith seemed to understand. “Last year.”

“Let's take care of that while you're here.” Sara told the man, “You can wait outside.”

“Oh.” He seemed surprised, even as he nodded. “All right.” He told his wife, “I'll be in the waiting room if you need me.”

“Okay.” Faith watched him leave, her shoulders visibly slumping in relief as the door closed. She asked Sara, “Do you mind if I lie down?”

“Of course not.” Sara helped her get comfortable on the bed, thinking Faith looked younger than her thirty-three years. She still had the bearing of a cop, though—that no-nonsense, don't-bullshit-me squareness to her shoulders. Her lawyer husband seemed like an odd match, but Sara had seen stranger combinations.

She asked the woman, “How far along are you?”

“About nine weeks.”

Sara put this in her notes as she asked, “Is that a guess or have you seen a doctor?”

“I took an over-the-counter test.” She changed that. “Actually, I took three over-the-counter tests. I'm never late.”

Sara added a pregnancy test to the orders. “What about this weight gain?”

“Ten pounds,” Faith admitted. “I've kind of gone a little crazy with the eating since I found out.”

In Sara's experience, ten pounds usually meant fifteen. “Do you have any other children?”

“One—Jeremy—eighteen.”

Sara made the notation in the chart, mumbling, “Lucky you. Heading into the terrible twos.”

“More like terrible twenties. My son is eighteen years old.”

Sara did a double take, flipping back through Faith's history.

“Let me do the math for you,” Faith offered. “I got pregnant when I was fourteen. I had Jeremy when I was fifteen.”

Not much surprised Sara anymore, but Faith Mitchell had managed to do it. “Were there any complications with your first pregnancy?”

“Other than being fodder for a Lifetime movie?” She shook her head. “No problems at all.”

“Okay,” Sara answered, putting down the chart, giving Faith her full attention. “Let's talk about what happened tonight.”

“I was walking to the car, I felt a little dizzy, and the next thing I know, Will's

driving me here.”

“Dizzy like the room spinning or dizzy as in light-headed?”

She thought about the question before replying. “Light-headed.”

“Any flashes of light or unusual tastes in your mouth?”

“No.”

“Will’s your husband?”

She actually guffawed. “God, no.” She choked on an incredulous laugh. “Will’s my partner—Will Trent.”

“Is Detective Trent here so I can talk to him?”

“Special Agent. You already did. He just left.”

Sara was sure she was missing something. “The man who was just in here is a cop?”

She laughed. “It’s the suit. You’re not the first person to think he’s an undertaker.”

“I thought lawyer,” Sara admitted, thinking she had never met anyone who looked less like a police officer in her life.

“I’ll have to tell him you thought he was a lawyer. He’ll be pleased you took him for an educated man.”

For the first time, Sara noticed the woman was not wearing a wedding ring. “So, the father is ...”

“In and out of the picture.” Faith didn’t seem embarrassed by the information, though Sara supposed that there wasn’t much that could embarrass you after having a child at fifteen. “I’d prefer Will didn’t know,” Faith said. “He’s very—” She stopped mid-sentence. She closed her eyes, pressed her lips together. A sheen of sweat had broken out on her forehead.

Sara pressed her fingers to Faith’s wrist again. “What’s happening here?”

Faith clenched her jaw, not answering.

Sara had been vomited on enough to know the warning signs. She went to the sink to wet a paper towel, telling Faith, “Take a deep breath and let it out slowly.”

Faith did as she was told, her lips trembling.

“Have you been irritable lately?”

Despite her condition, Faith tried for levity. “More than usual?” She put her hand to her stomach, suddenly serious. “Yes. Nervous. Annoyed.” She swallowed. “I get a buzzing in my head, like there are bees in my brain.”

Sara pressed the cold paper towel to the woman’s forehead. “Any nausea?”

“In the mornings,” Faith managed. “I thought it was morning sickness, but ...”

“What about the headaches?”

“They’re pretty bad, mostly in the afternoon.”

“Have you been unusually thirsty? Urinating a lot?”

“Yes. No. I don’t know.” She managed to open her eyes, asking, “So, what is it—the flu or brain cancer or what?”

Sara sat on the edge of the bed and took the woman’s hand.

“Oh, God, is it that bad?” Before Sara could answer, she said, “Doctors and cops only sit down when it’s bad news.”

Sara wondered how she had missed this revelation. In all her years with Jeffrey Tolliver, she’d thought she had figured out every one of his tics, but this one had passed her by. She told Faith, “I was married to a cop for fifteen years. I

never noticed, but you're right—my husband always sat down when there was bad news."

"I've been a cop for fifteen years," Faith responded. "Did he cheat on you or turn into an alcoholic?"

Sara felt a lump in her throat. "He was killed three and a half years ago."

"Oh, no," Faith gasped, putting her hand to her chest. "I'm so sorry."

"It's all right," Sara answered, wondering why she'd even told the woman such a personal detail. Her life over the last few years had been dedicated to not talking about Jeffrey, and here she was sharing him with a stranger. She tried to ease the tension by adding, "You're right. He cheated on me, too." At least he had the first time Sara married him.

"I'm so sorry," Faith repeated. "Was he on duty?"

Sara didn't want to answer her. She felt nauseated and overwhelmed, probably a lot like Faith had felt before she'd passed out in the parking lot.

Faith picked up on this. "You don't have to—"

"Thanks."

"I hope they got the bastard."

Sara put her hand into her pocket, her fingers wrapping around the edge of the letter. That was the question everyone wanted answered: *Did they get him? Did they catch the bastard who killed your husband?* As if it mattered. As if the disposition of Jeffrey's killer would somehow alleviate the pain of his death.

Mercifully, Mary came into the room. "Sorry," the nurse apologized. "The old lady's kids just dropped her here. I had to call social services." She handed Sara a piece of paper. "CMP's back."

Sara frowned as she read the numbers on the metabolic profile. "Do you have your monitor?"

Mary reached into her pocket and handed over her blood glucose monitor.

Sara swabbed some alcohol on the tip of Faith's finger. The CMP was incredibly accurate, but Grady was a large hospital and it wasn't unheard-of for the lab to get samples mixed up. "When was the last time you had a meal?" she asked Faith.

"We were in court all day." Faith hissed "Shit" as the lancet pierced her finger, then continued, "Around noon, I ate part of a sticky bun Will got out of the vending machine."

Sara tried again. "The last *real* meal."

"Around eight o'clock last night."

Sara guessed from the guilty look on Faith's face that it had probably come out of a takeout bag. "Did you have coffee this morning?"

"Maybe half a cup. The smell was a bit too much."

"Cream and sugar?"

"Black. I usually eat a good breakfast—yogurt, fruit. Right after my run." Faith asked, "Is something wrong with my blood sugar?"

"We'll see," Sara told her, squeezing some blood onto the test strip. Mary raised an eyebrow, as if to ask if Sara wanted to place a wager on the number. Sara shook her head: *no bet*. Mary persisted, using her fingers to indicate one-five-zero.

"I thought the test came later," Faith said, sounding unsure of herself. "When they make you drink the sugary stuff."

"Have you ever had any problems with your blood sugar? Is there a history in your family?"

"No. None."

The monitor beeped and the number 152 flashed on the screen.

Mary gave a low whistle, impressed by her own guess. Sara had once asked the woman why she didn't go to medical school, only to be told that nurses were the ones who practiced the real medicine.

Sara told Faith, "You have diabetes."

Faith's mouth worked before she managed a faint, "What?"

"My guess is that you've been pre-diabetic for a while. Your cholesterol and triglycerides are extremely elevated. Your blood pressure is a little high. The pregnancy and the rapid weight gain—ten pounds is a lot for nine weeks—plus your bad eating habits, pushed you over the edge."

"My first pregnancy was fine."

"You're older now." Sara gave her some tissue to press against her finger so the bleeding would stop. "I want you to follow up with your regular doctor first thing in the morning. We need to make sure there's not something else going on here. Meanwhile, you have to keep your blood sugar under control. If you don't, passing out in the parking lot will be the least of your worries."

"Maybe it's just—I haven't been eating right, and—"

Sara cut her off mid-denial. "Anything over one-forty is a positive diagnosis for diabetes. Your number has actually inched up since the first blood test was taken."

Faith took her time absorbing this. "Will it last?"

The question was one for an endocrinologist to answer. "You'll need to talk to your doctor and have him run some more tests," Sara advised, though, if she had to make an educated guess, she would say that Faith was in a precarious situation. Except for the pregnancy, she would be presenting as a full-blown diabetic.

Sara glanced at her watch. "I would admit you tonight for observation, but by the time we processed you and found you a room, your doctor's office would be open, and something tells me you wouldn't stay here anyway." She had spent enough time around police officers to know that Faith would bolt the minute she got the chance.

She continued, "You have to promise me that you'll call your doctor first thing—and I mean that, first thing. We'll get a nurse educator in here to teach you how to test your blood and how and when to inject yourself, but you've got to follow up with him immediately."

"I have to give myself shots?" Faith's voice went up in alarm.

"Oral meds aren't approved for use in pregnant women. This is why you need to talk to your doctor. There's a lot of trial and error here. Your weight and hormone levels will change as the pregnancy progresses. Your doctor's going to be your best friend for the next eight months, at least."

Faith seemed embarrassed. "I don't have a regular doctor."

Sara took out her prescription pad and wrote down the name of a woman she'd interned with years ago. "Delia Wallace works out of Emory. She has a dual specialty in gynecology and endocrinology. I'll call her tonight so her office knows to work you in."

Faith still seemed unconvinced. “How can I suddenly have this? I know I’ve put on weight, but I’m not fat.”

“You don’t have to be fat,” Sara told her. “You’re older now. The baby affects your hormones, your ability to produce insulin. You haven’t been eating well. The stars lined up and it triggered you.”

“It’s Will’s fault,” Faith mumbled. “He eats like a twelve-year-old. Doughnuts, pizza, hamburgers. He can’t go into a gas station without buying nachos and a hot dog.”

Sara sat down on the edge of the bed again. “Faith, this isn’t the end of the world. You’re in good shape. You’ve got great insurance. You can manage this.”

“What if I ...” She blanched, breaking eye contact with Sara. “What if I wasn’t pregnant?”

“We’re not talking about gestational diabetes here. This is full-blown, type two. A termination won’t suddenly make the problem go away,” Sara answered. “Look, this is probably something you’ve been building up to for a while. Being pregnant brought it on faster. It will make things more complicated in the beginning, but not impossible.”

“I just ...” She didn’t seem capable of finishing a sentence.

Sara patted her hand, standing. “Dr. Wallace is an excellent diagnostician. I know for a fact that she takes the city insurance plan.”

“State,” Faith corrected. “I’m with the GBI.”

Sara assumed the Georgia Bureau of Investigation’s plan was similar, but she didn’t quibble. Faith was obviously having difficulty absorbing the news, and Sara had not exactly eased her into it. You couldn’t unring a bell, though. Sara patted her arm. “Mary will give you an injection. You’ll be feeling better in no time.” She started to leave. “I mean it about calling Dr. Wallace,” she added firmly. “I want you on the phone with her office first thing in the morning, and you need to be eating more than sticky buns. Low-carb, low-fat, regular healthy meals and snacks, okay?”

Faith nodded, still dumbstruck, and Sara left the room feeling like an absolute heel. Her bedside manner had certainly deteriorated over the years, but this represented a new low. Wasn’t that anonymity why she had come to Grady in the first place? But for a handful of homeless men and some prostitutes, she seldom saw a patient more than once. That had been the real pull for Sara—the absolute detachment. She wasn’t at a stage in her life where she wanted to make connections with people. Every new chart was an opportunity to start all over. If Sara was lucky—and if Faith Mitchell was careful—they would probably never see each other again.

Instead of going back into the doctors’ lounge to finish her charts, Sara walked past the nurses’ station, through the double doors, into the overfilled waiting room and finally found herself outside. There were a couple of respiratory therapists by the exit smoking cigarettes, so Sara kept walking toward the back of the building. Guilt about Faith Mitchell still hung heavy on her shoulders, and she looked up Delia Wallace’s number in her cell phone before she forgot to follow up. The service took her message about Faith, and Sara felt slightly better as she ended the call.

She had run into Delia Wallace a couple of months ago, when the woman had come in to see one of her wealthy patients who had been airlifted to Grady after

a bad car accident. Delia and Sara had been the only women in the top five percent of their graduating class at Emory University Medical School. At the time, it was an unwritten rule that there were two options for female doctors: gynecology or pediatrics. Delia had chosen the first, Sara the latter. They would both turn forty next year. Delia seemed to have everything. Sara felt like she had nothing.

Most doctors—Sara included—were arrogant to one degree or another, but Delia had always been an avid self-promoter. While they drank their coffees in the doctors' lounge, Delia quickly offered the highlights of her life: a thriving practice with two offices, a stockbroker husband and three overachieving kids. She'd shown Sara pictures of them all, this perfect family of hers who looked as if they had walked out of a Ralph Lauren advertisement.

Sara hadn't told Delia about her own life after medical school, that she had gone back to Grant County, her home, to tend to children in rural areas. She didn't tell Delia about Jeffrey or why she moved back to Atlanta or why she was working at Grady when she could open her own practice and have some semblance of a normal life. Sara had just shrugged, saying, "I ended up back here," and Delia had looked at her with both disappointment and vindication, both emotions conjured by the fact that Sara had been ahead of Delia their entire time at Emory.

Sara tucked her hands into her pockets, pulling her thin coat closed to fight the chill. She felt the letter against the back of her hand as she walked past the loading dock. She had volunteered to cover an extra shift that morning, working straight through for nearly sixteen hours so that she could have all of tomorrow off. Exhaustion hit her just as the night air did, and she stood with her hands fisted in her pockets, relishing the relatively clean air in her lungs. She caught the scent of rain under the smell of car exhaust and whatever was coming off the Dumpster. Maybe she would sleep tonight. She always slept better when it rained.

She looked down at the cars on the interstate. Rush hour was at its tail end—men and women going home to their families, their lives. Sara was standing at what was called the Grady Curve, an arc in the highway that traffic reporters used as a landmark when reporting trouble on the downtown connector. All the taillights were bright red tonight as a tow truck pulled a stalled SUV from the left-hand shoulder. Police cruisers blocked the scene, blue lights spinning, casting their eerie light into the darkness. They reminded her of the night Jeffrey had died—the police swarming, the state taking over, the scene combed through by dozens of men in their white suits and booties.

"Sara?"

She turned around. Mary stood with the door open, waving her back into the building. "Hurry!"

Sara jogged toward the door, Mary calling out stats as she got closer. "Single car MVA with pedestrian on foot. Krakauer took the driver and passenger, possible MI on the driver. You've got the woman who was hit by the car. Open frac on right arm and leg, L-O-C at the scene. Possible sexual assault and torture. Bystander happened to be an EMT. He did what he could, but it's bad."

Sara was sure she'd misunderstood. "She was raped and hit by a car?"

Mary didn't explain. Her hand was like a vise on Sara's arm as they jogged

down the hallway. The door was open to the emergency triage room. Sara saw the gurney, three medics surrounding the patient. Everyone in the room was a man, including Will Trent, who was leaning over the woman, trying to question her.

“Can you tell me your name?” he asked.

Sara stopped short at the foot of the bed, Mary’s hand still on her arm. The patient was lying curled on her side in a fetal position. Surgical tape held her tightly to the frame of the stretcher, pneumatic splints binding her right arm and leg. She was awake, her teeth chattering, murmuring unintelligibly. A folded jacket was under her head, a cervical collar keeping her neck in line. The side of her face was caked in dirt and blood; electrical tape hung from her cheek, sticking to her dark hair. Her mouth was open, lips cut and bleeding. The sheet they had covered her with was pulled down and the side of her breast gaped open in a wound so deep that bright yellow fat was showing.

“Ma’am?” Will asked. “Are you aware of your condition?”

“Move away,” Sara ordered, pushing him back harder than she intended. He flailed, momentarily losing his balance. Sara did not care. She had seen the small digital recorder he had in his hand and did not like what he was doing.

Sara put on a pair of gloves as she knelt down, telling the woman, “I’m Dr. Linton. You’re at Grady Hospital. We’re going to take care of you.”

“Help ... help ... help ...” the woman chanted, her body shivering so hard the metal gurney rattled. Her eyes stared blankly ahead, unfocused. She was painfully thin, her skin flaky and dry. “Help ...”

Sara stroked back her hair as gently as she could. “We’ve got a lot of people here and we’re all going to help you. You just hang on for me, okay? You’re safe now.” Sara stood, lightly resting her hand on the woman’s shoulder to let her know she was not alone. Two more nurses were in the room, awaiting orders. “Somebody give me the rundown.”

She had directed her request toward the uniformed emergency medical techs, but the man across from her started talking, delivering in rapid staccato the woman’s vitals and the triage performed en route. He was dressed in street clothes that were covered in blood. Probably the bystander who had given aid at the scene. “Penetrating wound between eleventh and twelfth ribs. Open fractures right arm and leg. Blunt force trauma to the head. She was unconscious when we arrived, but she gained consciousness when I started working on her. We couldn’t get her flat on her back,” he explained, his voice filling with panic. “She kept screaming. We had to get her in the bus, so we just strapped her down. I don’t know what’s wrong with ... I don’t know what—”

He gulped back a sob. His anguish was contagious. The air felt charged with adrenaline; understandably so, considering the state of the victim. Sara felt a moment of panic herself, unable to take in the damage inflicted on the body, the multiple wounds, the obvious signs of torture. More than one person in the room had tears in their eyes.

Sara made her voice as calm as possible, trying to bring the hysteria down to a manageable level. She dismissed the EMTs and the bystander by saying, “Thank you, gentlemen. You did everything you could just to get her here. Let’s clear the room now so that we have space to keep helping her.” She told Mary, “Start an IV and prep a central line just in case.” She told another nurse, “Get portable

X-ray in here, call CT and get the surgical on-call.” And said to another, “Blood gas, tox screen, CMP, CBC, and a coag panel.”

Carefully, Sara pressed the stethoscope to the woman’s back, trying not to concentrate on the burn marks and crisscrossed slices in the flesh. She listened to the woman’s lungs, feeling the sharp outline of ribs against her fingers. Breath sounds were equal, but not as strong as Sara would’ve liked, probably because of the massive amount of morphine they had given her in the ambulance. Panic often blurred the line between helping and hindering.

Sara knelt down again. The woman’s eyes were still open, her teeth still chattering. Sara told her, “If you have any trouble breathing, let me know, and I’ll help you immediately. All right? Can you do that?” There was no response, but Sara kept talking to her anyway, announcing every step of the way what she was doing and why. “I’m checking your airway to make sure you can keep breathing,” she said, gently pressing into the jaw. The woman’s teeth were reddish pink, indicating blood in her mouth, but Sara guessed that was from biting her tongue. Deep scratches marked her face, as if someone had clawed her. Sara thought she might have to intubate her, paralyze her, but this might be the last opportunity the woman had to speak.

That was why Will Trent would not leave. He had been asking the victim about her condition in order to set up the framework for a dying declaration. The victim would have to know she was dying before her last words could be admitted in court as anything other than hearsay. Even now, Trent kept his back to the wall, listening to every word being spoken in the room, bearing witness in case he was needed to testify.

Sara asked, “Ma’am? Can you tell me your name?” Sara paused as the woman’s mouth moved, but no words came out. “Just a first name, all right? Let’s start with something easy.”

“Ah ... ah ...”

“Anne?”

“Nah ... nah ...”

“Anna?”

The woman closed her eyes, gave a slight nod. Her breath had turned more shallow from the effort.

Sara tried, “How about a last name?”

The woman did not respond.

“All right, Anna. That’s fine. Just stay with me.” Sara glanced at Will Trent. He nodded his thanks. She returned to the patient, checking her pupils, pressing her fingers into the skull to check for fractures. “You’ve got some blood in your ears, Anna. You took a hard knock to your head.” Sara took a wet swab and brushed it across the woman’s face to remove some of the dried blood. “I know you’re still in there, Anna. Just hang on for me.”

With care, Sara traced her fingers down the neck and shoulder, feeling the clavicle move. She continued down gently, checking the shoulders front and back, then the vertebrae. The woman was painfully undernourished, the bones starkly outlined, her skeleton on display. There were tears in the skin, as if barbs or hooks had been imbedded under the flesh, then ripped out. Superficial cuts sliced their way up and down the body, and the long incision on the breast already smelled septic; she had been like this for days.

Mary said, "IV's in, saline wide open."

Sara asked Will Trent, "See the doctors' directory by the phone?" He nodded. "Page Phil Sanderson. Tell him we need him down here immediately."

He hesitated. "I'll go find him."

Mary supplied, "It's faster to page him. Extension 392." She taped a loop from the IV to the back of the woman's hand, asking Sara, "You want more morphine on board?"

"Let's figure out what's going on with her first." Sara tried to examine the woman's torso, not wanting to move the body until she knew exactly what she was dealing with. There was a gaping hole in her left side between the eleventh and twelfth ribs, which would explain why the woman had screamed when they tried to straighten her out. The stretching and grinding of torn muscle and cartilage would have been excruciating.

The EMT had put a compression pack on her right leg and arm along with two pneumatic splints to keep the limbs stabilized. Sara lifted the sterile dressing on the leg, seeing bright bone. The pelvis felt unstable beneath her hands. These were recent wounds. The car must have hit Anna from the right side, folding her in two.

Sara took a pair of scissors out of her pocket and cut through the tape that kept the woman immobile on the gurney, explaining, "Anna, I'm going to roll you onto your back." She braced the woman's neck and shoulders while Mary took care of the pelvis and legs. "We'll keep your legs bent, but we need to—"

"No-no-no!" the woman pleaded. "Please don't! Please don't!" They kept moving and her mouth opened wide, her screams sending a chill up Sara's spine. She had never heard anything more horrific in her life. "No!" the woman yelled, her voice catching. "No! Please! *Noooo!*"

She started to violently convulse. Instantly, Sara leaned over the stretcher, pinning Anna's body to the table so she wouldn't fall onto the floor. She could hear the woman grunt with each convulsion, as every movement brought a knife of pain to her side. "Five milligrams of Ativan," she ordered, hoping to control the seizures. "Stay with me, Anna," she urged the woman. "Just stay with me."

Sara's words did not matter. The woman had lost consciousness, either from the seizure or the pain. Long after the drug should have taken effect, the muscles still spasmed through the body, legs jerking, head shaking.

"Portable's here," Mary announced, motioning the X-ray technician into the room. She told Sara, "I'll check on Sanderson and the OR."

The X-ray technician put his hand to his chest. "Macon."

"Sara," she returned. "I'll help."

He handed her the extra lead apron, then went about preparing the machine. Sara kept her hand on Anna's forehead, stroking back her dark hair. The woman's muscles were still twitching when Sara and Macon managed to roll her onto her back, legs bent to help control the pain. Sara noticed that Will Trent was still in the room and told him, "You need to clear out while we do this."

Sara helped Macon take the X-rays, both of them moving as fast as they could. She prayed that the patient would not wake up and start screaming again. She could still hear the sound of Anna's screams, almost like an animal caught in a trap. The noise alone would set up the belief that the woman knew she was going to die. You did not scream like that unless you had given up all hope on

life.

Macon helped Sara turn the woman back on her side, then went off to develop the films. Sara took off her gloves and knelt beside the gurney again. She touched her hand to Anna's face, stroking her cheek. "I'm sorry I pushed you," she said—not to Anna, but to Will Trent. She turned to find him standing at the foot of the bed, staring down at the woman's legs, the soles of her feet. His jaw was clenched, but she didn't know if that was from anger or horror or both.

He said, "We've both got jobs to do."

"Still."

Gently, he reached down and stroked the sole of Anna's right foot, probably thinking there was nowhere else to touch her that wouldn't cause pain. Sara was surprised by the gesture. It seemed almost tender.

"Sara?" Phil Sanderson was in the doorway, his surgical scrubs neatly clean and pressed.

She stood up, lightly resting her fingertips on Anna's shoulder as she told Phil, "We've got two open fractures and a crushed pelvis. There's a deep incision on the right breast and a penetrating wound on the left side. I'm not sure about the neurologic; her pupils are nonresponsive, but she was talking, making sense."

Phil walked over to the body and started his examination. He didn't comment on the state of the victim, the obvious abuse. His focus was on the things he could fix: the open fractures, the shattered pelvis. "You didn't intubate her?"

"Airways are clear."

Phil obviously disagreed with her decision, but then, orthopedic surgeons didn't generally care whether or not their patients could speak. "How's the heart?"

"Strong. BP is good. She's stable." Phil's surgical team came in to prep the body for transfer. Mary returned with the X-rays and handed them to Sara.

Phil pointed out, "Just putting her under could kill her."

Sara snapped the films into the lightbox. "I don't think she'd be here if she wasn't a fighter."

"The breast is septic. It looks like—"

"I know," Sara interrupted, putting on her glasses so she could read the X-rays.

"This wound in her side is pretty clean." He stopped his team for a moment and leaned down, checking the long tear in her skin. "Was she dragged by the car? Did something metal slice her open?"

Will Trent answered, "As far as I know, she was hit straight-on. She was standing in the roadway."

Phil asked, "Was there anything around that might have made this wound? It's pretty clean."

Will hesitated, probably wondering if the man realized what the woman had been through before the car had struck her. "The area was pretty wooded, mostly rural. I haven't talked to the witnesses yet. The driver had some chest complaints at the scene."

Sara turned her attention to the X-ray of the torso. Either something was wrong or she was more exhausted than she'd realized. She counted the ribs, not quite trusting what she was seeing.

Will seemed to sense her confusion. "What is it?"

"Her eleventh rib," Sara told him. "It's been removed."

Will asked, "Removed how?"

"Not surgically."

Phil barked, "Don't be ridiculous." He strode over, leaning close to the film. "It's probably ..." He put up the second film of the chest, the anterior-posterior, then the lateral. He leaned closer, narrowing his eyes as if that would help. "The damn thing can't just drop out of the body. Where is it?"

"Look." Sara traced her finger along the jagged shadow where cartilage had once held bone. "It's not missing," she said. "It was taken."

CHAPTER TWO

Will drove to the scene of the car accident in Faith Mitchell's Mini, his shoulders slumped, the top of his head pressed tightly against the roof of the car. He hadn't wanted to waste any time trying to get the seat adjusted—not when he had taken Faith to the hospital and especially not now that he was driving to the scene of one of the most horrific crimes he'd ever seen. The car was holding its own on the back roads as he traveled down Route 316 at well over the posted speed limit. The Mini's wide wheelbase hugged every curve, but Will backed off the gas as he got farther away from the city. The trees thickened, the road narrowed, and he was suddenly in an area where it was not uncommon for a deer or possum to wander onto the road.

He was thinking about the woman—the torn skin, the blood, the wounds on her body. From the moment he'd seen the medics wheeling her down the hospital corridor, Will had known that the injuries had been wrought by someone with a very sick mind. The woman had been tortured. Someone had spent time with her—someone well practiced in the art of pain.

The woman hadn't just appeared on the road out of thin air. The bottoms of her feet were freshly cut, still bleeding from a walk through the woods. A pine needle was embedded in the meaty flesh of her arch, dirt darkening her soles. She had been kept somewhere, then somehow managed to walk to her escape. She must have been held in a location close to the road, and Will was going to find the location if it took him the rest of his life.

Will realized that he had been using "she," when the victim had a name. Anna, close to Angie, the name of Will's wife. Like Angie, the woman had dark hair, dark eyes. Her skin tone was olive and she had a mole on the back of her calf just down from her knee, the same as Angie. Will wondered if this was something olive-skinned women tended to have, a mole on the back of their leg. Maybe this was some kind of marker that came in the genetic kit along with dark hair and eyes. He bet that doctor would know.

He remembered Sara Linton's words as she examined the torn skin, the fingernail scratches around the gaping hole in the victim's side. "She must have been awake when the rib was removed."

Will shuddered at the thought. He had seen the work of many sadists over his law enforcement career, but nothing as sick as this.

His cell phone rang, and Will struggled to get his hand into his pocket without knocking the steering wheel and sending the Mini into the ditch by the road. Carefully, he opened the phone. The plastic clamshell had been cracked apart months ago, but he'd managed to put the pieces back together with superglue, duct tape and five strips of twine that acted as a hinge. Still, he had to be careful or the whole thing would fall apart in his hand.

"Will Trent."

"It's Lola, baby."

He felt his brow furrow. Her voice had the phlegmy rasp of a two-pack-a-day smoker. "Who?"

"You're Angie's brother, right?"

"Husband," he corrected. "Who is this?"

"This is Lola. I'm one of her girls."

Angie was freelancing for several private detective firms now, but she had been a vice cop for over a decade. Will occasionally got calls from some of the women she had walked the streets with. They all wanted help, and they all ended up right back in jail, where they used the pay phone to call him. "What do you want?"

"You don't gotta be all abrupt on me, baby."

"Listen, I haven't talked to Angie in eight months." Coincidentally, their relationship had become unhinged around the same time as the phone. "I can't help you."

"I'm innocent." Lola laughed at the joke, then coughed, then coughed some more. "I got picked up with an unknown white substance I was just holding for a friend."

These girls knew the law better than most cops, and they were especially careful on the pay phone in the jail.

"Get a lawyer," Will advised, speeding up to pass a car in front of him. Lightning cracked the sky, illuminating the road. "I can't help you."

"I got information to exchange."

"Then tell that to your lawyer." His phone beeped, and he recognized his boss's number. "I have to go." He clicked over before the woman could say anything else. "Will Trent."

Amanda Wagner inhaled, and Will braced himself for a barrage of words. "What the hell are you doing leaving your partner at the hospital and going on some fool's errand for a case that we have no jurisdiction over and haven't been invited to attend—in a county, I might add, where we don't exactly have a good relationship?"

"We'll get asked to help," he assured her.

"Your woman's intuition is not impressing me tonight, Will."

"The longer we let the locals play this out, the colder the trail is going to get. This isn't our abductor's first time, Amanda. This wasn't an exhibition game."

"Rockdale has this covered," she said, referring to the county that had police jurisdiction over the area where the car accident had occurred. "They know what they're doing."

"Are they stopping cars and looking for stolen vehicles?"

"They're not completely stupid."

"Yes, they are," he insisted. "This wasn't a dump job. She was held in the area and she managed to escape."

Amanda was silent for a moment, probably clearing the smoke coming out of her ears. Overhead, a flash of lightning slashed the sky, and the ensuing thunder made it hard for Will to hear what Amanda finally said.

"What?" he asked.

She curtly repeated, "What's the status of the victim?"

Will didn't think about Anna. Instead, he recalled the look in Sara Linton's eyes when they rolled the patient up to surgery. "It doesn't look good for her."

Amanda gave another, heavier sigh. "Run it down for me."

Will gave her the highlights, the way the woman had looked, the torture. "She must have walked out of the woods. There's got to be a house somewhere, a shack or something. She didn't look like she'd been out in the elements. Somebody kept her for a while, starved her, raped her, abused her."

"You think some hillbilly snatched her?"

"I think she was kidnapped," he replied. "She had a good haircut, her teeth were bleached white. No track marks. No signs of neglect. There were two small plastic surgery scars on her back, probably from lipo."

"So, not a homeless woman and not a prostitute."

"Her wrists and ankles were bleeding from being bound. Some of the wounds on her body were healing, others were fresh. She was thin—too thin. This took place over more than a few days—maybe a week, two weeks, tops."

Amanda cursed under her breath. The red tape was getting pretty thick. The Georgia Bureau of Investigation was to the state what the Federal Bureau of Investigation was to the country. The GBI coordinated with local law enforcement when crimes crossed over county lines, keeping the focus on the case rather than territorial disputes. The state had eight crime labs as well as hundreds of crime-scene techs and special agents on duty, all ready to serve whoever asked for help. The catch was that the request for help had to be formally made. There were ways to make sure it came, but favors had to be played, and for reasons not discussed in polite company, Amanda had lost her heat in Rockdale County a few months ago during a case involving an unstable father who had abducted and murdered his own children.

Will tried again. "Amanda—"

"Let me make some calls."

"Can the first one be to Barry Fielding?" he asked, referring to the canine expert for the GBI. "I'm not even sure the locals know what they're dealing with. They haven't seen the victim or talked to the witnesses. Their detective wasn't even at the hospital when I left." She didn't respond, so he prodded some more. "Barry lives in Rockdale County."

A heavier sigh than the first two came down the line. Finally, she said, "All right. Just try not to piss off anyone more than usual. Report back to me when you've got something to move on." Amanda ended the call.

Will closed the cell phone and tucked it into his jacket pocket just as the rumble of thunder filled the air. Lightning lit up the sky again, and he slowed the Mini, his knees pressing into the plastic dashboard. His plan had been to drive straight up Route 316 until he found the accident site, then beg his way onto the scene. Stupidly, he had not anticipated a roadblock. Two Rockdale County police cruisers were parked nose to nose, closing both lanes, and two beefy uniformed officers stood in front of each. About fifty feet ahead, giant xenon work lights illuminated a Buick with a crumpled front end. Crime-scene techs were all over, doing the painstaking work of collecting every piece of dirt, rock and glass so they could take it back to the lab for analysis.

One of the cops came up to the Mini. Will looked around for the button to roll down the window, forgetting that it was on the center console. By the time he got the window down, the other cop had joined his partner. Both of them were smiling. Will realized he must look comical in the tiny car, but there was

nothing to be done about it now. When Faith had passed out in the parking lot of the courthouse, Will's only thought was that her car was closer than his and it would be faster using the Mini to take her to the hospital.

The second cop said, "Circus is thataway." He pointed his thumb back toward Atlanta.

Will knew better than to attempt to pull out his wallet from his back pocket while he was still in the car. He pushed open the door and clumsily exited the vehicle. They all looked heavenward as a clap of thunder shook the air.

"Special Agent Will Trent," he told the cops, showing them his identification.

Both men looked wary. One of them walked away, talking into the radio mike on his shoulder, probably checking with his boss. Sometimes local cops were glad to see the GBI on their turf. Sometimes they wanted to shoot them.

The man in front of him asked, "What's with the monkey suit, city boy? You just come from a funeral?"

Will ignored the jab. "I was at the hospital when the victim was brought in."

"We've got several victims," he answered, obviously determined to make this hard.

"The woman," Will clarified. "The one who was walking on the road and was hit by the Buick that was being driven by an elderly couple. We think her name is Anna."

The second cop was back. "I'm going to have to ask you to get back in your car, sir. According to my boss, you don't have jurisdiction here."

"Can I talk to your boss?"

"He figured you'd say that." The man had a nasty smile on his face. "Said to give him a call in the morning, say around ten, ten-thirty."

Will looked past their cruisers to the crime scene. "Can I get his name?"

The cop took his time, making a show of taking out his pad, finding his pen, putting pen to paper, printing the letters. With extreme care, he tore off the page and handed it to Will.

Will stared at the scrawl over the numbers. "Is this English?"

"Fierro, numbnuts. It's Italian." The man glanced at the paper, offering a defensive "I wrote it clear."

Will folded the note and put it in his vest pocket. "Thank you."

He wasn't stupid enough to think the cops would politely return to their posts while he got back into the Mini. Will was in no hurry now. He leaned down and found the pump handle to lower the driver's seat, then pushed it back as far as it would go. He angled himself into the car and gave the cops a salute as he did a three-point turn and drove away.

Route 316 hadn't always been a back road. Before I-20 came along, 316 had been a main artery connecting Rockdale County and Atlanta. Today, most travelers preferred the interstate, but there were still people who used it for shortcuts and other nefarious pursuits. Back in the late nineties, Will had been involved in a sting operation to stop prostitutes from bringing johns out here. Even then, the road was not well traveled. That two cars managed to be here tonight at the same time as the woman was wildly coincidental. That she had at that point managed to walk onto the road into the path of one of them was even more fantastical.

Unless Anna had been waiting for them. Maybe she had stepped out in front of

the Buick on purpose. Will had learned a long time ago that escape was sometimes easier than survival.

He kept the Mini at a slow crawl as he looked for a side road to turn down. He had gone about a quarter of a mile before he found it. The pavement was choppy, the low-riding car feeling each and every bump. An occasional streak of lightning lit the woods for him. There were no houses that Will could see from the road, no run-down shacks or old barns. No lean-tos sheltering old stills. He kept going, using the bright lights at the crime scene as his guide so that when he stopped, he found himself parallel to the action. Will pulled up the emergency brake and allowed himself a smile. The accident site was about two hundred yards away, the lights and activity making it look like a football field in the middle of the forest.

Will took the small emergency flashlight out of the glove box and got out of the car. The air was changing fast, the temperature dropping. On the news this morning, the weatherman had predicted partly cloudy, but Will was thinking they were in for a deluge.

He made his way on foot through the thick forest, carefully scanning the ground as he walked, searching for anything that was out of place. Anna could have come through here, or she could have been on the other side of the road. The point was that the crime scene should not just be confined to the street. They should be out in the forest, searching within at least a mile radius. The job would not be easy. The forest was dense, low-lying limbs and bushes blocking forward progress, fallen trees and sinkholes making the nighttime terrain even more dangerous. Will tried to get his bearings, wondering which direction would lead him to I-20, where the more residential areas were, but gave up after the compass in his head started spinning toward nowhere.

The grade shifted, sloping downward, and though it was still far away, Will could hear the usual sounds of a crime scene—the electric hum of the generator, the buzz from the stadium lights, the pop of camera flashes, the grumblings of cops and crime-scene techs occasionally punctuated by surprised laughter.

Overhead, the clouds parted, sending down a sliver of moonlight that cast the ground in shadow. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a patch of leaves that looked disturbed. He crouched down, the weak beam of the light not helping him much. The leaves were darker here, but he couldn't tell if that was from blood or precipitation. Will could definitely tell that something had lain in the spot. The question was, had that something been an animal or had it been a woman?

He tried to get his bearings again. He was about halfway between Faith's car and the crumpled Buick on the road. The clouds moved again, and he was back in darkness. The flashlight in his hand chose this moment to give up the ghost, the bulb going yellowish brown, then black. Will slapped the plastic case against his palm, trying to get some more juice out of the batteries.

Suddenly, the bright beam of a Maglite illuminated everything within a five-foot radius.

"You must be Agent Trent," a man said. Will put up his hand to keep his retinas from burning. The man took his time lowering the flashlight to Will's chest. In the distant glow of the crime-scene lights, he appeared to be the living embodiment of a Macy's Day parade balloon—bulbous at the top, tapering to

almost a point at the bottom. The man's tiny little pinhead floated above his shoulders, the flesh of his thick neck spilling up over his shirt collar.

Considering his girth, the man was light on his feet. Will hadn't heard him making his way through the forest. "Detective Fierro?" Will guessed.

He flashed the light into his own face so Will could see him. "Call me Asshole, because that's what you're gonna be thinking about me the whole lonely way back to Atlanta."

Will was still crouched down. He glanced toward the crime scene. "Why not let me have a peek first?"

The light was back in Will's eyes. Fierro said, "Persistent little fucker, aren't you?"

"You think she was dropped here, but she wasn't."

"You're a mind reader?"

"You've got an APB for all suspicious cars in the area and you've got your crime-scene guys going over that Buick with a sieve."

"The APB is a code 10-38, which you'd know if you were a real cop, and the closest house to here is an old geezer in a wheelchair about two miles up." Fierro said this with a disdain that was more than familiar to Will. "I'm not gonna have this conversation with you, pal. Leave my scene."

"I saw what was done to her," Will pressed. "She wasn't put in a car and dropped. She was bleeding from everywhere. Whoever did this is smart. He wouldn't put her in a car. He wouldn't risk the trace evidence. He sure as hell wouldn't leave her alive."

"Two options." Fierro held up his pudgy fingers and counted them off for Will. "Leave on your own two feet or leave on your back."

Will stood up, straightening his shoulders so that he was standing at his full six-three. Pointedly, he looked down at Fierro. "Let's try to work this out. I'm here to help."

"I don't need your help, Gomez. Now I suggest you turn around, get back in your little girl car and go gentle into that good night. You wanna know what happens here? Read a newspaper."

"I think you mean Lurch," Will corrected. "Gomez was the father."

Fierro's brow wrinkled.

"Look, the victim—Anna—probably lay down here." Will pointed to the depression in the leaves. "She heard the cars coming, and she walked onto the road to get help." Fierro didn't stop him, so he continued, "I've got a canine unit on the way. The trail is still fresh now, but it'll be gone with the rain." As if on cue, lightning flashed, followed closely by a clap of thunder.

Fierro stepped closer. "You're not hearing me, *Gomez*." He thrust the butt of his flashlight into Will's chest, physically pushing him away from the crime scene. He kept doing this as he spoke, punctuating each word with a sharp jab. "Get your fucking *GBI*, three-piece fucking *undertaker* ass back in your little red toy car and get the *fuck* off my—"

Will's heel struck something solid. Both men heard it, and both men stopped.

Fierro opened his mouth, but Will indicated he should keep quiet, slowly kneeling down to the ground. Will used his hands to brush away some leaves and found the outline of a large square of plywood. Two big rocks framed the corner, marking the spot.

There was a faint sound in the air, almost a crackling. Will knelt down farther and the noise turned into a few muffled words. Fierro heard it, too. He drew his gun, keeping the flashlight alongside the muzzle so he could see what he was going to shoot. Suddenly, the detective no longer appeared to mind Will's presence; instead, he seemed to be encouraging Will to be the one pulling back the sheet of plywood and putting his face in the line of fire.

When Will looked up at him, Fierro shrugged, as if to say, "You wanted on the case."

Will had been in court all day. His gun was at home in the drawer by his bed. Fierro either had a large goiter on his ankle or he was carrying a backup piece. The man didn't offer the gun and Will didn't ask for it. He would need both hands if he was going to pull back the plywood and get out of the way in a timely manner. Will sucked in his breath as he moved the rocks, then dug his fingers carefully into the soft ground, getting a good grip on the edge of the board. It was standard size, roughly four-by-eight, and half an inch thick. The wood felt wet under his fingers, which meant that it would be even heavier.

Will glanced back at Fierro to make sure he was ready, then, in one swift motion, pried back the sheet of plywood. Dirt and debris scattered as Will quickly backed away.

"What is it?" Fierro's voice was a hoarse whisper. "Do you see anything?"

Will craned his neck to see what he had uncovered. The hole was deep and crudely dug, a thirty-by-thirty-inch square opening going straight down into the earth. Will kept at a low crouch as he made his way toward the hole. Aware that he was again offering his head as a target, he quickly glanced inside, trying to see what they were dealing with. He couldn't see to the bottom. What he did discover was a ladder resting a few feet down from the top, a homemade deal with the rungs nailed crookedly to a pair of rotting two-by-fours.

Lightning cracked in the sky, showing the tableau in full glory. It was like a cartoon: the ladder to hell.

"Give me the light," he whispered to Fierro. The detective was more than accommodating now, slapping the Maglite into Will's reaching hand. Will looked back at the man. Fierro had taken a wide stance, his gun still pointed at the opening in the ground, fear widening his eyes.

Will shone down the light. The cavern seemed to be L-shaped, going straight about five feet, then turning into what seemed to be the main area of the cave. Pieces of wood jutted out where the roof was shored up. There were supplies at the base of the ladder. Cans of food. Rope. Chains. Hooks. Will's heart jumped as he heard movement down there, rustling, and he had to force himself not to jerk back.

Fierro asked, "Is it—"

Will put his finger to his lips, though he was pretty sure that the element of surprise was not on their side. Whoever was down there had seen the beam of the flashlight moving around. As if to reinforce this, Will heard a guttural sound from below, almost a moan. Was there another victim down there? He thought of the woman in the hospital. Anna. Will knew what electrical burns looked like. They stained the skin in a dark powder that never washed away. They stayed with you for a lifetime—that is, if you had a lifetime left in you.

Will took off his suit jacket and tossed it behind him. He reached toward

Fierro's ankle and grabbed the revolver out of the holster. Before he could stop himself, Will swung his legs down into the hole.

"Jesus Christ," Fierro hissed. He looked over his shoulder at the dozens of cops who were a hundred feet away, no doubt realizing there was a better way to do this.

Will heard the sound from below again. Maybe an animal, maybe a human being. He turned off the flashlight and jammed it into the back of his pants. There was something he should have said, like "Tell my wife I love her," but he didn't want to give Angie the burden—or the satisfaction.

"Hold on," Fierro whispered. He wanted to get backup.

Will ignored him, shoving the revolver into his front pocket. Carefully, he tested his weight on the wobbly ladder, the heels of his shoes on the rungs so he could face the inside of the cavern as he descended. The space was narrow, his shoulders too broad. He had to keep one arm straight above his head so that he could fit down the hole. Dirt kept falling in clumps around him and roots scratched his face and neck. The wall of the shaft was just a few inches from his nose, bringing out a claustrophobia Will never knew he had. Every time he inhaled, he tasted mud in the back of his throat. He couldn't look down, because there was nothing to see, and he was afraid that if he looked up, he might reverse direction.

With each step, the smell got worse—feces, urine, sweat, fear. Maybe the fear was coming from Will. Anna had escaped from here. Maybe she had wounded her attacker in the process. Maybe the man was down there waiting with a gun or a razor or a knife.

Will's heart was beating so hard that he could feel it choking his throat. Sweat was pouring off him, and his knees were shaky as he took step after interminable step down. Finally, his foot hit soft earth. He felt around with the toe of his shoe, finding the rope at the base of the ladder, hearing the chain rattle. He would have to crouch down to get inside, leaving himself completely exposed to whoever was waiting.

Will could hear panting, more mumbling. Fierro's revolver was in his hand. He wasn't sure how it had gotten there. The space was too tight for him to reach the flashlight, and it was falling down the back of his pants anyway. Will tried to make his knees bend, but his body would not comply. The panting was getting louder, and he realized it was coming from his own mouth. He looked up, seeing nothing but darkness. Sweat blurred his eyes. He held his breath, then dropped down in a squat.

No gun went off. His throat was not slit. Hooks were not jammed into his eyes. He felt a breeze from the shaft, or was that something in front of his face? Was someone standing in front of him? Had someone just brushed their hand in front of his face? He heard movement again, chattering.

"Don't move," Will managed. He held the gun in front of him, sweeping it back and forth like a pendulum in case someone was standing in front of him. With a shaking hand, he reached behind him for the flashlight. The panting was back, an embarrassing noise that echoed in the cave.

"Never ..." a man murmured.

Will's hand was slick with sweat, but it held steady to the grooved metal grip of the flashlight. He jammed his thumb into the button, turning on the light.

Rats scattered—three big, black rats with plump bellies and sharp claws. Two of them went straight for Will. Instinctively, he backed up, slamming into the ladder, his feet tangling in the rope. He covered his face with his arms, and felt sharp claws dig into his skin as the rats bolted up the ladder. Will panicked, realizing he'd dropped the flashlight, and he snatched it up quickly, scanning the cave, looking for other occupants.

Empty.

"Crap ..." Will exhaled, slumping to the ground. Sweat poured into his eyes. His arms throbbed where the rats had ripped the skin. He had to fight the overwhelming urge to escape up after them.

He used the flashlight to take in his surroundings, sending roaches and other insects scrambling. There was no telling where the other rat had gone, and Will wasn't going to go looking for him. The main part of the cavern was sunken, about three feet down from where Will was sitting. Whoever had designed the structure knew what they were doing. The depressed area would give a home-field advantage.

Will slowly lowered himself down, keeping the light trained in front of him so there wouldn't be any more surprises. The space was bigger than he had expected. It must have taken weeks to excavate the area, lifting out bucket after bucket of dirt, bringing down pieces of wood to keep the whole thing from caving in.

He guessed the main area was at least ten feet deep and six feet wide. The ceiling was about six feet overhead—tall enough for him to stand up if he kept stooped over, but he didn't trust his knees to lift him. The flashlight could not illuminate everything at once, so the space felt even more cramped than it was. Add to that the eeriness, the ungodly smells of Georgia clay mixed with blood and excrement, and everything started to feel smaller and darker.

Against one wall was a low bed that had been thrown together with what looked like recycled wood. A shelf overhead held supplies: water jugs, soup cans, implements of torture Will had only seen in books. The mattress was thin, bloodstained foam sticking out of the torn black cover. There were chunks of flesh on the surface, some of it already rotting. Maggots swirled like churning waters. Strands of rope were bunched up on the floor by the bed, enough to wrap around someone head to toe, almost like a mummy. Deep scratch marks clawed into the wood on the sides of the bed. There were sewing needles, fishing hooks, matches. Blood pooled onto the dirt floor, running underneath the bed frame like a slow leak in a faucet.

"Told ..." a voice began, only to be drowned by static. There was a small television/radio sitting on a white plastic chair at the back of the cavern. Will kept down in a crouch as he moved toward the chair. He looked at the buttons, pressing a few before he managed to turn off the radio, remembering too late that he should have had his gloves on.

He followed the cord of the television with his eyes, finding a large marine battery. The plug had been cut off the cord, the bare red and black wires attached to the terminals. There were other wires, their ends stripped down to the copper. They were blackened, and Will caught the familiar scent of an electrical burn.

"Hey, Gomez?" Fierro called. His voice was all raw nerves.

"It's empty," Will told him.

Fierro made a hesitating noise.

"I'm serious," Will told him. He went back to the opening, craning up to see the man. "It's empty."

"Christ." Fierro's head disappeared from view, but not before Will saw his hand shoot up in the sign of the cross.

Will was ready to do some praying himself if he didn't get out of here. He shone the light on the ladder, seeing where his own shoe prints had smeared into the bloody footprints on the rungs. Will looked down at his scuffed shoes, the dirt floor, finding more bloody footprints that he had smeared. He crammed his shoulders back into the shaft and put his foot on the rung, trying not to mess up anything else. Forensics wasn't going to be happy with him, but there was nothing he could do about it now except apologize.

Will froze. Anna's feet had been cut, but the cuts were more like the nasty scrapes you get from stepping on sharp objects—pine needles, burrs, thorny vines. That was why he had assumed she had walked in the woods. She wasn't bleeding enough to leave bloody footprints that were so pronounced he could see the ridges of the sole in the dirt. Will stood there with his hand above him, one foot on the ladder, debating.

He gave a bone-weary sigh, then crouched back down, skipping the light along every corner of the cave. The rope was bothering him, the way it had been wrapped around the bed. His mind flashed on the image of Anna tied down, the rope wrapped in a continuous loop over and under the bed, securing her body to the frame. He pulled one of the lengths out from under the bed. The end was cut clean through, as were the others. He glanced around. Where was the knife now?

Probably with that last stupid rat.

Will pulled back the mattress, gagging from the smell, trying not to think about what his bare hands were touching. He kept the back of his wrist pressed under his nose as he pulled away slats of wood that supported the mattress, hoping to God the rat didn't spring up and claw out his eyes. He made as much noise as he could, dropping the slats in a pile on the floor. He heard a squeaking sound behind him, and turned to find the rat crouched down in the corner, its beady eyes reflecting the light. Will had a piece of wood in his hand, and he thought about hurling it at the beast, but he was worried his aim wouldn't be good enough in the narrow space. He was also worried it would piss off the rat.

He laid the plank onto the pile, keeping a wary eye on the creature. Something else got his attention. There were scratch marks on the bottom of the bed slats—deep bloody gouges that didn't look like they were made by an animal. Will shone the light into the opening under the bed. The dirt was excavated about six inches below the floor, running the length and width of the bed. Will reached down and picked up a small length of rope. Like the other pieces, this had been cut, too. Unlike the other pieces, there was a knot intact.

Will pulled back the rest of the slats. There were four metal bolts underneath the bed, one at each corner. A piece of rope was tied through one bolt. Pink blood stained the cord. He felt the rope with his fingers. It was wet. Something sharp scraped his thumb. Will leaned in closer, straining to see what had scratched him. He picked at the cord with his fingernails, prying out the object

so he could examine it more closely in the flashlight beam. Bile hit the back of his throat when he saw what he was holding.

“Hey!” Fierro bellowed. “Gomez? You coming up or what?”

“Get a search team out here!” Will rasped.

“What’re you talkin—”

Will looked at the piece of broken tooth in his hand. “There’s another victim!”

CHAPTER THREE

Faith sat in the hospital cafeteria, thinking she felt the same way she'd felt the night of her junior prom: unwanted, fat and pregnant. She looked at the wiry Rockdale County detective sitting across from her at the table. With his long nose and greasy hair hanging down over his ears, Max Galloway had the surly yet perplexed look of a Weimaraner. What's more, he was a poor sport. Every sentence he uttered to Faith alluded to the GBI taking away his case, beginning with his opening salvo when Faith asked to sit in on the interview with two of the witnesses: "I bet that bitch you work for is already primping her hair for the TV cameras."

Faith had held her tongue, though she couldn't imagine Amanda Wagner primping anything. Sharpening her claws, maybe, but her hair was a structure that defied primping.

"So," Galloway said to the two male witnesses. "You guys were just driving around, didn't see nothing, and then there's the Buick and the girl on the road?"

Faith struggled not to roll her eyes. She had worked homicide in the Atlanta Police Department for eight years before she had partnered with Will Trent. She knew what it was like to be the detective on the other side of that table, to have some arrogant jerk from the GBI waltz in and tell you he could run your case better than you could. She understood the anger and the frustration of being treated like an ignorant hick who couldn't detect your way out of a paper bag, but now that Faith herself was GBI, all she could think about was the pleasure she would feel when she snatched this case right out from under this particularly galling ignorant hick.

As for the paper bag, Max Galloway might as well have had one over his head. He had been interviewing Rick Sigler and Jake Berman, the two men who had come upon the car accident on Route 316, for at least half an hour and still hadn't noticed that both men were gay as handbags.

Galloway addressed Rick, the emergency medical technician who had helped the woman on the scene. "You said your wife's a nurse?"

Rick stared at his hands. He had a rose-gold wedding band around his finger and the most beautiful, delicate hands Faith had ever seen on a man. "She works nights at Crawford Long."

Faith wondered how the woman would feel knowing that her husband was out getting his knob polished while she was pulling the late shift.

Galloway asked, "What movie did y'all go see?"

He'd asked the two men this same question at least three times, only to be given the same answer. Faith was all for trying to trip up a suspect, but you had to have more intelligence than a russet potato to pull off that kind of thing—sadly, this was exactly the type of acumen that Max Galloway did not possess. From where Faith was sitting, it seemed like the two witnesses had just had the misfortune of finding themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time. The only

positive aspect of their involvement was that the medic had been able to take care of the victim until the ambulance arrived.

Rick asked Faith, "Do you think she's going to be okay?"

Faith assumed the woman was still in surgery. "I don't know," she admitted. "You did everything you could to help her, though. You have to know that."

"I've been at a million car accidents," Rick looked back at his hands. "I've never seen anything like that before. It was ... it was just awful."

In her normal life, Faith wasn't a touchy-feely person, but as a cop, she knew when a softer approach was needed. She felt the urge to lean across the table and put her hands over Rick's, to comfort him and draw him out, but she wasn't sure how Galloway would react and she didn't want to make herself any more of an enemy than she already was.

Galloway said, "Did y'all meet at the theater or did you take one car?"

Jake, the other man, shifted in his chair. He'd been very quiet from the beginning, only speaking when he was asked a direct question. He kept glancing at his watch. "I need to go," he said. "I have to get up for work in less than five hours."

Faith glanced at the clock on the wall. She hadn't realized it was coming up on one in the morning, probably because the insulin shot had given her a strange sort of second wind. Will had left two hours ago after giving her a quick rundown of what had happened, dashing off to the crime scene before she could offer to join him. He was persistent, and Faith knew that he would find a way to get this case. She just wished she knew what was taking him so long.

Galloway pushed a pad and pen toward the men. "Give me all your phone numbers."

The color drained from Rick's face. "Only call my cell. Please. Don't call me at work." He glanced nervously at Faith, then back at Galloway. "They don't like me to get personal calls at work. I'm out in the bus all day. All right?"

"Sure." Max sat back in the chair, arms crossed over his chest, staring at Faith. "You hear that, vulture?"

Faith gave the man a tight smile. She could take outright hate, but this passive-aggressive crap was getting on her last nerve.

She took out two business cards and handed one to each man. "Please call me if you think of anything else. Even something that doesn't seem important."

Rick nodded, tucking the card into his back pocket. Jake held on to his, and she imagined he was going to toss it into the first trashcan he came across. Faith's impression was that the men didn't know each other very well. They had been vague about details pertaining to their friendship, but each had presented a movie-ticket stub when asked. They had probably met in the theater, then decided to go somewhere more private.

A cell phone began to play "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." Faith corrected her initial assumption, thinking it was more than likely the University of Georgia fight song, as Galloway flipped open his phone, saying, "Yeah?"

Jake started to stand, and Galloway nodded to him, as if permission to leave had been asked and granted.

"Thank you," Faith told the two men. "Please call me if you think of anything else."

Jake was already halfway to the door, but Rick lingered. "I'm sorry I wasn't

much help. There was a lot going on, and—" Tears welled into his eyes. He was obviously still haunted by what had happened.

Faith put her hand on his arm, keeping her voice low. "I really don't care about what you guys were doing out there." Rick colored. "It's none of my business. All I care about is finding out who hurt this woman."

He looked away. Immediately, Faith knew that she had pushed him in exactly the wrong direction.

Rick gave a tight nod, still not meeting her eye. "I'm sorry I can't be more help."

Faith watched him leave, wanting to kick herself. Behind her, she heard Galloway mutter several curses. She turned as he pushed back from the table so hard that his chair clattered to the floor. "Your partner is a fucking lunatic. One hundred fucking percent."

Faith agreed—Will was never one to do things halfway—but she never badmouthed her partner unless it was to his face. "Is that just an observation, or are you trying to tell me something?"

Galloway tore off the page with the phone numbers and slapped it down on the table. "You got your case."

"What a surprising turn of events." Faith flashed him a smile, handing him a card. "If you could please fax all witness statements and preliminary reports to my office. Number's on the bottom."

He snatched the card, bumping into the table as he walked away, grumbling, "Keep smiling, bitch."

Faith leaned down and picked up the chair, feeling a bit woozy as she straightened. The nurse educator had been more of the former than the latter, and Faith was still unsure about what to do with all the diabetic instruments and supplies she had been given. She had notes, forms, a journal and all sorts of test results and papers to give to her doctor tomorrow. None of it made sense. Or maybe she was too shocked to process it all. She had always been very good at math, but the thought of measuring her food and calculating insulin made her brain go all fuzzy.

The final blow had been the result of the pregnancy test that had been kindly tagged on to all the other bloodwork. Faith had been clinging to the possibility that the over-the-counter tests were inaccurate—all three of them. How exact could the technology be for something that you peed on? She had vacillated daily between thinking she was pregnant and thinking that she had a stomach tumor, not exactly sure which news would be more welcome. When the nurse had happily informed her, "You're going to have a baby!" Faith had felt like she was going to pass out again.

There was nothing she could do about it now. She sat back down at the table, looking at Rick Sigler's and Jake Berman's phone numbers. She would have made a bet that Jake's was false, but Faith wasn't new to this game. Max Galloway had been annoyed when she had asked to see the men's driver's licenses and copied down the information in her notebook. Then again, maybe Galloway wasn't a total idiot. She'd seen him scribbling down his own copy of the phone numbers while he was on his cell. The thought of Galloway having to come ask Faith for Jake Berman's details made her smile.

She checked the clock again, wondering what was keeping the Coldfields.

Galloway had told Faith the couple had been instructed to come to the cafeteria for their interviews as soon as the ER cleared them, but the couple seemed to be taking their own sweet time. Faith was also curious about what Will had done to make Max Galloway call him a lunatic. She would be the first person to admit that her partner was far from conventional. He certainly had his own way of doing things, but Will Trent was the best cop Faith had ever worked with—even if he had the social skills of an awkward toddler. For instance, Faith would've liked to have found out from her own partner that they were assigned to this case rather than hear it from an inbred Weimaraner from Rockdale County.

Maybe it was for the best that she had some time before she talked to Will. She had no idea how she was going to explain why she had passed out in the parking deck at the courthouse without actually having to tell him the truth.

She rifled through the plastic bag filled with diabetic supplies and pulled out the pamphlet the nurse had given her, hoping that this time she would be able to concentrate on it. Faith didn't get much further than "*So, you have diabetes*" before she was telling herself once again that there had been some kind of mistake. The insulin shot had made her feel better, but maybe just lying down for a few minutes had done the trick. Did she even have a history of this in her family? She should call her mother, but she hadn't even told Evelyn that she was pregnant. Besides, the woman was on vacation in Mexico, her first holiday in years. Faith wanted to make sure her mother was close to good medical care when she told her the news.

The person she should really call was her brother. Captain Zeke Mitchell was an Air Force surgeon stationed in Landstuhl, Germany. As a doctor, he would know everything about her condition, which was probably why she cringed at the thought of reaching out to him. When fourteen-year-old Faith announced that she was pregnant, Zeke was just hitting his senior year in high school. His mortification and humiliation had lasted twenty-four hours, seven days a week. At home, he had to watch his slut of a teenage sister swell up like a blimp, and at school, he had to listen to the crude jokes his friends made about her. It was no wonder he'd joined the military straight out of high school.

Then there was Jeremy. Faith had no idea how she would tell her son that she was pregnant. He was eighteen, the same age Zeke had been when she'd ruined his life. If boys did not want to know their sisters were having sex, they sure as hell didn't want to hear the news about their mothers.

Faith had done most of her growing up with Jeremy, and now that he was in college, their relationship was settling into a comfortable place where they could talk to each other as adults. Sure, she sometimes had flashes of her son as a child—the blanket he used to drag around with him everywhere, the way he constantly used to ask her when he was going to get too heavy for her to carry him—but she'd finally come to terms with the fact that her little boy was now a grown man. How could she pull the rug out from under her son now that he'd finally gotten settled? And it wasn't just that she was pregnant anymore. She had a *disease*. She had something that could be carried in families. Jeremy could be susceptible. He had a serious girlfriend now. Faith knew that they were having sex. Jeremy's children could become diabetic because of Faith.

"God," she mumbled. It wasn't the diabetes, but the idea that she could end up being a grandmother before she hit thirty-four.

"How are you feeling?"

Faith looked up to find Sara Linton standing across from her with a tray of food.

"Old."

"Just from the pamphlet?"

Faith had forgotten it was in her hand. She indicated that Sara should sit. "Actually, I was questioning your medical abilities."

"You wouldn't be the first." She said it ruefully, and not for the first time, Faith wondered what Sara's story was. "My bedside manner could have been better with you."

Faith did not disagree. Back in the ER, she had wanted to hate Sara Linton on sight for no other reason than she was the type of woman you'd want to hate on sight: tall and thin with great posture, long auburn hair and that unusual kind of beauty that made men fall all over themselves when she entered a room. It didn't help matters that the woman was obviously smart and successful, and Faith had felt the same knee-jerk dislike she'd felt in high school when the cheerleaders had bounced by. She'd like to think a new strength of character, a spurt in maturity, had allowed her to overcome the petty response, but the truth was that it was hard for Faith to hate someone who was a widow, especially the widow of a cop.

Sara asked, "Have you had anything to eat since we talked?"

Faith shook her head, looking down at the doctor's food selection: a scrawny piece of baked chicken on a leaf of wilted lettuce and something that may or may not have been a vegetable. Sara used her plastic fork and knife to cut into the piece of chicken. At least she tried to cut into it. In the end, it was more like a tearing. She moved the roll off her bread plate and passed Faith the chicken.

"Thanks," Faith managed, thinking that the fudge brownies she had spotted when she walked in were much more appetizing.

Sara asked, "Are you officially on the case?"

Faith was surprised by the question, but then again, Sara had worked on the victim; she was bound to be curious. "Will managed to snag it for us." She checked the signal on her cell phone, wondering why he hadn't called yet.

"I'm sure the locals were very happy to step aside."

Faith laughed, thinking Sara's husband had probably been a good cop. Faith was a good cop, too, and she knew that it was one in the morning and Sara had said six hours ago that she was at the end of her shift. Faith studied the doctor. Sara had the unmistakable glow of an adrenaline junkie. The woman was here for information.

Sara offered, "I checked on Henry Coldfield, the driver." She hadn't eaten anything yet, but then she had come into the cafeteria to find Faith, not choke down a piece of chicken that had hatched just as Nixon was resigning. "The air bag bruised his chest, and the wife took a couple of stitches in her head, but they're both fine."

"That's actually what I'm waiting on." Faith checked the clock again. "They were supposed to meet me down here."

Sara looked confused. "They left at least half an hour ago with their son."

"What?"

"I saw them all talking to that detective with the greasy hair."

“Motherfucker.” No wonder Max Galloway had looked so smug when he left the cafeteria. “Sorry,” she told Sara. “One of the locals is smarter than I thought. He played me like a violin.”

“Coldfield is an unusual name,” Sara said. “I’m sure they’re in the phone book.”

Faith hoped so, because she didn’t want to have to go crawling back to Max Galloway and give him the satisfaction of relaying the information.

Sara offered, “I could pull the address and phone number off the hospital intake form for you.”

Faith was surprised by the offer, which usually required a subpoena. “That’d be great.”

“It’s not a problem.”

“It’s, uh—” Faith stopped, biting her tongue to keep from telling the other woman that she would be breaking the law. She changed the subject. “Will told me you worked on the victim when she came in.”

“Anna,” Sara supplied. “At least that’s what I think she said.”

Faith tested the waters. Will hadn’t given her the gritty details. “What were your impressions?”

Sara sat back in her chair, arms folded. “She showed signs of severe malnutrition and dehydration. Her gums were white, her veins collapsed. Because of the nature of the healing and the way the blood was clotting, I would assume that the wounds were inflicted over a period of time. Her wrists and ankles showed signs of being bound. She was penetrated vaginally and anally; there were indications that a blunt object was used. I couldn’t really do a rape kit before surgery, but I managed to examine her as best I could. I removed some splinters of wood from under her fingernails for your lab to look at—not pressure-treated from the look of it, but that will have to be confirmed by your guys.”

She sounded like she was giving testimony in court. Every observation had supporting evidence, every educated guess was framed as an estimation. Faith asked, “How long do you think she was kept?”

“At least four days. Though gauging by how malnourished she was, it might be as much as a week to ten days.”

Faith didn’t want to think about the woman being tortured for ten days. “How are you so sure about the four days?”

“The cut on the breast here,” Sara replied, indicating the side of her own breast. “It was deep, already septic, with signs of insect activity. You’d have to talk to an entomologist to pin down the pupation—the developmental stage of the insect—but considering she was still alive, that her body was relatively warm and there was a fresh blood supply to feed on, four days is a solid guess.” She added, “I don’t imagine they’ll be able to save the tissue.”

Faith kept her lips pressed tightly together, resisting the urge to put her hand over her own breast. How many pieces of yourself could you lose and still go on?

Sara kept talking, though Faith had not prompted her. “The eleventh rib, here”—she touched her abdomen—“that was recent, probably earlier today or late yesterday, and done with precision.”

“Surgical precision?”

“No.” She shook her head. “Confidence. There were no hesitation marks, no test cuts. The person was confident in what they were doing.”

Faith thought the doctor seemed pretty confident herself. “How do you think it was done?”

Sara took out her prescription pad and started drawing a bunch of curved lines that only made sense when she explained, “The ribs are numbered in pairs starting at the top and going down, twelve each side, left and right.” She tapped the lines with her pen. “Number one is just under the clavicle and twelve is the last one here.” She looked up to make sure Faith was following. “Now, eleven and twelve at the bottom are considered to be ‘floating,’ because they don’t have an anterior connection. They only connect at the back, not the front.” She drew a straight line to indicate the spine. “The top seven ribs connect at the back and then attach to the sternum—like a big crescent. The next three rows connect roughly to the ribs above. They’re called false ribs. All of this is very elastic so that you can breathe, and it’s also why it’s hard to break a rib with a direct blow—they bend quite a bit.”

Faith was leaning forward, hanging on her every word. “So, this was done by someone with medical knowledge?”

“Not necessarily. You can feel your own ribs with your fingers. You know where they are in your body.”

“But, still—”

“Look.” She sat up straight, raising her right arm and pressing the fingers of her left hand into her side. “You run your hand down the posterior axillary line until you feel the tip of the rib—eleven, with twelve a little farther back.” She picked up the plastic knife. “You slice the knife into the skin and cut along the rib—the tip of the blade could even scrape along the bone as a guide. Push back the fat and muscle, disarticulate the rib from the vertebra, snap it off, whatever, then grab hold and yank it out.”

Faith felt queasy at the thought.

Sara put down the knife. “A hunter could do it in under a minute, but anyone could figure it out. It’s not precision surgery. I’m sure you could Google up a better drawing than the one I’ve made.”

“Is it possible that the rib was never there? That she was born without it?”

“A small portion of the population is born with one pair fewer, but the majority of us have twenty-four.”

“I thought men were missing a rib?”

“You mean like Adam and Eve?” A smile curved Sara’s lips, and Faith got the distinct impression the woman was trying not to laugh at her. “I wouldn’t believe everything they told you in Sunday School, Faith. We all have the same number of ribs.”

“Well, don’t I feel stupid.” It wasn’t a question. “But you’re sure about this, that the rib was taken out?”

“Ripped out. The cartilage and muscle were torn. This was a violent wrenching.”

“You seem to have given this a lot of thought.”

Sara shrugged, as if this was just the product of natural curiosity. She picked up the knife and fork again, cutting into the chicken. Faith watched her struggle with the desiccated meat for a few seconds before she put the utensils back

down. She gave a strange smile, almost embarrassed. "I was a coroner in my previous life."

Faith felt her mouth open in surprise. The doctor had said it the same way you might confide a hidden acrobatic talent or youthful indiscretion. "Where?"

"Grant County. It's about four hours from here."

"Never heard of it."

"It's well below the gnat line," Sara admitted. She leaned her arms on the table, a wistful tone to her voice when she revealed, "I took the job so that I could buy out my partner in our pediatric practice. At least I thought I did. The truth was that I was bored. You can only give so many vaccinations and stick so many Band-Aids on skinned knees before your mind starts to go."

"I can imagine," Faith mumbled, though she was wondering which was more alarming: that the doctor who had just diagnosed her with diabetes was a pediatrician or that she was a coroner.

"I'm glad you're on this case," Sara said. "Your partner is ..."

"Strange?"

Sara gave her an odd look. "I was going to say 'intense.'"

"He's pretty driven," Faith agreed, thinking this was the first time since she'd met Will Trent that anyone's first impression of him had been so complimentary. He usually took a while to grow on you, like cataracts or shingles.

"He seemed very compassionate," Sara held up her hand to stop any protest. "Not that cops aren't compassionate, but they usually don't show it."

Faith could only nod. Will seldom showed any emotions, but she knew that torture victims cut him close to the bone. "He's a good cop."

Sara looked down at her tray. "You can have this if you want. I'm not really hungry."

"I didn't think you came in here to eat."

She blushed, caught.

"It's all right," Faith assured her. "But if you're still offering the Coldfields' information ..."

"Of course."

Faith dug out one of her business cards. "My cell number is on the back."

"Right." She read the number, a determined set to her mouth, and Faith saw that not only did Sara know she was breaking the law, she obviously didn't care. "Another thing—" Sara seemed to be debating whether or not to speak. "Her eyes. The whites showed petechia, but there weren't any visible signs of strangulation. Her pupils wouldn't focus. It could be from the trauma or something neurological, but I'm not sure she could see anything."

"That might explain why she walked out in the middle of the road."

"Considering what she's been through ..." Sara didn't finish the sentence, but Faith knew exactly what she meant. You didn't have to be a doctor to understand that a woman who'd been through that kind of hell might deliberately walk into the path of a speeding car.

Sara tucked Faith's business card into her coat pocket. "I'll call you in a few minutes."

Faith watched her leave, wondering how in the hell Sara Linton had ended up working at Grady Hospital. Sara couldn't be more than forty, but the emergency room was a young person's game, the sort of place you ran screaming from

before you hit your thirties.

She checked her phone again. All six bars were lit, meaning the signal was bright and clear. She tried to give Will the benefit of the doubt. Maybe his phone had fallen apart again. Then again, every cop on the scene would have a cell phone, so maybe he really was an asshole.

It did occur to Faith as she got up from the table and made her way to the parking lot that she could call Will herself, but there was a reason Faith was pregnant and unmarried for the second time in less than twenty years, and it wasn't because she was good at communicating with the men in her life.

CHAPTER FOUR

Will stood at the mouth of the cave, lowering down a set of lights on a rope so that Charlie Reed would have something better than a flashlight to help him collect evidence. Will was soaked to the bone, even though the rain had stopped half an hour ago. As dawn approached, the air had turned chillier, but he would rather stand on the deck of the *Titanic* than go down into that hole again.

The lights hit the bottom and he saw a pair of hands pull them into the cavern. Will scratched his arms. His white shirt showed pinpoints of blood where the rats had clawed their way over him, and he was wondering if itching was a sign of rabies. It was the kind of question he would normally ask Faith, but he didn't want to bother her. She had looked awful when he'd left the hospital, and there was nothing she could do here but stand in the rain alongside him. He would catch her up on the case in the morning, after she'd had a good night's sleep. This case wasn't going to be solved in an hour. At least one of them should be well rested as they headed into the investigation.

A helicopter whirled overhead, the chopping sound vibrating in his ears. They were doing infrared sweeps, looking for the second victim. The search teams had been out for hours, carefully combing the area within a two-mile radius. Barry Fielding had shown up with his search dogs, and the animals had gone crazy for the first half hour, then lost the scent. Uniformed patrolmen from Rockdale County were doing grid searches, looking for more underground caves, more clues that might indicate the other woman had escaped.

Maybe she hadn't managed to escape. Maybe her attacker had found her before she could reach help. Maybe she had died days or even weeks ago. Or maybe she had never existed in the first place. As the search wore on, Will was getting the impression that the cops were turning against him. Some of them didn't think there was a second victim at all. Some of them thought Will was keeping them out in the freezing cold rain for no reason other than he was too stupid to see that he was wrong.

There was one person who could clarify this, but she was still in surgery back at Grady Hospital, fighting for her life. The first thing you normally did in an abduction or murder case was put the victim's life under a microscope. Other than assuming her name was Anna, they knew nothing about the woman. In the morning, Will would pull all the missing persons reports in the area, but those were bound to be in the hundreds, and that was excluding the city of Atlanta, where on average, two people a day went missing. If the woman came from a different state, the paperwork would increase exponentially. Over a quarter of a million missing persons cases were reported to the FBI every year. Compounding the problem, the cases were seldom updated if the missing were found.

If Anna wasn't awake by morning, Will would send over a fingerprint technician to card her. It was a scattershot way of trying to find her identity. Unless she had committed an arrestable crime, her fingerprints would not be on

file. Still, more than one case cracked open based on following procedure. Will had learned a long time ago that a slim chance was still a chance.

The ladder at the mouth of the cavern shook and Will steadied it as Charlie Reed made his way up. The clouds had passed with the rain, letting through some of the moonlight. Though the deluge had passed, there was the occasional drop, sounding like a cat smacking its lips. Everything in the forest had a strange, bluish hue to it, and there was enough light now that Will didn't need his flashlight to see Charlie. The crime-scene tech's hand reached out, slapping a large evidence bag on the ground at Will's feet as he climbed to the surface.

"Shit," Charlie cursed. His white clean suit was caked in mud. He unzipped it as soon as he was topside, and Will could see that he was sweating so badly his T-shirt was stuck to his chest.

Will asked, "You okay?"

"Shit," Charlie repeated, wiping his forehead with the back of his arm. "I can't believe ... Jesus, Will." He leaned over, bracing his hands on his knees. He was breathing hard, though he was a fit man and the climb was not a difficult one. "I don't know where to start."

Will understood the feeling.

"There were torture devices ..." Charlie wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "I've only seen that kind of thing on television."

"There was a second victim," Will said, raising up his voice at the end so that Charlie would take his words as an observation that needed confirming.

"I can't make sense of anything down there." Charlie squatted, resting his head in his hands. "I've never seen anything like it."

Will knelt down alongside him. He picked up the evidence bag. "What's this?"

He shook his head. "I found them rolled up in a tin can by the chair."

Will spread the bag flat on his leg and used the penlight from Charlie's kit to study the contents. There were at least fifty sheets of notebook paper inside. Each page was covered front to back in cursive pencil. Will squinted at the words, trying to make sense out of them. He had never been able to read well. The letters always tended to mix up and turn around. Sometimes, they blurred so much that he felt motion sickness just trying to decipher their meaning.

Charlie didn't know about Will's problem. Will tried to draw out some information from him, asking, "What do you make of these notes?"

"It's crazy, right?" Charlie was rubbing his thumb and forefinger along his mustache, a nervous habit that only came out during dire circumstances. "I don't think I can go back down there." He paused, swallowing hard. "It just feels ... evil, you know? Just plain damn evil."

Will heard leaves rustling, branches snapping. He turned to find Amanda Wagner making her way through the woods. She was an older woman, probably in her sixties. She favored monochromatic power suits with skirts that hit below her knee and stockings that showed off the definition of what Will had to admit were remarkably good calves for a woman he often thought of as the Antichrist. Her high heels should have made it difficult for her to find her footing, but, as with most obstacles, Amanda conquered the terrain with steely determination.

Both men stood as she approached.

As usual, she didn't bother with pleasantries. "What's this?" She held out her hand for the evidence bag. Other than Faith, Amanda was the only person in the

bureau who knew about Will's reading issues, something she both accepted and criticized at the same time. Will trained the penlight on the pages and she read aloud, " *'I will not deny myself. I will not deny myself.'* " She shook the bag, checking the rest of the pages. "Front and back, all the same sentence. Cursive, probably a woman's handwriting." She handed the notes back to Will, giving him a pointed look of disapproval. "So, our bad guy's either an angry schoolteacher or a self-help guru."

She addressed Charlie. "What else have you found?"

"Pornography. Chains. Handcuffs. Sexual devices."

"That's evidence. I need clues."

Will took over for him. "I think the second victim was bolted underneath the bed. I found this in the rope." He took a small evidence bag from his jacket pocket. It contained part of a front tooth, some of the root still attached. He told Amanda, "That's an incisor. The victim at the hospital had all of her teeth intact."

She scrutinized Will more than the tooth. "You're sure about this?"

"I was right in her face trying to get information," he answered. "Her teeth were chattering together. They were making a clicking sound."

She seemed to accept this. "What makes you think the tooth was recently lost? And don't tell me gut instinct, Will, because I've got the entire Rockdale County police force out here in the wet and cold, ready to lynch you for sending them on a wild-goose chase in the middle of the night."

"The rope was cut from underneath the bed," he told her. "The first victim, Anna, was tied down to the top of the bed. The second victim was underneath. Anna couldn't have cut the rope herself." Amanda asked Charlie, "Do you agree with this?" Still shaken up, he took his time answering. "Half of the cut ends of the rope were still under the bed. It would make sense that they would fall that way if they were cut from underneath. Cut from the top, the ends would be on the floor or still on top of the bed, not underneath it."

Amanda was still dubious. She told Will, "Go on." "There were more pieces of rope tied to the eyebolts under the bed. Someone cut themselves away. They would still have the rope around their ankles and at least one wrist. Anna didn't have any rope on her."

"The paramedics could've cut it off," Amanda pointed out. She asked Charlie, "DNA? Fluids?"

"All over the place. We should get them back in forty-eight hours. Unless this guy's on the database ..." He glanced at Will. They all knew that DNA was a shot in the dark. Unless their abductor had committed a crime in the past that caused his DNA to be taken, then logged into the computer, there was no way he would come up as a match.

Amanda asked, "What about the waste situation?" Initially, Charlie didn't seem to understand the question, but then he answered, "There aren't any empty jars or cans. I guess they were taken away. There's a covered bucket in the corner that was used as a toilet, but from what I can tell, the victim—or victims—were tied up most of the time and didn't have a choice but to go where they were. I couldn't tell you if any of this points to one or two captives. It depends on when they were taken, how dehydrated they were, that kind of thing."

She asked, "Was there anything fresh underneath the bed?" "Yes," Charlie

answered, as if surprised by the revelation. "Actually, there was an area that tested positive for urine. It would be in the right place for someone lying down on their back."

Amanda pressed, "Wouldn't it take longer for liquid to evaporate underground?"

"Not necessarily. The high acidity would have a chemical reaction with the pH in the soil. Depending on the mineral content and the—"

Amanda cut him off. "Don't educate me, Charlie, just give me facts that I can use."

He looked at Will apologetically. "I don't know if there were two hostages at the same time. Someone was definitely kept under the bed, but it could have been that the abductor moved the same victim from place to place. The body fluids could've also drained off from above." He told Will, "You were down there. You saw what this guy is capable of." The color had drained from his face again. "It's awful," he mumbled. "It's just awful."

Amanda was her usual sympathetic self. "Man up, Charlie. Get back down there and find me some evidence I can use to catch this bastard." She patted him on the back, more of a shove to get him moving, then told Will, "Walk with me. We've got to find that pygmy detective you pissed off and make nice with him so he doesn't go crying to Lyle Peterson." Peterson was Rockdale County's chief of police and no friend of Amanda's. By law, only a police chief, a mayor or a district attorney could ask the GBI to take over a case. Will wondered what strings Amanda had managed to pull and how furious Peterson was about it.

"Well." She held out her hands for balance as she stepped over a fallen limb. "You bought some good grace volunteering yourself to go down into that hole, but if you ever do anything that stupid again, I'll have you running stings in the men's bathroom at the airport for the rest of your natural born life. Do you hear me?"

Will nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

"Your victim doesn't look good," she told him, walking past a group of cops who had stopped for a cigarette break. They glared at Will. "There were some complications. I talked to the surgeon. Sanderson. He doesn't sound hopeful." She added, "He confirmed your observation about the teeth, by the way. They were fully intact."

This was typical Amanda, making him work for everything. Will didn't take it as an insult but as a sign that she might be on his side. "The soles of her feet were freshly cut," he said. "She didn't bleed from her feet when she was in the cave."

"Take me through your process."

Will had already relayed the highlights to her over the telephone, but he told her again about finding the sheet of plywood, going down into the hole. He went into more details this time around as he described the cavern, carefully giving her a sense of the atmosphere while trying not to reveal that he had been even more petrified than Charlie Reed. "The slats of the bed were clawed underneath," he said. "The second victim—her hands had to be unbound to make those marks. He wouldn't have left her hands free while she was alone because she could free herself and leave."

"You really think he kept one on top and one on bottom?"

"I think that's exactly what he did."

"If they were both tied up and one of them managed to get a knife, it would make sense that the woman on bottom would keep it hidden while they waited for the abductor to leave."

Will didn't respond. Amanda could be sarcastic and petty and downright mean, but she was also fair in her own way, and he knew that as much as she derided his gut instincts, she had learned over the years to trust him. He also knew better than to expect anything remotely resembling praise.

They had reached the road where Will had parked the Mini all those hours ago. Dawn was coming fast, and the blue cast of light had turned to sepia tones. Dozens of Rockdale County cruisers were blocking off the area. More men milled around, but the sense of urgency had been lost. The press was out there somewhere, too, and Will saw a couple of news helicopters hovering overhead. It was too dark to get a shot, but that probably was not stopping them from reporting every movement they saw on the ground—or at least what they thought they saw. Accuracy wasn't exactly part of the equation when you had to provide news twenty-four hours a day.

Will held out his hand to Amanda, helping her down the shoulder as they went into the opposite side of the forest. There were hundreds of searchers in the area, some from other counties, all spread out into groups. The Georgia Emergency Management Agency, or GEMA, had called in the civilian canine corps, the people who had trained their dogs to scent corpses. The dogs had stopped barking hours ago. Most of the volunteers had gone home. It was mostly cops now, people who didn't have a choice. Detective Fierro was out there somewhere, probably cursing Will's name.

Amanda asked, "How's Faith?"

He was surprised by the question, but then, Amanda had a connection with Faith that went back several years. "She's fine," he said, automatically covering for his partner.

"I heard she passed out."

He feigned surprise. "Did you?"

Amanda raised her eyebrows at him. "She hasn't been looking good lately."

Will assumed she meant the weight gain, which was a little much for Faith's small frame, but he had figured out today that you did not discuss a woman's weight, especially with another woman. "She seems fine to me."

"She seems irritable and distracted."

Will kept his mouth shut, unsure whether Amanda was truly concerned or asking him to tattle. The truth was that Faith *had* been irritable and distracted lately. He had worked with her long enough to know her moods. For the most part, she was pretty even-keeled. Once every month, always around the same time, she carried her purse with her for a few days. Her tone would get snippy and she'd tend to favor radio stations that played women singing along to acoustic guitars. Will knew to just apologize a lot for everything he said until she stopped carrying her bag. Not that he would share this with Amanda, but he had to admit that lately, every day with Faith seemed like a purse day.

Amanda reached out her hand and he helped her step over a fallen log. "You know I hate working cases we can't clear," she said.

"I know you like solving cases no one else can."

She chuckled ruefully. "When are you going to get tired of me stealing all your thunder, Will?"

"I'm indefatigable."

"Putting that calendar to use, I see."

"It's the most thoughtful gift you've ever given me." Leave it to Amanda to give a functional illiterate a word-a-day calendar for Christmas.

Up ahead, Will saw Fierro making his way toward them. This side of the road was more densely forested, and there were limbs and vines everywhere. Will could hear Fierro cursing as his pant leg got caught in a prickly bush. He slapped his neck, probably killing an insect. "Nice of you to join this fucking waste of time, Gomez."

Will made the introductions. "Detective Fierro, this is Dr. Amanda Wagner."

Fierro tilted up his chin at her in greeting. "I've seen you on TV."

"Thank you," Amanda returned, as if he had meant it as a compliment. "We're dealing with some pretty salacious details here, Detective Fierro. I hope your team knows to keep a lid on it."

"You think we're a bunch of amateurs?"

Obviously, she did. "How is the search going?"

"We're finding exactly what's out here—nothing. Nada. Zero." He glared at Will. "This how you state guys run things? Come in here and blow our whole fucking budget on a useless search in the middle of the goddamn night?"

Will was tired and he was frustrated, and it came out in his tone. "We usually pillage your supplies and rape your women first."

"Ha-fucking-ha," Fierro grumbled, slapping his neck again. He pulled away his hand and there was a smear of bloody insect on his palm. "You're gonna be laughing your ass off when I take back my case."

Amanda said, "Detective Fierro, Chief Peterson asked us to intervene. You don't have the authority to take back this case."

"Peterson, huh?" His lip curled. "Does that mean you've been greasing his pole again?"

Will sucked in so much air that his lips made a whistling sound. For her part, Amanda looked unfazed, though her eyes narrowed, and she gave Fierro a single nod, as if to say his time would come. Will wouldn't be surprised if, at some future date, Fierro woke up to find a decapitated horse's head in his bed.

"Hey!" someone screamed. "Over here!"

All three stood where they were in various stages of shock, anger and unadulterated rage.

"I found something!"

The words got Will moving. He jogged toward the searcher, a woman who was furiously waving her hands in the air. She was Rockdale uniformed patrol, wearing a knit hat on her head and surrounded by tall switchgrass.

"What is it?" he asked.

She pointed toward a dense pack of low-hanging trees. He saw that the leaves underneath were disturbed, bare spots of earth showing in places. "Something caught my light," she said, turning on her Maglite and shining it into the shadowy area under the trees. Will didn't see anything. By the time Amanda had joined them, he was wondering if the patrolwoman was a little too tired, a little too anxious to find something.

"What is it?" Amanda asked, just as the light reflected back from the darkness. It was a small flash that lasted no more than a second. Will blinked, thinking maybe his tired brain had conjured it, too, but the patrolwoman found it again—a quick flash like a tiny burst of powder, approximately twenty feet away.

Will slipped on a pair of latex gloves from his jacket. He took the flashlight, carefully pushing back branches as he made his way into the area. The prickly bushes and limbs made it hard going, and he stooped down low to make forward progress. He shone the light on the ground, scanning for the object. Maybe it was a broken mirror or a chewing gum wrapper. All the possibilities ran through his mind as he tried to locate it: a piece of jewelry, a shard of glass, minerals in a rock.

A Florida state driver's license.

The license was about two feet from the base of the tree. Beside it was a small pocketknife, the thin blade so coated in blood that it blended in with the dark leaves around it. Close to the trunk, the branches thinned out. Will knelt down, picking up the leaves one at a time as he moved them off the license. The thick plastic had been folded in two. The colors and the distinctive outline of the state of Florida in the corner told him where the license had been issued. There was a hologram in the background to prevent forgeries. That must have been what the light had picked up on.

He leaned down, craning his neck so he could get a better look, not wanting to disturb the scene. One of the clearest fingerprints Will had ever seen was right in the middle of the license. Imprinted in blood, the ridges were practically jumping off the smooth plastic. The photograph showed a woman: dark hair, dark eyes.

"There's a pocketknife and a license," he told Amanda, his voice raised so that she could hear him. "There's a bloody fingerprint on the license."

"Can you read the name?" She put her hands on her hips, sounding furious.

Will felt his throat close up. He concentrated on the small print, making out a *J*, or maybe an *I*, before everything began to jumble around.

Her fury shot up exponentially. "Just bring the damn thing out."

There was a cluster of cops around her now, all looking confused. Even twenty feet away, Will could hear them mumbling about procedure. The purity of the crime scene was sacrosanct. Defense lawyers chewed apart irregularities. Photographs and measurements had to be taken, sketches made. The chain of custody could not be broken, or the evidence would be thrown out.

"Will?"

He felt a drop of rain hit the back of his neck. It was hot, almost like a burn. More cops were coming up, trying to see what had been found. They would wonder why Will didn't shout out the name from the license, why he didn't immediately send off someone to do a computer check. Was this how it was going to end? Was Will going to have to pick his way out of this dense covering and announce to a group of strangers that, at his best, he could only read at a second-grade level? If that information got out, he might as well go home and stick his head in the oven, because there wouldn't be a cop in the city who would work with him.

Amanda started making her way toward him, her skirt snagging on a prickly vine, various curses coming from her lips.

Will felt another drop of rain on his neck and wiped it away with his hand. He looked down at his glove. There was a fine smear of blood on his fingers. He thought maybe he had cut his neck on one of the limbs, but he felt another drop on the back of his neck. Hot, wet, viscous. He put his hand to the place. More blood.

Will looked up, into the eyes of a woman with dark brown hair and dark eyes. She was hanging upside down about fifteen feet above him. Her ankle was snagged in a patchwork of branches, the only thing keeping her from hitting the ground. She had fallen at an angle, face-first, snapping her neck. Her shoulders were twisted, her eyes open, staring at the ground. One arm hung straight down, reaching toward Will. There was an angry red circle around her wrist, the skin burned through. A piece of rope was knotted tightly around the other wrist. Her mouth was open. Her front tooth was broken, a third of it missing.

Another drop of blood dripped from her fingertips, this time hitting him on the cheek just below his eye. Will took off his latex glove and touched the blood. It was still warm.

She had died within the last hour.

DAY TWO



CHAPTER FIVE

Pauline McGhee steered her Lexus LX right into the handicapped parking space in front of the City Foods Supermarket. It was five in the morning. All the handicapped people were probably still asleep. More importantly, it was too damn early to walk more than she had to.

“Come on, sleepy cat,” she told her son, gently pressing his shoulder. Felix stirred, not wanting to wake up. She caressed his cheek with her hand, thinking not for the first time that it was a miracle that something so perfect had come out of her imperfect body. “Come on, sweet pea,” she said, tickling his ribs until he curved up like a roly-poly worm.

She got out of the car, helping Felix climb out of the SUV behind her. His feet hadn’t hit the ground before she went over the routine. “See where we’re parked?” He nodded. “What do we do if we get lost?”

“Meet at the car.” He struggled not to yawn.

“Good boy.” She pulled him close as they walked toward the store. Growing up, Pauline had been told that she should find an adult if she ever got lost, but these days, you never knew who that adult might be. A security guard might be a pedophile. A little old lady might be a batty witch who spent her spare time hiding razor blades in apples. It was a sad state of affairs when the safest help for a lost six-year-old boy was an inanimate object.

The artificial lights of the store were a bit much for this time of morning, but it was Pauline’s own fault for not already buying the cupcakes for Felix’s class. She’d gotten the notice a week ago, but she hadn’t anticipated all hell breaking loose at work in between. One of the interior design agency’s biggest clients had ordered a custom-made sixty-thousand-dollar Italian brown leather couch that wouldn’t fit in the damn elevator, and the only way to get it up to his penthouse was with a ten-thousand-dollar-an-hour crane.

The client was blaming Pauline’s agency for not catching the error, the agency was blaming Pauline for designing the couch too big, and Pauline was blaming the dipshit upholsterer whom she had specifically told to go to the building on Peachtree Street to measure the elevator before making the damn couch. Faced with a ten-thousand-dollar-an-hour crane bill or rebuilding a sixty-thousand-dollar couch, the upholsterer was, of course, conveniently forgetting this conversation, but Pauline was damned if she was going to let him get away with it.

There was a meeting of all concerned at seven o’clock sharp, and she was going to be the first one there to get in her side of the story. As her father always said, shit rolls downhill. Pauline McGhee wasn’t going to be the one smelling like a sewer when the day was over. She had evidence on her side—a copy of an email exchange with her boss asking him to remind the upholsterer about taking measurements. The critical part was Morgan’s response: *I’ll take care of it*. Her boss was pretending like the emails hadn’t happened, but Pauline wasn’t going

to take the fall. Someone was going to lose their job today, and it sure as hell wasn't going to be her.

"No, baby," she said, pulling Felix's hand away from a package of Gummi Bears dangling from the shelf. Pauline swore they put those things at kid level just so their parents would be bullied into buying them. She had seen more than one mother relent to a screaming kid just so he'd shut up. Pauline didn't play that game, and Felix knew it. If he tried anything, she would snatch him up and leave the store, even if that meant abandoning a half-filled shopping cart.

She turned down the bakery aisle, nearly smacking into a grocery cart. The man behind the buggy laughed good-naturedly, and Pauline managed a smile.

"Have a good day," he said.

"You, too," she returned.

That, she thought, was the last time she was going to be nice to anybody this morning. She'd tossed and turned all night, then gotten up at three so she could run on the treadmill, put her face on, fix breakfast for Felix and get him ready for school. Long gone were her single days when she could spend all night partying, go home with whoever looked good, then roll out of bed the next morning twenty minutes before it was time to get to work.

Pauline ruffled Felix's hair, thinking she didn't miss it a bit. Though getting laid every now and then would've been a damn gift from heaven.

"Cupcakes," she said, relieved to find several stacks lined up along the front of the bakery counter. Her relief quickly left when she saw that every single one was pastel with Easter bunnies and multicolored eggs on top. The note she'd gotten from the school had specified nondenominational cupcakes, but Pauline wasn't sure what that meant, other than Felix's extremely expensive private school was brimming with politically correct bullshit. They wouldn't even call it an Easter Party—it was a Spring Party that just happened to fall a few days before Easter Sunday. What religion didn't celebrate Easter? She knew the Jews didn't get Christmas, but for the love of God, Easter was all about them. Even the pagans got the bunny.

"All right," Pauline said, handing Felix her purse. He slung it over his shoulder the same way she did, and Pauline felt a pang of angst. She worked in interior design. Just about every man in her life was a flaming mo. She'd have to make an effort to meet some straight men soon for both their sakes.

There were six cupcakes in each box, so Pauline scooped up five boxes, thinking the teachers would want some. She couldn't stand most of the faculty at the school, but they loved Felix, and Pauline loved her son, so what was an extra four seventy-five to feed the fat cows who took care of her baby?

She carried the boxes to the front of the store, the smell making her feel hungry and nauseated at the same time, like she could eat every one of them until it made her sick enough to spend the next hour in the toilet. It was too early to smell anything with frosting, that was for sure. She turned around and checked on Felix, who was dragging his feet behind her. He was exhausted, and it was her fault. She contemplated getting him the bag of Gummi Bears he'd wanted, but her cell phone started ringing as soon as she put the cupcakes on the checkout belt and all was forgotten when she recognized the number.

"Yeah?" she asked, watching the boxes slowly make their way down the belt toward the slope-shouldered cashier. The woman was so large that her hands

barely met in the middle, like a T. Rex or a baby seal.

"Paulie." Morgan, her boss, sounded frantic. "Can you believe this meeting?"

He was acting like he was on her side, but she knew he'd stab her in the back the minute she let her guard down. She'd enjoy watching him pack up his office after she produced the email at the meeting. "I know," she commiserated. "It's horrible."

"Are you at the grocery store?"

He must have heard the beeps from the scanner. The T. Rex was ringing up each box individually, even though they were all the same. If Pauline hadn't been on the phone, she would have jumped over the counter and scanned them herself. She moved to the end of the checkout and grabbed a couple of plastic bags to expedite the operation. Cradling her phone between her ear and shoulder, she asked, "What do you think's gonna happen?"

"Well, it's clearly not your fault," he said, but she would've bet her right one that the bastard had told his boss that very thing.

"It's not yours, either," she countered, though Morgan had recommended the upholsterer in the first place, probably because the guy looked thirteen and waxed his gym-toned legs to shiny perfection. She knew the little tart was working the gay connection with Morgan, but he was dead wrong if he thought Pauline was going to be the odd girl out. It had taken her sixteen years to work her way up from secretary to assistant to designer. She'd spent endless nights at the Atlanta School of Art and Design getting her degree, dragging into work every morning so she could pay the rent, finally getting to a position where she could breathe a little, could afford to bring a kid into the world the right way—and then some. Felix had all the right clothes, all the good toys, and he went to one of the most expensive schools in the city. Pauline hadn't stopped with her boy, either. She'd gotten her teeth fixed and laser-corrected her eyes. Every week she got a massage, every other week she got a facial, and there wasn't a damn root in her hair that showed anything but sassy brown thanks to the girl she saw in Peachtree Hills every month and a half. There was no way in hell she was giving up any of that. Not by a long shot.

It would serve Morgan well to remember where Pauline had started. She'd worked the secretarial pool back before wire transfers and online banking, when they kept all the checks in a wall safe until they could be deposited at the end of the day. After the last office remodel, Pauline had taken a smaller office just so the safe would end up in her space. Just in case, she'd even had a locksmith come in after hours to reset the combination, and she was the only one who knew it. It drove Morgan crazy that he didn't know the combination, and it was a damn good thing he didn't, because the copy of the email covering her ass was locked behind that steel door. For days, she had conjured countless scenarios of herself opening the safe with a flourish, shoving the email in Morgan's face, shaming him in front of their boss and the client.

"What a mess," Morgan sighed, going for the dramatic. "I just can't believe—"

Pauline took her purse from Felix and dug around for her wallet. He stared longingly at the candy bars as she slid her debit card through the reader and went through the motions. "Uh-huh," she said as Morgan yapped in her ear about what a bastard the client was, how he wouldn't stand by while Pauline's good name was dragged through the mud. If anyone had been around to

appreciate it, she would've feigned gagging herself.

"Come on, baby," she said, gently pushing Felix toward the door. She cradled the phone to her ear as she took the bags by the handles, then wondered why she had bothered to bag the boxes in the first place. Plastic boxes, plastic bags; the women at Felix's school would be horrified on behalf of the environment. Pauline stacked the cupcakes back together, pressing against the top box with her chin. She dropped the empty bags in the trash, and used her free hand to dig into her purse for her car keys as she walked through the sliding doors.

"This is absolutely the worst thing that's ever happened to me in my career," Morgan groaned. Despite the crick in her neck, Pauline had forgotten she was still on the phone.

She pressed the button on the remote to open the trunk of the SUV. It slid up with a sigh, and she thought about how much she loved the sound of that tailgate lifting, what a luxury it was to make enough money so that you didn't even have to open your own trunk. She wasn't going to lose it all because of some pretty-boy butt waxer who couldn't be bothered to measure a fucking elevator.

"It's true," she said into the phone, though she hadn't really paid attention to what Morgan was stating as the God's honest. She put the boxes in the back, then pressed the button on the bottom of the trunk to make it close. She was in her car before she realized that Felix wasn't with her.

"Fuck," she whispered, closing the phone. She was out of the car in a flash, scanning the parking lot, which had filled up considerably since she'd been inside the store.

"Felix?" She circled the car, thinking he must be hiding on the other side. He wasn't there.

"Felix?" she called, running back toward the store. She nearly slammed into the sliding doors because they didn't open quickly enough. She asked the cashier, "Did you see my son?" The woman looked confused, and Pauline tersely repeated, "My son. He was just with me. He's got dark hair, he's about this tall, he's six years old?" She gave up, mumbling, "For fucksakes." She ran back to the bakery, then up and down the aisles.

"Felix?" she called, her heart beating so loud she couldn't hear herself speak. She went up and down every aisle, jogging, then running like a madwoman through the store. She ended up at the bakery, about to lose her shit. What had she dressed him in today? His red sneakers. He always wanted to wear his red sneakers because they had Elmo on the soles. Was he in the white shirt or the blue one? What about his pants? Had she pressed his cargo pants this morning or put him in jeans? Why couldn't she remember this?

"I saw a child outside," someone said, and Pauline bolted for the doors again.

She saw Felix walking around the back of the SUV toward the passenger side. He was wearing his white shirt, his cargo pants and his red Elmo sneakers. His hair was still wet in the back where she had smoothed down the cowlick this morning.

Pauline slowed her pace to a fast walk, patting her hand to her chest as if she could calm her heart. She wasn't going to yell at him, because he wouldn't understand and it would only make him scared. She was going to grab him up and kiss every single inch of his body until he started to squirm and then she

was going to tell him that if he ever left her side again she was going to throttle his precious little neck.

She wiped away tears as she rounded the rear of the car. Felix was in the Lexus, the door open, his legs dangling down. He wasn't alone.

"Oh, thank you," she gushed to the stranger. She reached out to Felix, saying, "He got lost in the store and—"

Pauline felt an explosion in her head. She collapsed to the pavement like a rag doll. The last thing she saw when she looked up was Elmo laughing down at her from the bottom of Felix's shoe.

CHAPTER SIX

Sara woke with a start. She had a moment of disorientation before she realized that she was in the ICU, sitting in a chair beside Anna's bed. There were no windows in the room. The plastic curtain that acted as a door blocked out all the light from the hallway. Sara leaned forward, looking at her watch in the glow of monitors, and saw that it was eight in the morning. She had worked a double shift yesterday so that she could take off today and catch up on her life: the refrigerator was empty, bills needed to be paid and the dirty laundry was piled so high on the floor of her closet that she could no longer close the door.

And yet, here she was.

Sara sat up in her chair, wincing as her spine adjusted to a position that did not resemble a C. She pressed her fingers to Anna's wrist, though the rhythmic beat of her heart, along with every in and out of breath, was announced by the machines. Sara had no idea if Anna could feel her touch or even knew that Sara was there, but it made her feel better to have the contact.

Maybe it was for the best that Anna was not awake. Her body was fighting against a raging infection that had sent her white blood cell count into the danger zone. Her arm was in an open splint, her right breast removed. Her leg was in traction, metal pins holding together what the car had ripped apart. A plaster cast kept her hips in a fixed position so that the bones would stay aligned as they healed. The pain would be unimaginable, though considering what torture the poor woman had been through, it might not even matter anymore.

What Sara could not get past was the fact that, even in her current state, Anna was an attractive woman—probably one of the qualities that had first caught her abductor's eye. She wasn't movie-star beautiful, but there was something striking about her features that must have garnered a fair share of attention. Probably Sara had watched too many sensational cases on the news, but it didn't make sense that someone as noticeable as Anna would go missing without another person in the world noticing. Whether it was Laci Peterson or Natalee Holloway, the world seemed to pay more attention when a beautiful woman disappeared.

Sara didn't know why she was thinking about such things. Figuring out what happened was Faith Mitchell's job. Sara wasn't involved in the case, and there really had been no reason for her to stay at the hospital last night. Anna was in good hands. The nurses and doctors were down the hallway. Two cops stood guard by the door. Sara should have gone home and climbed into bed, listening to the soft rain, waiting for sleep to come. The problem was that sleep seldom came peacefully, or—worse still—sometimes it came too deeply, and Sara would find herself caught up in a dream, living back in the before time when Jeffrey was alive and her life was everything she had wanted it to be.

Three and a half years had passed since her husband was killed, and Sara could not recall a minute since that some thought of him, some piece of him, did

not linger in her mind. In the days after he was gone, Sara had been terrified she would forget something important about Jeffrey. She had made endless lists of everything she had loved about him—the way he smelled when he got out of the shower. The way he liked to sit behind her and brush her hair. The way he tasted when she kissed him. He always carried a handkerchief in his back pocket. He used oatmeal-scented lotion to keep his hands soft. He was a good dancer. He was a good cop. He took care of his mother. He loved Sara.

He *had* loved Sara.

The lists became exhaustive, and turned at times into endless itemizations: songs she could no longer listen to, movies she could no longer see, places she could no longer go. There was page after page of books they had read and holidays they had taken and long weekends spent in bed and fifteen years of a life she knew she would never get back.

Sara had no idea what happened to the lists. Maybe her mother had put them in a box and taken them to her father's storage unit, or maybe Sara had never really made them at all. Maybe in those days after Jeffrey's death, when she had been so distraught that she had welcomed sedation, Sara had simply dreamed up the lists, dreamed up sitting in her dark kitchen for hours on end, recording for posterity all of the wonderful things about her beloved husband.

Xanax, Valium, Ambien, Zoloft. She had nearly poisoned herself trying to make it through each day. Sometimes she would lie in bed, half conscious, and conjure Jeffrey's hands, his mouth, on her body. She would dream of the last time they were together, the way he had stared into her eyes, so sure of himself as he slowly brought her to the edge. Sara would wake to find herself writhing, fighting against the urge to rouse in hopes of a few more moments in that other time.

She wasted hours dwelling on memories of sex with him, recalling every sensation, every inch of his body, in lurid detail. For weeks, she could think only about the first time they made love—not the first time they'd had sex, which was a frenzied, wanton act of passion that had caused Sara to sneak out of her own house in shame the next morning—but the first time they had really held each other, had caressed and touched and cherished each other's bodies the way that lovers do.

He was gentle. He was tender. He always listened to her. He opened the door for her. He trusted her judgment. He built his life around her. He was always there when she needed him.

He used to be there.

After a few months, she remembered stupid things: a fight they had had over which way the toilet paper roll should go on the holder. A disagreement about the time they were supposed to meet at a restaurant. Their second anniversary, when he'd thought driving to Auburn to see a football game was a romantic weekend. A beach trip where she had gotten jealous over the attention a woman at the bar was giving him.

He knew how to fix the radio in the bathroom. He loved reading to her on long trips. He put up with her cat, who urinated in his shoe the first night he officially moved into her house. He was getting laugh lines around his eyes, and she used to kiss them and think about how wonderful it was to be growing older with this man.

And now, when she looked in the mirror and saw a new line on her own face, a new wrinkle, all she could think was that she was growing old without him.

Sara still wasn't sure how long she had grieved—or if, in fact, she had ever stopped at all. Her mother had always been the strong one, never stronger than when her daughters needed her. Tessa, Sara's sister, had sat with her for days, sometimes holding her, rocking Sara back and forth as if she were a child who needed soothing. Her father fixed things around the house. He took out the trash and walked the dogs and went to the post office to get her mail. Once, she found him sobbing in the kitchen, whispering, "My child ... My own child ..." Not for Sara, but for Jeffrey, because he had been the son that her father never had.

"She's just come undone," her mother had whispered on the phone to her aunt Bella. It was an old colloquialism, the sort of thing you didn't think people still said. The phrase fit Sara so completely that she had found herself surrendering to it, imagining her arms, her legs, detaching from her body. What did it matter? What did she need arms or legs or hands or feet for if she could not run to him, if she could not hold him and touch him anymore? Sara had never thought of herself as the type of woman who needed a man to complete her life, but somehow, Jeffrey had come to define her, so that without him, she felt untethered.

Who was she without him, then? Who was this woman who did not want to live without her husband, who just gave up? Maybe that was the real genesis of the grief she felt—not just that she had lost Jeffrey, but that she had lost herself.

Every day, Sara told herself she would stop taking the pills, stop trying to sleep away every painful minute that passed so slowly she was sure weeks had gone by when it was only hours. When she managed to stop taking the pills, she stopped eating. This wasn't a choice. Food tasted rotten in her mouth. Bile would rise in her throat no matter what her mother brought her. Sara stopped leaving the house, stopped taking care of herself. She wanted to stop existing, but she didn't know how to make it happen without compromising everything that she had once believed in.

Finally, her mother had come to her and begged, "Make up your mind. Either live or die, but don't force us to watch you waste away like this."

With a cold eye, Sara had considered her alternatives. Pills. Rope. A gun. A knife. None of them would bring back Jeffrey, and none of them would change what had happened.

More time passed, the clock ticking forward when she longed for it to go back. Sara was coming up on the one-year anniversary when she had realized that if she were gone, then her memories of Jeffrey would be gone, too. They had no children together. They had no lasting monument to their married life. There was just Sara, and the memories that were locked in Sara's mind.

And so she had had no choice but to pull herself back together, to turn back the process of coming undone. Slowly, a lesser shadow of Sara started to go through the motions. She was getting up in the morning, going for a run, working part-time, trying to live the life she had had before, but without Jeffrey. She had valiantly tried to trudge through this semblance of her earlier life, but she simply couldn't do it. She couldn't be in the house where they had loved each other, the town where they had lived together. She couldn't even attend a typical Sunday dinner at her parents' because there would always be that empty

chair beside her, that vacancy that would never be filled.

The job notice at Grady Hospital had been emailed to her by a fellow Emory grad who had no idea what had happened to Sara. He had sent it as a joke, as if to say, "Who would go back to this hellhole?" but Sara had called the hospital administrator the next day. She had interned at Grady in the ER. She knew the great, creaking beast that was the public health system. She knew that working in an emergency room took over your life, your soul. She had rented out her house, sold her pediatric practice, given away most of her furniture, and moved to Atlanta a month later.

And here she was. Two more years had passed and Sara was still stagnating. She didn't have many friends outside of work, but then she'd never been a social person. Her life had always revolved around her family. Her sister Tessa had always been her best friend, her mother her closest confidante. Jeffrey was the chief of police for Grant County. Sara was the coroner. They had worked together more often than not, and she wondered now if their relationship would have been as close if they had each gone their separate ways every day and only glimpsed one another over the dinner table.

Love, like water, always flowed down the path of least resistance.

Sara had grown up in a small town. The last time she had seriously dated, girls were not allowed to call boys on the telephone and boys were required to ask the girl's father for permission to date his daughter. Those practices were quaint now, almost laughable, but Sara found herself wishing for them. She didn't understand the nuances of adult dating, but she had forced herself to try, to see if that part of her had died with Jeffrey, too.

There had been two men since she moved to Atlanta, both fixed up through nurses at the hospital and both exhaustingly unremarkable. The first man had been handsome and smart and successful, but there was nothing else behind his perfect smile and good manners, and he hadn't called back after Sara had burst into tears the first time they'd kissed. The second man had been three months ago. The experience was a little better, or maybe she was fooling herself. She had slept with him once, but only after four glasses of wine. Sara had gritted her teeth the entire time as if the act was a test she was determined to pass. The man had broken it off with her the next day, which Sara had not realized until she checked her voicemail at home a week later.

If she had only one regret about her life with Jeffrey, it would be this one: Why hadn't she kissed him more? Like most married couples, they had developed a secret language of intimacy. A long kiss usually signaled the desire for sex, not simple affection. There were the odd pecks on the cheek and the quick smacks before they went to work, but nothing like when they had first started seeing each other—when passionate kisses were titillating and exotic gifts that didn't always lead to ripping off each other's clothes.

Sara wanted to be back at that beginning, to enjoy those long hours on the couch with Jeffrey's head in her lap, kissing him deeply, her fingers running through his soft hair. She longed for those stolen moments in parked cars and in hallways and movie theaters when Sara thought she would stop breathing if she didn't feel his mouth pressed to hers. She wanted that surprise of seeing him at work, that thump in her heart when she caught sight of him walking down the street. She wanted that thrill in her stomach when the phone rang and she heard

his voice on the line. She wanted that rush of blood to her center when she was driving alone in her car or walking down the aisle at the drugstore and smelled him on her skin.

She wanted her lover.

The vinyl curtain slid back, squeaking on the rail. Jill Marino, one of the ICU nurses, flashed Sara a smile as she put Anna's chart on the bed.

"Have a good night?" Jill asked. She bustled around the room, checking the leads, making sure the IV was running. "Blood gases came back."

Sara opened the chart and checked the numbers. Last night, the pulse oximeter on Anna's finger kept detecting low oxygen levels in her blood. They seemed to have leveled out on their own this morning. Sara was constantly humbled by the human body's ability to heal itself. "Makes you feel superfluous, doesn't it?"

"Maybe doctors," Jill teased. "Nurses?"

"Good point." Sara stuck her hand into her lab coat pocket, feeling the letter inside. She had changed into fresh scrubs after working on Anna last night, automatically moving the letter to the pocket of the clean coat. Maybe she should open it. Maybe she should sit down and rip it open and get it over with once and for all.

Jill asked, "Something wrong?"

Sara shook her head. "No. Thanks for putting up with me last night."

"You made my job a little easier," the nurse admitted. The ICU was, as usual, packed to the rafters. "I'll call you if anything changes." Jill put her hand to Anna's cheek, smiling down at the woman. "Maybe our girl will wake up today."

"I'm sure she will." Sara didn't think Anna could hear her, but it made her feel good to hear the words said.

The two cops stationed outside the room tipped their hats to Sara as she left the room. She could feel their eyes follow her as she walked down the hall—not because they thought she was attractive, but because they knew she was a cop's widow. Sara had never discussed Jeffrey with anyone at Grady, but there were enough cops in and out of the ER every day that the news had spread. It quickly became one of those known secrets that everyone talked about, just not in front of Sara. She hadn't intended to become a tragic figure, but it kept people from asking questions, so she did not complain.

The great mystery was why she had so easily talked about Jeffrey with Faith Mitchell. Sara liked to think that Faith was just a really good detective rather than admit what was probably closer to the truth, which was that Sara was lonely. Her sister was living halfway around the world, her parents were four hours and a lifetime away, and Sara's days were filled with little more than work and whatever was on television when she got home.

What's worse, she had a nagging suspicion that it wasn't Faith she'd found enticing, but the case. Jeffrey had always used Sara as a sounding board during his investigations, and she missed having that part of her brain engaged.

Last night, for the first time in forever, the last thing on Sara's mind before she fell asleep had not been Jeffrey, but Anna. Who had abducted her? Why had she been chosen? What clues had been left on her body that might explain the motivations of the animal who'd hurt her? Talking to Faith in the cafeteria last night, Sara had finally felt like her brain was doing something more useful than

just keeping her alive. And it was probably the last time she would feel that way again for a very long while.

Sara rubbed her eyes, trying to wake herself up. She had known that life without Jeffrey would be painful. What she wasn't prepared for was that it would be so damn irrelevant.

She was almost to the elevators when her cell phone rang. She turned on her heel, walking back toward Anna's room as she opened the phone. "I'm on my way."

Mary Schroder said, "Sonny's about ten minutes out."

Sara stopped, her heart dropping in her chest at the nurse's words. Sonny was Mary's husband, a patrolman who worked the early shift. "Is he all right?"

"Sonny?" she asked. "Of course he is. Where are you?"

"I'm upstairs in the ICU." Sara changed course, heading back toward the elevator. "What's going on?"

"Sonny got a call about a little boy abandoned at the City Foods on Ponce de Leon. Six years old. Poor thing was left in the back of the car for at least three hours."

Sara punched the button for the elevator. "Where's the mother?"

"Missing. Her purse is on the front seat, the keys are in the ignition and there's blood on the ground beside the car."

Sara felt her heart speed back up. "Did the boy see anything?"

"He's too upset to talk, and Sonny's useless. He doesn't know how to deal with kids that age. Are you on your way down?"

"I'm waiting for the elevator." Sara double-checked the time. "Is Sonny sure about the three hours?"

"The store manager noticed the car when he came into work. He said the mother was there earlier, freaking out because she couldn't find her kid."

Sara jammed the button again, knowing full well the gesture was useless. "Why did he take three hours to call it in?"

"Because people are assholes," Mary answered. "People are just plain, goddamn assholes."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Faith's red Mini was parked in her driveway when she woke up that morning. Amanda must have followed Will here, then taken him home. He had probably thought he was doing Faith a favor, but Faith still wanted to rake him over the coals. When Will had called this morning to tell her that he would pick her up at their usual eight-thirty, she had snapped a "Fine" that seemed to float over his head.

Her anger had evened out somewhat when Will had told her what had happened last night—his idiotic foray into the cave, finding the second victim, dealing with Amanda. The last part sounded particularly challenging: Amanda never made things easy. Will had sounded exhausted, and Faith's heart went out to him as he described the woman hanging in the tree, but as soon as she got off the phone, she was furious with him all over again.

What was he doing going down into that cave alone with no one but that idiot Fierro topside? Why the hell hadn't he called Faith to come help search for the second victim? Why in God's name did he think he was doing her a favor by actively preventing her from doing her job? Did he think she wasn't capable, wasn't good enough? Faith wasn't some useless mascot. Her mother had been a cop. Faith had worked her way up from patrol to homicide detective faster than anyone else on the squad. She hadn't been picking daisies when Will stumbled across her. She wasn't damn Watson to his Sherlock Holmes.

Faith had forced herself to take a deep breath. She was just sane enough to realize that her level of fury might be out of proportion. It wasn't until she sat down at the kitchen table and measured her blood sugar that she realized why. She was hovering around one-fifty again, which, according to *Your Life with Diabetes*, could make a person nervous and irritable. It didn't help her nervousness and irritability one whit when she tried to inject herself with the insulin pen.

Her hands were steady as she turned the dial for what she hoped were the correct units, but her leg started shaking as she tried to stick herself with the needle, so that she looked like a dog who was enjoying a particularly good scratch. There had to be some part of her unconscious brain that kept her hand hovering frozen over her shaking thigh, unable to willfully inflict pain on herself. It was probably somewhere near that damaged region that made it impossible for Faith to enter into a long-term relationship with a man.

"Screw it," she had said, almost like a sneeze, jamming the pen down, pressing the button. The needle burned like hellfire, even though the literature on the device claimed it was virtually pain-free. Maybe after sticking yourself six zillion times a week, a needle jamming into your leg or your abdomen felt relatively painless, but Faith wasn't to that point yet and she couldn't imagine herself ever being there. She was sweating so badly by the time she pulled out the needle that her underarms were sticky.

She spent the next hour dividing her time between the phone and the Internet, reaching out to various governmental organizations to get the investigation moving while scaring the ever-loving shit out of herself by investiGoogling type 2 diabetes on her laptop computer. The first ten minutes were spent on hold with the Atlanta Police Department while she looked for an alternate diagnosis in case Sara Linton was wrong. That proved to be a pipe dream, and by the time Faith was on hold with the GBI's Atlanta lab, she had stumbled upon her first diabetic blog. She found another, then another—thousands of people letting loose about the travails of living with a chronic disease.

Faith read about pumps and monitors and diabetic retinopathy and poor circulation and loss of libido and all the other wonderful things diabetes could bring into your life. There were miracle cures and device reviews and one nut who claimed that diabetes was a government plot to extract billions of dollars from the unsuspecting public in order to wage the war for oil.

As Faith waded through the conspiracy pages, she was ready to believe anything that might get her out of having to live the rest of her life under constant measurement. A lifetime of following every fad diet *Cosmo* could spit out had taught her to count carbs and calories, but the thought of turning into a human pincushion was almost too much to bear. Thoroughly depressed—and on hold with Equifax—she had quickly clicked back to the pharmaceutical pages with their images of smiling, healthy diabetics riding bicycles and doing yoga and playing with puppies, kittens, small children, kites, sometimes a combination of all four. Surely, the woman swinging around the adorable toddler wasn't suffering from vaginal dryness.

Surely, after spending all morning on the telephone, Faith could have called the doctor's office and scheduled an appointment for later this afternoon. She had the number Sara had scribbled down at her elbow—of course she'd done a search on Delia Wallace, checking to see if she'd been sued for malpractice or had a history of drunk driving. Faith knew every detail of the doctor's education as well as her driving record, but still could not make the call.

Faith knew she was looking at desk time because of the pregnancy. Amanda had dated Faith's uncle Ted until the relationship had petered out around the time Faith had entered junior high. Boss Amanda was very different from Aunt Amanda. She was going to make Faith's life miserable in the way that only a woman can make another woman miserable for doing the things that most women do. That sort of living hell Faith was prepared for, but would Faith be allowed to return to her job even though she had diabetes?

Could she go out in the field, carry a gun and round up the bad guys if her blood sugar was out of whack? Exercise could lead to a precipitous drop. What if she was chasing a suspect and fainted? Emotional moments could stress her blood sugar as well. What if she was interviewing a witness and didn't realize she was acting crazy until internal affairs was called in? And what about Will? Could she be trusted to have his back? For all her complaints about her partner, Faith had a deep devotion to the man. She was at times his navigator, his buffer against the world and his big sister. How could she protect Will if she couldn't protect herself?

Maybe she wouldn't even have a choice in the matter.

Faith stared at her computer screen, contemplating doing another search to

see what the standard policy was for diabetics in law enforcement. Were they shoved behind desks until they atrophied or quit? Were they fired? Her hands went to the laptop, her fingers resting on the keyboard. As with the insulin pen, her brain froze her muscles, not letting her press the keys. She tapped her finger lightly on the *H* in a nervous tick, feeling the flop sweat come back. When the phone rang, she nearly jumped out of her skin.

“Good morning,” Will said. “I’m outside when you’re ready.”

Faith shut down the laptop. She gathered up the notes she had taken from her phone calls, loaded her diabetes paraphernalia into her purse and walked out the front door without a look back.

Will was in an unmarked black Dodge Charger, what they called a G-ride, slang for government-issued car. This particular beauty had a key scratch cutting along the panel over the back tire and a large antenna mounted on a spring so the scanner could pick up all signals within a hundred-mile area. A blind three-year-old would’ve been able to tell it was a cop car.

She opened the door and Will said, “I’ve got Jacquelyn Zabel’s Atlanta address.”

He meant the second victim, the woman who had been hanging upside down in the tree.

Faith got in the car and buckled her seatbelt. “How?”

“The Walton Beach sheriff called me back this morning. They checked with her neighbors down there. Apparently, her mother just went into a retirement home and Jacquelyn was up here packing up the house to sell it.”

“Where’s the house?”

“Inman Park. Charlie’s going to meet us there. I’ve reached out to the Atlanta police for some feet on the ground. They say they can give me two patrols for a couple of hours.” He reversed the car down the driveway, glancing at Faith. “You look better. Did you get some sleep?”

Faith didn’t answer his question. She pulled out her notebook, going through the list of things she had accomplished on the phone this morning. “I had the splinters of wood that were taken from underneath Anna’s fingernails transferred to our lab. I sent a tech to fingerprint her at the hospital first thing. I put out a statewide APB for any missing women matching Anna’s age and description—they’re going to try to send over a sketch artist for a drawing. Her face is pretty bruised. I’m not sure anyone would recognize her from a photograph.”

She flipped to the next page, skimming her notes. “I checked the NCIC and VICAP for comparable cases—the FBI isn’t tracking anything similar, but I put our details into the database just in case something hits.” She went to the next page. “I put an alert on Jacquelyn Zabel’s credit cards so we’ll know if someone tries to use them. I called the morgue; the autopsy is scheduled to start around eleven. I put in a call to the Coldfields—the man and wife in the Buick that hit Anna. They said we could come by and talk to them at the shelter where Judith volunteers, even though they’ve already told that nice Detective Galloway everything they know, and speaking of that prick, I woke up Jeremy at school this morning and made him leave a message on Galloway’s voicemail saying he was from the IRS and needed to talk to him about some irregularities.”

Will chuckled at this last bit.

"We're waiting on Rockdale County to fax over the crime-scene reports and whatever witness statements they have. Other than that, that's all I've got." Faith closed her notebook. "So, what did you do this morning?"

He nodded toward the cup holder. "I got you some hot chocolate."

Faith stared longingly at the takeout cup, dying to lick off the foamy puddle of whipped cream that had squirted through the slit in the lid. She had lied to Sara Linton about her usual diet. The last time Faith had jogged anywhere, she had been rushing from her car to the front door of Zesto's, hoping to get a milk shake before they closed. Breakfast was usually a Pop-Tart and a Diet Coke, but this morning, she had eaten a boiled egg and a piece of dry toast, the kind of thing they served at the county jail. The sugar in the hot chocolate would probably kill her, though, and she said, "No, thanks," before she could change her mind.

"You know," he began, "if you're trying to lose weight, I could—"

"Will," she interrupted. "I've been on a diet for the last eighteen years of my life. If I want to let myself go, I'm going to let myself go."

"I didn't say—"

"Besides, I've only gained five pounds," she lied. "It's not like I need a Goodyear sign strapped to my ass."

Will glanced at the purse in her lap, his mouth drawn. Finally, he said, "I'm sorry."

"Thank you."

"If you're not going to ..." He let his words trail off, taking the cup out of the holder. Faith turned on the radio so she wouldn't have to listen to him swallow. The volume was low, and she heard the dull murmur of news coming from the speakers. She pressed the buttons until she found something soft and innocuous that wouldn't get on her nerves.

She felt the seatbelt tense as Will slowed for a pedestrian darting across the road. Faith had no excuse for snapping at him, and he wasn't a stupid man—he obviously knew that something was wrong but, as usual, didn't want to push. She felt a pang of guilt for keeping secrets, but then again, Will wasn't exactly known for sharing. It had only been by accident that she'd stumbled onto the realization that he was dyslexic. At least, she thought it was dyslexia. There was certainly some reading issue there, but God knew what it was. Faith had figured out from watching him that Will could make out some words on his own, but it took forever, and he was wrong more often than not about the content. When she'd tried to ask him about the diagnosis, Will had shut her down so tersely that Faith had felt her face flush in embarrassment for asking the question in the first place.

She hated to admit that he was right to hide the problem. Faith had worked on the force long enough to know that most police officers were barely out of the primordial ooze. They tended to be a conservative lot, and they didn't exactly embrace the unusual. Maybe dealing with the most freakish elements society had to offer made them reject any semblance of abnormality in their own ranks. Whatever the reason, Faith knew that if word of Will's dyslexia got out, there wasn't a cop around who would let it pass. He already had trouble fitting in. This would make him a permanent outsider.

Will took a right on Moreland Avenue, and she wondered how he knew which

way to go. Directions were an issue for him, left and right an insurmountable problem. Despite this, he was incredibly adept at hiding his disability. For those times when his shockingly good memory wouldn't suffice, he had a digital recorder that he kept in his pocket the way that most cops kept a notebook. Sometimes he slipped up and made a mistake, but most of the time, Faith found herself in awe of his accomplishments. He had gotten through school and then college with no one recognizing there was a problem. Growing up in an orphanage hadn't exactly given him a good start in life. His success was a lot to be proud of, which made the fact that he had to hide his disability even more heartbreaking.

They were in the middle of Little Five Points, an eclectic part of the city that blended seedy bars and fashionably overpriced boutiques, when Will finally spoke. "You okay?"

"I was just thinking," Faith began, though she didn't share her actual thoughts. "What do we know about the victims?"

"Both of them have dark hair. Both are fit, attractive. We think the woman at the hospital's name is Anna. The license says the one hanging in the tree is Jacquelyn Zabel."

"What about fingerprints?"

"There was a latent on the pocketknife that belongs to Zabel. The print on her license came back unknown—it doesn't match Zabel and there's no match on the computer."

"We should compare it to Anna's fingerprints and see if she's the one who made it. If Anna touched the license, then that puts both Anna and Jacquelyn Zabel in the cave together."

"Good idea."

Faith felt like she was pulling teeth, though she couldn't blame Will for being gun-shy, considering how mercurial her mood was lately. "Have you found out anything else about Zabel?"

He shrugged, as if there wasn't much, but reeled off, "Jacquelyn Zabel is thirty-eight, unmarried, no children. The Florida Law Enforcement Bureau is giving us an assist—they're going to go through her place, do a phone dump, try to find next of kin other than the mother who was living in Atlanta. The sheriff says no one in town knows Zabel that well. She has one sort-of friend next door who's been watering her plants but doesn't know anything about her. There's been an ongoing feud with some of the other neighbors about people leaving out their trashcans on the street. The sheriff said Zabel's made a few nuisance complaints in the past six months over loud noises from pool parties and cars being parked in front of her house."

Faith bit back the urge to ask him why he hadn't told her all this in the first place. "Has the sheriff ever met Zabel?"

"He said he took a couple of the nuisance calls himself and didn't find her to be a very pleasant person."

"You mean, he said she was a bitch," Faith clarified. For a cop, Will had a surprisingly clean vocabulary. "What did she do for a living?"

"Real estate. The market's been off, but she looks pretty set—house on the beach, BMW, a boat at the marina."

"Wasn't the battery you found in the cave for marine use?"

"I had the sheriff check her boat. The battery's still there."

"It was worth a shot," Faith mumbled, thinking they were still grasping at straws.

"Charlie says the battery we found in the cave is at least ten years old. All the numbers are worn off. He's going to see if he can get some more information on it, but chances are it's a wash. You can pick up those things at yard sales." Will shrugged, adding, "The only thing it tells us is that the guy knew what he was going to do with it."

"Why is that?"

"A car battery is designed to deliver a short, large current like you need to crank your car. Once the car starts, the alternator takes over, and the battery isn't needed again until the next time you need to start the engine. A marine battery like from the cave is what's called a deep-cycle battery, meaning it gives a steady current over a long period of time. You'd ruin a car battery pretty quickly if you tried to use it the way our guy was. The marine battery would last for hours."

Faith let his words hang in the air, her brain trying to make sense of them. There was no way to make sense of it, though: What had been done to those women was not the product of a sound mind.

She asked, "Where's Jacquelyn Zabel's BMW?"

"Not in her driveway in Florida. And not at her mother's house."

"Did you put out an APB on the car?"

"In both Florida and Georgia." He reached around to the back seat and pulled out a handful of folders. They were all color-coded, and he thumbed through until he found the orange one, which he handed to Faith. She opened it to find a printout from the Florida Department of Motor Vehicles. Jacquelyn Alexandra Zabel's driver's license stared back at her, the picture showing a very attractive woman with long dark hair and brown eyes. "She's pretty," Faith said.

"So's Anna," Will provided. "Brown hair, brown eyes."

"Our guy has a type." Faith turned to the next page and read aloud from the woman's driving record, "Zabel's car is a 2008 red BMW 540i. Speeding ticket six months ago for going eighty in a fifty-five. Running a stop sign in a school zone last month. Failure to stop at a roadblock two weeks ago, refused to take a Breathalyzer, court date pending." She thumbed through the pages. "Her record was pretty clean until recently."

Will absently scratched his forearm as he waited for another light to change. "Maybe something happened."

"What about the notes Charlie found in the cave?"

"I will not deny myself," he recalled, taking out the blue folder. "The pages are being fingerprinted." They're from a standard spiral notebook, written in pencil, probably by a woman."

Faith looked at the copy, the same sentence written over and over again like she'd done many times herself as punishment back in junior high school. "And the rib?"

He was still scratching his arm. "No sign of the rib in the cave or the immediate area."

"A souvenir?"

"Maybe," he said. "Jacquelyn didn't have any cuts on her body." He corrected,

"I mean, any deep cuts like what Anna had where the rib was removed. Both of them looked like they'd been through the same kind of stuff, though."

"Torture." Faith tried to put herself in the mind of their perpetrator. "He keeps one woman on the top of the bed and one woman underneath. Maybe he trades them out—does one horrible thing to Anna, then swaps her out for Jacquelyn and does the horrible thing to her."

"Then trades them back," Will said. "So, maybe Jacquelyn heard what happened to Anna with the rib, knew what was coming and chewed her way through the rope around her wrist."

"She must have found the penknife, or had it with her under the bed."

"Charlie examined the slats under the bed. He put them back together in sequence. The tip of a very sharp knife ran in the center of each slat where someone cut the rope from underneath the bed, head to foot."

Faith suppressed a shudder as she stated the obvious. "Jacquelyn was under the bed while Anna was being mutilated."

"And she was probably alive while we were searching the woods."

Faith opened her mouth to say something along the lines of "It's not your fault," but she knew the words were useless. She felt guilt herself for not being out there during the search. She could not imagine how Will was feeling, considering he'd been blundering around in the woods while the woman was dying.

Instead, she asked, "What's wrong with your arm?"

"What do you mean?"

"You keep scratching it."

He stopped the car and squinted up at the street signs.

"Hamilton," Faith read.

He checked his watch, a ploy he used for telling left from right. "Both victims were probably well-off," he said, taking a right onto Hamilton. "Anna was malnourished, but her hair was nice—the color, I mean—and she'd had a manicure recently. The polish on her nails was chipped, but it looked professionally done."

Faith didn't press him on how he knew a professional manicure from an amateur one. "These women weren't prostitutes. They had homes and probably jobs. It's unusual for a killer to choose victims who will be missed."

"Motive, means, opportunity," he listed, stating the foundation for any investigation. "Motive is sex and torture and maybe taking the rib."

"Means," Faith said, trying to think of ways the killer might have abducted his victims. "Maybe he rigs their cars to break down? He could be a mechanic."

"BMWs are equipped with driver assist. You just press a button and they're on the phone with you and they send out a tow truck."

"Nice," Faith said. The Mini was a poor man's BMW, which meant you had to use your own phone if you got stuck. "Jacquelyn's moving her mother's house. That means she probably contracted with a moving company or liquidation agent."

"She'd need a termite letter to sell the house," Will added. You couldn't get a mortgage on a house in most of the South without first proving that termites weren't feasting on the foundation. "So, our bad guy could be an exterminator, a contractor, a mover ..."

Faith got out a pen and started a list on the back of the orange folder. "Her real estate license wouldn't transfer up here, so she'd have to have an Atlanta agent to sell the house."

"Unless she did a for-sale-by-owner, in which case she could have had open houses, could've had strangers in and out all the time."

"Why didn't anyone notice she was missing?" Faith asked. "Sara said Anna was taken at least four days ago."

"Who's Sara?"

"Sara Linton," Faith said. He shrugged, and she studied him carefully. Will never forgot names. He never forgot anything. "The doctor from yesterday?"

"Is that her name?"

Faith resisted a "Come on."

He asked, "How would she know how long Anna was kept?"

"She used to be a coroner in some county way down south."

Will's eyebrows went up. He slowed to look at another sign. "A coroner? That's weird."

He was one to talk. "She was a coroner *and* a pediatrician."

Will mumbled as he tried to make out the sign. "I took her for a dancer."

"Woodland," Faith read. "A dancer? She's twenty feet tall."

"Dancers can be tall."

Faith clenched her teeth together so that she would not laugh out loud.

"Anyway." He didn't add anything else, using the word to indicate an end to that part of the conversation.

She studied his profile as he turned the wheel, the way he stared so intently at the road ahead. Will was an attractive man, arguably handsome, but he was about as self-aware as a snail. His wife, Angie Polaski, seemed to see beyond his quirks—among them his painful inability to conduct small talk and the anachronistic three-piece suits he insisted on wearing. In return, Will seemed to overlook the fact that Angie had slept with half the Atlanta police force, including—if graffiti in the ladies' toilet on the third floor was to be believed—a couple of women. They had met each other at the Atlanta Children's Home, and Faith supposed this was the connection that bound them together. They were both orphans, both abandoned by, presumably, crappy parents. As with everything in his personal life, Will did not share the details. Faith hadn't even known that he and Angie were officially married until Will showed up one morning wearing a wedding band.

And she had never known Will to even give a passing glance to another woman until now.

"This is it," he said, taking a right down a narrow, tree-lined street. She saw the white crime-scene van parked in front of a very small house. Charlie Reed and two of his assistants were already going through the trash on the side of the road. Whoever had taken out the trash was the neatest person in the world. There were boxes stacked up on the curb, three rows of two, each labeled with the contents. Beside these were a bunch of large black garbage bags lined up like a row of sentries. On the other side of the mailbox were a precisely aligned mattress and box spring, and a couple of pieces of furniture that the local trash trollers hadn't spotted yet. Behind Charlie's van were two empty Atlanta police cruisers, and Faith assumed the patrolmen Will had requested were already

canvassing the neighborhood.

Faith said, "Her husband was a cop. Sounds like he was killed in the line of duty. I hope they fried the bastard."

"Whose husband?"

He knew damn well who she was talking about. "Sara Linton's. The dancing doctor."

Will put the car in park and cut the engine. "I asked Charlie to hold off on processing the house." He took two pairs of latex gloves out of his jacket pocket and handed one to Faith. "My guess is that it's packed up for the move, but you never know."

Faith got out of the car. Charlie would have to close off the house as a crime scene as soon as he started collecting evidence. Letting Will and Faith check it out first meant that they wouldn't have to wait for everything to be processed before they started following up on clues.

"Hey there," Charlie called, tossing them an almost cheery wave. "Got here just in time." He indicated the bags. "Goodwill was about to cart it off when we pulled up."

"What've you got?"

He showed them the tags on the bags where the contents had been neatly labeled. "Clothes, mostly. Kitchen items, old blenders, that sort of thing." He flashed a smile. "Beats the hell out of that hole in the ground."

Will asked, "When do you think we'll have the analysis back from the cave?"

"Amanda put a rush on it. There was a lot of shit down there, literally and figuratively. We prioritized the pieces we thought might be more important. You know that DNA from the fluids will take forty-eight hours. Fingerprints are run through the computer as they're developed. If there's something earth-shattering down there, we'll know by tomorrow morning at the latest." He mimed holding a telephone receiver to his ear. "You'll be the first call."

Will indicated the garbage bags. "Find anything useful?"

Charlie handed him a packet of mail. Will snapped off the rubber band and looked at each envelope before handing it to Faith. "Postmark's recent," he noticed. He could easily read numbers, if not words, which was one of the many useful tools he used to conceal his problem. He was also good at recognizing company logos. "Gas bill, electric, cable ..."

Faith read the name of the addressee: "Gwendolyn Zabel. That's a lovely old name."

"Like Faith," Charlie said, and she was a little surprised to hear him utter something so personal. He hastily covered for it, saying, "And she lived in a lovely old house."

Faith wouldn't have called the small bungalow lovely, but it was certainly quaint with its gray shingles and red trim. Nothing had been done to update the place, or even simply keep it up. The gutters sagged from years of leaves and the roofline resembled a camel's back. The grass was neatly trimmed, but there were no flower beds or carefully sculpted shrubs typical to Atlanta homes. All the other houses on the street but one had a second story added on or had simply been torn down to make way for a mansion. Gwendolyn Zabel must have been one of the last holdouts, the only two-bedroom, one-bath in the area. Faith wondered if the neighbors were glad to see the old woman go. Her daughter

must have been happy to have the check from the sale. A house like this had probably cost around thirty thousand dollars when it was first built. Now the land alone would be worth around half a million.

Will asked Charlie, "Did you get the door unlocked?"

"It was unlocked when I got here," he told them. "Me and the guys took a look around. Nothing jumped out, but you've got first dibs." He indicated the trash pile in front of him. "This is just the tip of the iceberg. The place is a freakin' mess."

Will and Faith exchanged a look as they walked toward the house. Inman Park was far from Mayberry. You didn't leave your door unlocked unless you were hoping for an insurance claim.

Faith pushed open the front door, walking back into the 1970s as she crossed the threshold. The green shag carpet on the floor was deep enough to cup her tennis shoes, and the mirrored wallpaper was kind enough to remind her that she'd put on fifteen pounds in the last month.

"Wow," Will said, glancing around the front room. It was packed with untold amounts of crap: stacks of newspapers, paperback books, magazines.

"This can't be safe to live in."

"Imagine how it looked with all the stuff on the street back inside." Faith picked up a rusted hand blender sitting on the top of a stack of *Life* magazines. "Sometimes old people start collecting things and they can't stop."

"This is crazy," he said, wiping his hand along a stack of old forty-fives. Dust flew into the stale air.

"My grandmother's house was worse than this," Faith told him. "It took us a whole week just to be able to walk through to the kitchen."

"Why would someone do this?"

"I don't know," she admitted. Her grandfather had died when Faith was a child, and her granny Mitchell had lived on her own for most of her life. She had started collecting things in her fifties, and by the time she was moved into a nursing home, the house had been filled to the rafters with useless things. Looking around another lonely old woman's house, seeing a similar accumulation, made Faith wonder if someday Jeremy would be saying the same thing about Faith's housekeeping.

At least he would have a little brother or sister to help him. Faith put her hand to her stomach, wondering for the first time about the child growing inside of her. Was it a girl or a boy? Would it have her blonde hair or its father's dark Latino looks? Jeremy looked nothing like his father, thank God. Faith's first love had been a gangly hillbilly with a build that was reminiscent of Spike from the Peanuts cartoon. As a baby, Jeremy had been almost delicate, like a thin piece of porcelain. He'd had the sweetest little feet. Those first few days, Faith had spent hours staring at his tiny toes, kissing the bottoms of his heels. She had thought that he was the most remarkable thing on the face of the earth. He had been her little doll.

"Faith?"

She dropped her hand, wondering what had come over her. She'd taken enough insulin this morning. Maybe she was just feeling the typical hormonal swings of pregnancy that had made being fourteen such a pleasure for Faith as well as everyone around her. How on Earth was she going to go through this

again? And how was she going to do it alone?

“Faith?”

“You don’t have to keep saying my name, Will.” She indicated the back of the house. “Go check the kitchen. I’ll take the bedrooms.”

He gave her a careful look before heading into the kitchen.

Faith walked down the hallway toward the back rooms, picking her way through broken blenders and toasters and telephones. She wondered if the old woman had scavenged for these things or if she had accumulated them over a lifetime. The framed photographs on the walls looked ancient, some of them in sepia and black-and-white. Faith scanned them as she made her way back, wondering when people had started smiling for photographs, and why. She had some older photos of her mother’s grandparents that were particularly treasured. They had lived on a farm during the Depression, and a traveling photographer had taken a shot of their small family as well as a mule that was called Big Pete. Only the mule had been smiling.

There was no Big Pete on Gwendolyn Zabel’s wall, but some of the color photographs showed not one but two different young girls, both with dark brown hair hanging down past their pencil-thin waists. They were a few years apart in age, but definitely sisters. None of the more recent photographs showed the two posing together. Jacquelyn’s sister seemed to prefer desert settings for the shots she sent her mother, while Jacquelyn’s photos tended to show her posing on the beach, a bikini low across her boyishly thin hips. Faith could not help but think if she looked that great at thirty-eight years old, she’d be taking picture of herself wearing a bikini, too. There were very few recent pictures of the sister, who appeared to have grown plumper with age. Faith hoped she had kept in touch with her mother. They could do a reverse trace on the telephone and find her that way.

The first bedroom did not have a door. Stacks of debris filled the room—more newspapers and magazines. There were some boxes, but for the most part, the small bedroom was filled with so much trash it was impossible to go more than a few feet in. A musty odor filled the air, and Faith remembered a story she’d seen on the news many years ago about a woman who’d gotten a paper cut from an old magazine and ended up dying from some strange disease. She backed out of the room and glanced into the bathroom. More junk, but someone had cleared a path to the toilet and scrubbed it clean. A toothbrush and some other toiletries were lined up on the sink. There were piles of garbage bags in the bathtub. The shower curtain was almost black with mold.

Faith had to turn sideways to get past the door to the master bedroom. She saw the reason as soon as she was inside. There was an old rocking chair near the door, so piled with clothes that it was ready to topple over except for the door propping it up. More clothes were scattered around the room, the sort of stuff that would be called vintage and sold for hundreds of dollars down the street in the funky clothing stores of Little Five Points.

The house was warm, which made it more difficult for Faith to get her sweaty hands into the latex gloves. She ignored the pinprick of dried blood on the tip of her finger, not wanting to think about anything else that would turn her into a sobbing mess.

She started on the chest of drawers first. All of the drawers were open, so it

was just a matter of pushing around clothes, looking for stashed letters or an address book that might list family relations. The bed was neatly made, the only item in the house about which “neat” could be said to describe it. There was no telling if Jacquelyn Zabel had slept in her mother’s bedroom or if she had opted for a hotel downtown.

Or maybe not. Faith saw an open duffel bag sitting beside a laptop case on the floor. She should have spotted the items immediately, because they were both obviously out of place, with their distinctive designer logos and soft leather shells. Faith checked the laptop case, finding a MacBook Air that her son would’ve killed for. She booted it up, but the welcome screen asked for a username and password. Charlie would have to send it through the proper channels to try to crack it, but in Faith’s experience, Macs that had been password-protected were impossible to decode, even by the manufacturer.

Next, Faith looked through the duffel. The clothes inside were designer—Donna Karan, Jones of New York. The Jimmy Choos were particularly impressive, especially to Faith, who was wearing a skirt that was the equivalent of a camping tent, since she couldn’t find any pants in her closet that would button anymore. Jacquelyn Zabel apparently suffered no such sartorial quandaries, and Faith wondered why someone who could obviously afford otherwise chose to stay in this awful house.

So, Jacquelyn had apparently been sleeping in the room. The neatly made bed, a glass of water and a pair of reading glasses on the table beside it all pointed to a recent inhabitant. There was also a giant, hospital-size bottle of aspirin. Faith opened the container and found it half empty. She would probably need some aspirin herself if she were packing up her mother’s home. Faith had seen the heartbreak her father suffered when he’d had to put his mother in an assisted-living facility. The man had passed away years ago, but Faith knew that he had never gotten over having to put his mother in a home.

Unbidden, Faith felt her eyes fill with tears. She let out a groan, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. Since she’d seen a plus sign on the pregnancy test, a day hadn’t gone by without Faith’s brain conjuring some story to make her burst into tears.

She returned to the duffel. She was feeling around for pieces of paper—a notebook, a journal, a plane ticket—when she heard yelling coming from the other side of the house. Faith found Will in the kitchen. A very large and very angry woman was screaming in his face.

“You pigs have no right to be here!”

Faith thought the woman looked just like the type of aging hippie who would use the word “pigs.” Her hair was braided down her back and she was wearing a horse-blanket shawl around her body in lieu of a shirt. Faith guessed that the woman was officially the last holdout in the neighborhood, soon to be the crappiest house on the street. She didn’t look like the yoga-loving mommies who probably lived in the renovated mansions.

Will remained remarkably cool, leaning against the refrigerator with a hand in his pocket. “Ma’am, I need you to calm down.”

“Fuck you,” she shot back. “Fuck you, too,” she added, seeing Faith in the doorway. Close up, Faith thought the woman was in her late forties. It was hard to tell, though, since her face was twisted into an angry red knot. She had the

sort of features that seemed built for fury.

Will asked, "Did you know Gwendolyn Zabel?"

"You have no right to question me without a lawyer."

Faith rolled her eyes, reveling in the sheer childish joy of the gesture.

Will was more mature in his approach. "Can you tell me your name?"

She turned instantly reticent. "Why?"

"I'd like to know what to call you."

She seemed to scroll through her options. "Candy."

"All right, Candy. I'm Special Agent Trent with the Georgia Bureau of Investigation, this is Special Agent Mitchell. I'm sorry to tell you that Mrs. Zabel's daughter has been in an accident."

Candy pulled the blanket closer. "Was she drinking?"

Will asked, "Did you know Jacquelyn?"

"Jackie." Candy shrugged her shoulders. "She was here for a few weeks to get her mother's house sold. We talked."

"Did she use a real estate agent or sell it herself?"

"She used a local agent." The woman shifted her stance, blocking Faith from her view. "Is Jackie okay?"

"I'm afraid she's not. She was killed in the accident."

Candy put her hand to her mouth.

"Have you seen anyone hanging around the house? Anyone suspicious?"

"Of course not. I'd call the police."

Faith suppressed a snort. The ones who screamed about the pigs were always the ones who called the police for help at the first whiff of trouble.

Will asked, "Does Jackie have any family we can get in touch with?"

"Are you fucking blind?" Candy demanded. She jerked her head toward the refrigerator. Faith could see a list of names and phone numbers taped to the door that Will was leaning against. The words emergency numbers were typed in bold print at the top, less than six inches away from his face. "Christ, don't they teach you people to *read*?"

Will looked absolutely mortified, and Faith would have slapped the woman if she had been standing close enough. Instead, she said, "Ma'am, I'm going to need you to go downtown and make a formal statement."

Will caught her eye, shook his head, but Faith was so furious she struggled to keep her voice from shaking. "We'll get a cruiser to take you to City Hall East. It'll only take a few hours."

"Why?" the woman demanded. "Why do you need me to—"

Faith took out her cell phone and dialed her old partner at the Atlanta Police Department. Leo Donnelly owed her a favor—make that several favors—and she intended to use them to make this woman's life as difficult as possible.

Candy said, "I'll talk to you here. You don't need to take me downtown."

"Your friend Jackie is dead," Faith said, her anger making her tone sharp. "Either you're helping our investigation or you're obstructing it."

"Okay, okay," she said, holding up her hands in surrender. "What do you want to know?"

Faith glanced at Will, who was looking at his shoes. She pressed her thumb on the end button, disconnecting the call to Leo. She asked Candy, "When's the last time you saw Jackie?"

"Last weekend. She came over for some company."

"What kind of company?"

Candy equivocated, and Faith started to dial Leo's number again.

"All right," the woman groaned. "Jesus. We smoked some weed. She was freaked out about all this shit. She hadn't visited her mom in a while. None of us knew how bad it had gotten."

" 'None of us' meaning who?"

"Me and a couple of the neighbors. We kept an eye on Gwen. She's an old woman. Her daughters live out of state."

They must have not kept too close an eye on her if they hadn't realized she was living in a firetrap. "Do you know the other daughter?"

"Joelyn," she answered, nodding toward the list on the fridge. "She doesn't visit. At least, she hasn't in the ten years I've lived here."

Faith glanced at Will again. He was staring somewhere over Candy's shoulder. She asked the woman, "The last time you saw Jackie was a week ago?"

"That's right."

"What about her car?"

"It was in the driveway until a couple of days ago."

"A couple as in two?"

"I guess it's closer to four or five. I've got a life. It's not like I track the comings and goings of the neighborhood."

Faith ignored the sarcasm. "Have you seen anyone suspicious hanging around?"

"I told you no."

"Who was the real estate agent?"

She named one of the top Realtors in town, a man who advertised on every available bus stop in the city. "Jackie didn't even meet him. They handled it all on the phone. He had the house sold before the sign even went up in the yard. There's a developer who has a standing offer on all the lots, and he closes in ten days with cash."

Faith knew this was not uncommon. Her own poor house had been subject to many such offers over the years—none of them worth taking because then she wouldn't be able to afford a new house in her own neighborhood. "What about movers?"

"Look at all this shit." Candy slapped her hand against a crumbling pile of papers. "The last thing Jackie told me was that she was going to have one of those construction Dumpsters delivered."

Will cleared his throat. He wasn't looking at the wall anymore, but he wasn't exactly looking at the witness, either. "Why not just leave everything here?" he asked. "It's mostly trash. The builder is going to bulldoze it anyway."

Candy seemed appalled by the prospect. "This was her mother's house. She grew up here. Her childhood is buried under all this shit. You can't just throw that all away."

He took out his phone as if it had rung. Faith knew the vibration feature was broken. Amanda had nearly gutted him in a meeting last week when it had started ringing. Still, Will looked at the display, then said, "Excuse me." He left by the back door, using his foot to move a pile of magazines out of the way.

Candy asked, "What's his problem?"

"He's allergic to bitches," Faith quipped, though if that were true, Will would be covered in a head-to-toe rash after this morning. "How often did Jackie visit her mother?"

"I'm not her social secretary."

"Maybe if I take you downtown, it'll jog your memory."

"Jesus," she muttered. "Okay. Maybe a couple of times a year—if that."

"And you've never seen Joelyn, her sister, visit?"

"Nope."

"Did you spend much time with Jackie?"

"Not much. I wouldn't call us friends or anything."

"What about when you smoked together last week? Did she say anything about her life?"

"She told me the nursing home she sent her mom off to cost fifty grand a year."

Faith suppressed the urge to whistle. "There goes any profit from the house."

Candy didn't seem to think so. "Gwen's been failing for a while now. She won't last the year. Jackie said might as well get her something nice on her way out."

"Where's the home?"

"Sarasota."

Jackie Zabel lived on the Florida Panhandle, about five hours' drive away from Sarasota. Not too close and not too far. Faith said, "The doors weren't locked when we got here."

Candy shook her head. "Jackie lived in a gated community. She never locked her doors. One night, she left her keys in her car. I couldn't believe it when I saw them in the ignition. It was dumb luck that it wasn't stolen." She added ruefully, "But Jackie was always pretty lucky."

"Was she seeing anyone?"

Candy turned reticent again.

Faith waited her out.

Finally, the woman said, "She wasn't that nice, okay? I mean, she was fine to get stoned with, but she was kind of a bitch about things, and men wanted to fuck her, but they didn't want to talk to her afterward. You know what I mean?"

Faith wasn't in a position to judge. "What things was she a bitch about?"

"The best way to drive up from Florida. The right kind of gas to put in your car. The proper way to throw out the freaking trash." She indicated the cluttered kitchen. "That's why she was doing this all by herself. Jackie's loaded. She could afford to pay a crew to clean out this place in two days. She didn't trust anyone else to do it the right way. That's the only reason she's been staying here. She's a control freak."

Faith thought about the neatly tied bundles out by the street. "You said she wasn't seeing anyone. Were there any men in her life—ex-husbands? Ex-boyfriends?"

"Who knows? She didn't confide in me much and Gwen hasn't known the day of the week for the last ten years. Honestly, I think Jackie just needed a couple of tokes to take off the edge, and she knew I was holding."

"Why'd you let her?"

"She was okay when she unclenched."

"You asked if she'd been in a drunk-driving accident."

"I know she got stopped in Florida. She was really pissed about that." Candy was sure to add, "Those stops are completely bogus. One measly glass of wine and they're cuffing you like you're some kind of criminal. They just want to make their quota."

Faith had done many of those stops herself. She knew she had saved lives just as sure as she knew Candy had probably had her own run-ins with the cops. "So, you didn't like Jackie, but you spent time with her. You didn't know her well but you knew she was fighting a DUI rap. What's going on here?"

"It's easier to go with the flow, you know? I don't like causing trouble."

She certainly seemed fine with causing it for other people. Faith took out her notebook. "What's your last name?"

"Smith."

Faith gave her a sharp look.

"I'm serious. It's Candace Courtney Smith. I live in the only other shitty house on the street." Candy glanced out the window at Will. Faith saw that he was talking to one of the uniformed patrolmen. She could tell from the way the other man was shaking his head that they hadn't found anything useful.

Candy said, "I'm sorry I snapped. I just don't like the police around."

"Why is that?"

She shrugged. "I had some problems a while back."

Faith had already guessed as much. Candy certainly had the angry disposition of a person who had sat in the back of a squad car on more than one occasion. "What kind of problems?"

She shrugged again. "I'm only saying this because you're going to find out about it and come running back here like I'm an ax murderer."

"Go on."

"I got picked up on a solicitation when I was in my twenties."

Faith was unsurprised. She guessed, "You met a guy who got you hooked on drugs?"

"Romeo and Juliet," Candy confirmed. "Asshole left me holding his stash. He said I wouldn't go down for it."

There had to be a mathematical formula out there that calculated to the second how long it took a woman whose boyfriend got her hooked on drugs to get turned out on the street in order to support both their habits. Faith imagined the equation involved a lot of zeroes behind the decimal point.

Faith asked, "How long were you in for?"

"Shit," she laughed. "I flipped on the asshole *and* his dealer. I didn't spend day one in prison."

Still not surprised.

The woman said, "I stopped the hard stuff a long time ago. The weed just keeps me mellow." She glanced at Will again. Obviously, there was something about him that was making her nervous.

Faith called her on it. "What are you so worried about?"

"He doesn't look like a cop."

"What does he look like?"

She shook her head. "He reminds me of my first boyfriend, all quiet and nice, but his temper—" She smacked her hand into her palm. "He beat me pretty bad."

Broke my nose. Broke my leg once when I didn't earn out for him." She rubbed her knee. "Still hurts me when it's cold."

Faith saw where this was going. It wasn't Candy's fault that she'd tricked herself out to get high and more than likely failed her share of Breathalyzers. The evil boyfriend was to blame, or the stupid cop meeting his quota, and now Will was getting his turn as the bad guy, too.

Candy was a skilled enough manipulator to know when she was losing her audience. "I'm not lying to you."

"I don't care about the sordid details of your tragic past," Faith stated. "Tell me what you're really worried about."

She debated for a few seconds. "I take care of my daughter now. I'm straight."

"Ah," Faith said. The woman was worried her child would be taken away.

Candy nodded toward Will. "He reminds me of those bastards from the state."

Will as a social worker certainly was a better fit than Will as an abusive boyfriend. "How old is your daughter?"

"She's almost four. I didn't think I'd be able to—All the shit I've been through." Candy smiled, her face changing from an angry fist into something that might be called a moderately attractive plum. "Hannah's a little sweetheart. She loved Jackie a lot, wanted to be like her with her nice car and her fancy clothes."

Faith didn't think Jackie sounded like the kind of woman who wanted a three-year-old pawing her Jimmy Choos, not least of all because kids tended to be sticky at that age. "Did Jackie like her?"

Candy shrugged. "Who doesn't like kids?" She finally asked the question that a less self-absorbed person would've asked ten minutes ago. "So, what happened? Was she drunk?"

"She was murdered."

Candy opened her mouth, then closed it. "Killed?"

Faith nodded.

"Who would do that? Who would want to hurt her?"

Faith had seen this enough times to know where it was heading. It was the reason she had held back the true cause of Jacquelyn Zabel's death. No one wanted to speak ill of the dead, even a fried-out hippie wannabe with an anger problem.

"She wasn't bad," Candy insisted. "I mean, she was good deep down."

"I'm sure she was," Faith agreed, though the opposite was more likely true.

Candy's lip quivered. "How am I gonna tell Hannah that she's dead?"

Faith's phone rang, which was just as well because she did not know how to answer the question. Worse, part of her didn't care, now that she'd wrung out all the information she needed. Candy Smith was hardly number one on the list of horrible parents, but she wasn't a stellar human being, either, and there was a three-year-old child out there who was probably paying for it.

Faith answered the phone. "Mitchell."

Detective Leo Donnelly asked, "Did you just call me?"

"I hit the wrong button," she lied.

"I was about to call you anyway. You put out that BOLO, right?"

He meant the Be On the Look Out Faith had sent around to all the zones this morning. Faith held up her finger to Candy, asking for a minute, then walked

back into the family room. "What've you got?"

"Not exactly a miss-per," he said, meaning a missing person. "Uniform patrol found a kid asleep in an SUV this morning, mom nowhere to be found."

"And?" Faith asked, knowing there had to be more. Leo was a homicide detective. He didn't get called out to coordinate social services.

"Your BOLO," he said. "It kind of matches the mom's description. Brown hair, brown eyes."

"What's the kid saying?"

"Fuck-all," he admitted. "I'm at the hospital with him now. You've got a kid. You wanna come see if you can get anything out of him?"

CHAPTER EIGHT

Members of the press were clustered around the entrance of Grady Hospital, momentarily displacing the pigeons but not the homeless people, who appeared determined to be included in every background shot. Will pulled into one of the reserved parking spots out front, hoping they could sneak in unnoticed. The prospect did not seem likely. News vans had their satellite dishes pointed skyward, and perfectly pressed reporters stood with mikes in their hands, breathlessly reporting the tragic story of the child who was abandoned at City Foods this morning.

Will got out of the car, telling Faith, “Amanda thought the kid would take the heat off us for a while. She’s going to go ballistic when she finds out they might be connected.”

Faith offered, “I’ll tell her if you want me to.”

He tucked his hands into his pockets as he walked beside her. “If I get a vote here, I’d rather you snap at me than feel sorry for me.”

“I can do both.”

He chuckled, although the fact that he’d missed the list of emergency numbers taped to the refrigerator was about as funny as his inability to read Jackie Zabel’s name off her driver’s license while the woman hung lifeless over his head. “Candy’s right, Faith. She called it in one.”

“You would have shown the list to me,” Faith defended. “Jackie Zabel’s sister wasn’t even home. I doubt a five-minute delay in leaving a message on her answering machine will make a huge difference.”

Will kept his mouth shut. They both knew she was stretching things. In some cases, five minutes made all the difference in the world.

Faith continued, “And if you hadn’t stayed under that tree with the license last night, you might not have found the body until daylight. If ever.”

Will saw the reporters were studying each person who walked to the front entrance of the hospital, trying to ascertain whether or not they were important to their story.

He told Faith, “One day, you’re going to have to stop making excuses for me.”

“One day, you’re going to have to get your head out of your ass.”

Will kept walking. Faith was right about one thing—she could snap at him and feel sorry for him at the same time. The revelation brought him no comfort. Faith’s blood ran blue—not the old-money kind, but the cop kind—and she had the same knee-jerk response that had been drilled into Angie every single day at the police academy, every single second on the street. When your partner or your squad was attacked, you defended him no matter what. Us against them, damn the truth, damn what was right.

“Will—” Faith was cut off as the reporters swarmed around her. They had pegged Faith for a cop as she walked across the parking lot while Will, as usual, had gotten a free pass.

Will held out his hand, blocking a camera, using his elbow to push away a photographer with an *Atlanta Journal* logo on the back of his jacket.

"Faith? Faith?" a man called.

She turned around, spotting a reporter, and shook her head as she kept walking.

"Come on, babe!" the man called. Will thought that with his scruffy beard and rumpled clothes, he looked just like the kind of guy who could get away with calling a woman "babe."

Faith turned away, but she kept shaking her head as she walked toward the entrance.

Will waited until they were inside the building, past the metal detectors, to ask, "How do you know that guy?"

"Sam works for the *Atlanta Beacon*. He did a ride-along with me when I was working patrol."

Will seldom thought about Faith's life before him, the fact that she had worn a uniform and driven a squad car before she became a detective.

Faith gave a laugh Will didn't quite understand. "We were hot and heavy for a few years."

"What happened?"

"He didn't like that I had a kid. And I didn't like that he was an alcoholic."

"Well ..." Will tried to think of something to say. "He seems all right."

"He does seem that way," she answered.

Will watched the reporters press their cameras against the glass, trying desperately for a shot. Grady Hospital was a public area, but the press needed permission to film inside the building and they had all learned at one time or another that the security guards had no qualms about tossing them out on their ears if they started to bug the patients or—worse—the staff.

"Will," Faith said, and he could tell from her voice that she wanted to go back to talking about the list on the fridge, Will's glaring illiteracy.

He said something that he knew would sidetrack her. "Why did Dr. Linton tell you all that stuff?"

"What stuff?"

"About her husband and being a coroner down south."

"People tell me things."

That was true enough. Faith had the cop's gift of being quiet so that other people talked just to fill the silence. "What else did she say?"

She smiled like a cat. "Why? Do you want me to put a note in her locker?"

Will felt stupid again, but this kind of stupid was far worse.

Faith asked, "How's Angie doing?"

He shot back, "How's Victor?"

And they were quiet the rest of the journey through the lobby.

"Hey, hey!" Leo held out his arms as he walked toward Faith. "Look at the big GBI girl!" He gave her a bear hug that, surprisingly, Faith allowed. "You're looking good, Faith. Real good."

She waved him off with a disbelieving laugh that would've seemed girlish if Will hadn't known her better.

"Good to see you, man," Leo boomed, shooting out his hand.

Will tried not to wrinkle his nose at the stench of cigarette smoke coming off

the detective. Leo Donnelly was of average height and average build and, unfortunately, was a well-below-average cop. He was good at following orders, but thinking on his own was something the man just didn't want to do. While this was hardly surprising in a homicide detective who had come up in the 1980s, Leo represented exactly the kind of cop that Will hated: sloppy, arrogant, not afraid to use his hands if a suspect needed loosening up.

Will tried to keep things pleasant, shaking the man's hand, asking, "How's it going, Leo?"

"Can't complain," he answered, then started to do exactly that as they walked toward the emergency room. "I'm two years away from full retirement and they're trying to push me out. I think it's the medical—y'all remember that problem I had with my prostate." Neither one of them responded, but that didn't stop Leo. "Fucking city insurance is refusing to pay for some of my medication. I'm telling you, don't get sick or they'll screw you six ways to Sunday."

"What medication?" Faith asked. Will wondered why she was encouraging him.

"Fucking Viagra. Six bucks a pill. First time in my life I've ever had to pay for sex."

"I find that hard to believe," Faith commented. "Tell us about this kid. Any leads on the mom?"

"Zilch. Car's registered to a Pauline McGhee. We found blood at the scene—not a lot but enough, you know? This wasn't a nosebleed."

"Anything in the car?"

"Just her purse, her wallet—license confirms it's McGhee. Keys were in the ignition. The kid—Felix—was sleeping in the back."

"Who found him?"

"A customer. She spotted him sleeping in the car, then got the manager."

"He was probably exhausted from fear," Faith murmured. "What about video?"

"The only working camera outside sweeps back and forth across the front of the building."

"What happened to the other cameras?"

"Bad guys shot them out." Leo shrugged, as if this was to be expected. "The SUV was just out of the frame, so we've got no footage of the car. We've got McGhee walking in with her kid, walking out alone, running back in, running back out. My guess is she didn't notice the kid was gone until she got to her car. Maybe somebody outside kept him hidden, then used him as bait to lure her close enough, then smash and grab."

"Anyone else on the camera coming out of the store?"

"It pans left to right. The kid was definitely in the store. I'm guessing whoever snatched him was watching the camera. They sneaked by when it swept the other side of the lot."

Faith asked, "Do you know what school Felix goes to?"

"Some fancy private school in Decatur. I called them already." He took out his notebook and showed it to Faith so she could write down the information. "They said the mom doesn't have an emergency contact listed. The dad jerked off in a cup; end of involvement. No grandparents have ever shown up. FYI, personal observation, folks at her job ain't too crazy about the chick. Sounded like they

thought she was a real bitch.” He took a folded sheet of paper out of his pocket and showed it to Faith. “Here’s a copy of her license. Good-lookin’ broad.”

Over her shoulder Will looked at the picture. It was black-and-white, but he took a good guess. “Brown hair. Brown eyes.”

“Just like the others,” Faith confirmed.

Leo said, “We already got guys at McGhee’s house. None of the neighbors seem to know who the hell she is or really care that she’s gone. They say she kept to herself, never waved, never went to the block parties or whatever they did. We’re gonna try her work—it’s some hoity-toity design firm on Peachtree.”

“You run a credit check on her?”

“She’s flush,” Leo answered. “Mortgage looks good. Car’s paid for. Has money in the bank, the market and an IRA. She’s obviously not working off a cop’s salary.”

“Any recent activity on her credit cards?”

“Everything was still in her purse—wallet, cards, sixty bucks cash. Last time she used her debit card was at the City Foods this morning. We put a flag on everything in case somebody wrote the numbers down. I’ll let you know if we get a hit.” Leo glanced around. They were standing outside the emergency room entrance. He lowered his voice. “Is this related to your Kidney Killer?”

“Kidney Killer?” Will and Faith asked in unison.

“Y’all are cute,” Leo said. “Like the Bobbsey Twins.”

“What are you talking about, the Kidney Killer?” Faith sounded as puzzled as Will felt.

“Rockdale County’s leaking worse than my prostate,” Leo confided, obviously delighted to be spreading the news. “They’re saying your first victim had her kidney removed. I guess this is some kind of organ-harvesting thing. A cult maybe? I hear you can make big bucks for a kidney, around a hundred grand.”

“Jesus Christ,” Faith hissed. “That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Her kidney wasn’t taken?” Leo seemed disappointed.

Faith didn’t answer, and Will wasn’t about to give Leo Donnelly any information that he could take back to the squad room. He asked, “Has Felix said anything?”

Leo shook his head, flashing his badge so they’d be buzzed back into the ER. “The kid clammed up. I called in social services, but they got fuck-all out of him. You know how they are at that age. Little thing’s probably retarded.”

Faith bristled. “He’s probably upset because he saw his mother abducted. What do you expect?”

“Who the hell knows? You’ve got a kid. I figured you’d be better at talking to him.”

Will had to ask Leo, “Don’t you have kids?”

Leo shrugged. “Do I look like the kind of man who has a good relationship with his children?”

The question did not really need an answer. “Was anything done to the boy?”

“The doc says he’s okay.” His elbow dug into Will’s ribs. “Speaking of the doc, shit, she’s something else. Fucking gorgeous. Red hair, legs up to here.”

Faith had a smile on her lips, and Will would have asked her about Victor Martinez again if Leo hadn’t been standing there with his elbow jammed into Will’s liver.

There was a loud beeping from one of the rooms, and nurses and doctors ran past, crash carts and stethoscopes flying. Will felt his gut tighten at the familiar sights and sounds. He had always dreaded doctors—especially the Grady docs who had served the kids at the children's home where Will grew up. Every time he'd been taken out of a foster home, the cops had brought him here. Every scrape, every cut, every burn and bruise, had to be photographed, catalogued and detailed. The nurses had been doing it long enough to know that there was a certain detachment needed for the job. The doctors weren't as practiced. They would yell and scream at social services and make you think that for once, something was going to change, but then you found yourself right back in the hospital a year later, a new doc railing and screaming the same things.

Now that Will was in law enforcement, he understood how their hands were tied, but that still didn't change the way his gut twisted every time he walked into the Grady emergency room.

As if he sensed the ability to make the situation worse, Leo patted Will on the arm, saying, "Sorry about Angie splitting, man. Probably for the best."

Faith was silent, but Will felt lucky she wasn't capable of shooting flames from her eyes.

Leo said, "I'll go find out where the doc is. They were keeping the kid in the lounge, trying to get him to calm down."

He left, and Faith's continued silence as she stared at Will spoke volumes. He tucked his hands in his pockets, leaning against the wall. The emergency room wasn't as busy as it had been last night, but there were still enough people milling around to make it difficult to have a private chat.

Faith didn't seem to mind. "How long has Angie been gone?"

"A little under a year."

Her breath caught. "You've only been married for nine months."

"Yeah, well." He glanced around, not wanting to have this conversation here or anywhere else. "She only married me to prove that she actually was going to marry me." He felt himself smiling despite the situation. "It was more to win an argument than to actually get married."

Faith shook her head as if she could make no sense of what he was saying. Will wasn't sure he could help her. He had never understood his relationship with Angie Polaski. He had known her since he was eight years old and there wasn't much he had figured out in the ensuing years, except that the minute she felt too close to him, she headed for the door. That she always eventually came back was a pattern Will had come to appreciate for its simplicity.

He told her, "She leaves me a lot, Faith. It wasn't a surprise."

She kept her mouth shut, and he couldn't tell if she was mad or just too shocked to speak.

He said, "I want to check on Anna upstairs before we leave."

She nodded.

He tried again. "Amanda asked me how you were doing last night."

Faith suddenly gave him her full attention. "What did you tell her?"

"That you're fine."

"Good, because I am."

He stared his meaning into her: Will wasn't the only one holding back information.

"I *am* fine," she insisted. "At least I will be, okay? So don't worry about me."

Will pressed his shoulders into the wall. Faith was silent, and the low hum of the emergency room was like static in his ears. Within minutes, he found himself fighting the urge to close his eyes. Will had fallen into bed around six that morning, thinking that he'd manage at least two hours' sleep before he had to go pick up Faith. He'd negotiated down the morning's activities as each hour passed, thinking first that he'd skip taking the dog for a walk, then taking off eating breakfast from the list, then finally removing his usual coffee. The clock had ticked off each hour with excruciating slowness, which he marked every twenty minutes when his eyes shot open, his heart in his throat, his head still thinking he was trapped back in that cave.

Will felt his arm itching again, but he didn't scratch it for fear of drawing Faith's attention to the gesture. Every time he thought about the cave, those rats using the flesh on his arms for a ladder, he felt his skin start to crawl. Considering how many scars Will had on his body, it was foolish to obsess about a couple of scratches that would eventually heal without leaving a mark, but it kept troubling his mind, and the more his mind was troubled, the more he itched.

He asked Faith, "You think this Kidney Killer thing has already hit the news?"

"I hope it has so when the real story comes out, those Rockdale County idiots look like the ignorant pricks they are."

"Did I tell you what Fierro said to Amanda?"

She shook her head, and he relayed Fierro's ill-timed accusation involving the Rockdale County chief of police's pole.

Faith's voice was little more than a shocked whisper. "What did she do to him?"

"He just disappeared," Will said, taking out his cell phone. "I don't know where he went, but I never saw him again." He checked the time on his phone. "The autopsy's in an hour. If nothing comes out of this kid, let's go to the morgue and see if we can get Pete to start early."

"We're supposed to meet the Coldfields at two. I can call them and see if we can make it closer to noon."

Will knew Faith hated sitting in on autopsies. "Do you want to split up?"

She obviously did not appreciate the offer. "We'll see if they can move up the time. Our part of the postmortem should be fairly quick."

Will hoped so. He didn't relish the idea of lingering over the morbid details of the torture Jacquelyn Zabel had endured before she'd managed to escape to safety, only to fall and break her neck while waiting for help. "Maybe we'll have something more to go on by then. A connection."

"You mean other than both women were single, attractive, successful and pretty much hated by everyone who came into contact with them?"

"A lot of successful women are hated," Will said, realizing the moment that the words came out of his mouth that he sounded like a sexist pig. "I mean, a lot of men feel threatened by—"

"I get it, Will. People don't like successful women." She added ruefully, "Sometimes other women are worse than men."

He knew that she was probably thinking about Amanda. "Maybe that's what's motivating our killer. He's angry that these women are successful and they don't

need men in their lives.”

Faith crossed her arms, obviously considering the angles. “Here’s the trick: He’s picked two women who won’t be missed, Anna and Jackie Zabel. Actually, three women, if you count Pauline McGhee.”

“She’s got long dark hair and brown eyes like the other two victims. Usually, these guys like a pattern, a certain type.”

“Jackie Zabel’s successful. You said Anna was well put together. McGhee drives a Lexus and had a kid on her own, which, take it from me, is not easy.” She was silent for a beat, and he wondered if she was thinking about Jeremy. Faith didn’t give him time to ask. “It’s one thing to kill prostitutes—you’ve got to go through at least four or five before anyone notices. He’s targeting women who have real power in the world. So we can assume he’s been watching them.”

Will hadn’t considered that, but she was probably right.

Faith continued, “Maybe he thinks of it as part of the hunt—doing reconnaissance on them, finding out about their lives. He stalks them, then he takes them.”

“So, what are we talking about here—a guy who works for a woman he’s not particularly fond of? A loner who felt abandoned by his mother? A cuckold?” Will stopped trying to profile their suspect, thinking the characteristics were a little too close to home.

“It can be anyone,” Faith said. “That’s the problem—it can be anyone.”

Will felt the frustration he heard in her voice. They both knew that the case was reaching a critical point. Stranger abductions were the hardest crimes to solve. The victims were usually randomly chosen, the abductor a practiced hunter who knew how to cover his tracks. It was sheer luck finding the cave last night, but Will had to hope that the kidnapper was getting sloppy; two of his victims had escaped. He might be feeling desperate, off his game. Luck had to be on their side, if they were going to catch him.

Will tucked his phone back into his pocket. They were less than twelve hours out and close to hitting a brick wall. Unless Anna woke up, unless Felix could offer them a solid lead or one of the crime scenes revealed a clue they could follow up on, they were still solidly on square one with nothing to do but wait until another body showed up.

Faith was obviously considering the same problems. “He would need another place to hold a new victim.”

“I doubt it’s another cave,” Will said. “It would’ve been pretty hard to dig. I nearly killed myself digging the hole for that pond I put in my backyard last summer.”

“You have a pond in your backyard?”

“Koi,” he provided. “It took me two full weekends.”

She was silent for a few beats, as if she was considering his pond. “Maybe our suspect might have had help digging the cave.”

“Serial killers usually work alone.”

“What about those two guys in California?”

“Charles Ng and Leonard Lake.” Will knew about the case, mostly because it was one of the lengthiest and most expensive in California’s history. Lake and Ng had built a cinderblock bunker in the hills, fitting the chamber with various torture devices and other implements to help them act out their sick fantasies.

Both men had filmed themselves taking turns with the victims—men, women and children, some whom had never been identified.

Faith continued, “The Hillside Stranglers worked together, too.”

The two cousins had hunted women on the margins, prostitutes and runaways.

Will said, “They had a fake police badge. That’s how they got the women to trust them.”

“I don’t even want to consider the possibility.”

Will felt the same way, but it was something to keep in mind. Jackie Zabel’s BMW was missing. The woman at City Foods this morning had been abducted right beside her car. Someone posing as a police officer could have easily fabricated a scenario to approach their vehicles.

Will said, “Charlie didn’t find evidence of two different attackers being in the cave.” He had to add, “Then again, he wasn’t exactly eager to stay down there any longer than he had to.”

“What was your impression when you were down there?”

“That I needed to get out of there before I had a heart attack,” Will admitted, feeling the rat scratches on his arms start itching again. “It’s not the kind of place you want to linger.”

“We’ll look at the photos. Maybe there’s something you and Charlie didn’t see in the heat of the moment.”

Will knew that this was a distinct possibility. The photos of the cave would probably be on his desk by the time they got back to the office. They could examine the scene at leisure, the claustrophobia of the surroundings kept safely at arm’s length.

“Two victims, Anna and Jackie. Maybe two abductors?” Faith made the next connection. “If that’s their pattern, and Pauline McGhee is another victim, then they need a second victim.”

“Hey,” Leo called, waving them back. He stood at a door with a large sign on it.

“‘Doctors’ Lounge,’ ” Faith read, a habit she’d gotten into that Will both loathed and appreciated in unequal parts.

“Good luck,” Leo said, patting Will on the shoulder.

Faith asked, “You’re leaving?”

“The doc just handed me my ass on a platter.” Leo did not look particularly bothered by the fact. “You guys can talk to the kid, but unless this breaks toward your case, I need you to stay away.”

Will was slightly surprised by his words. Leo had always been more than happy to let other people do his work.

The detective said, “Trust me, I’d love to hand this over to you, but I got my bosses breathing down my neck. They’re looking for any reason to kick me. I’ll need a solid connection before I send this up the chain to get y’all on the case, all right?”

“We’ll make sure you’re covered,” Faith promised. “Can you still keep a lookout for us on missing persons? White, midthirties, dark brown hair, successful, but not someone who’s got a lot of friends who will miss her.”

“Brown and bitchy.” He gave her a wink. “What else I gotta do except gumshoe your case?” He seemed okay with it. “I’ll be at the City Foods if anything comes up. You’ve got my numbers.”

Will watched him go, asking, "Why are they pushing Leo out? I mean, other than the obvious reasons."

Faith had been Leo's partner for a few years, and Will could see her struggling with the desire to defend him. Finally, Faith said, "He's at the top of his pay scale. It's cheaper to have some fresh-faced kid just off patrol doing his job for half the pay. Plus, if Leo takes early retirement, he leaves twenty percent of his pension on the table. Throw in the medical, and it gets even more expensive to keep him around. The bosses look at that kind of thing when they're doing their budgets."

Faith was about to open the door, but stopped when her cell phone started ringing. She checked the caller ID and told Will, "Jackie's sister." She answered the phone, nodding for Will to go ahead without her.

Will's hand was sweating when he pressed his palm to the wooden door. His heart did something weird—almost a double beat—that he put down to lack of sleep and too much hot chocolate this morning. Then he saw Sara Linton, and it did it again.

She was sitting in a chair by the window, holding Felix McGhee in her lap. The boy was almost too big to be held, but Sara seemed to be managing it well. One arm was wrapped around his waist, the other around his shoulders. She used her hand to stroke his hair as she whispered sounds of comfort in his ear.

Sara had looked up when Will entered the room, but didn't let his presence disturb the scene. Felix stared blankly out the window, his lips slightly parted. Sara nodded toward a chair opposite, and Will guessed from the fact that it was less than six inches from Sara's knee that Leo had been sitting there. He pulled the chair back a few feet and sat down.

"Felix." Sara's voice calm and in control, the same tone she had used with Anna the night before. "This is Agent Trent. He's a policeman, and he's going to help you."

Felix kept staring out the window. The room was cool, but Will could see the boy's hair was damp with perspiration. A bead of sweat rolled down his cheek, and Will took out his handkerchief to wipe it away. When he looked back at Sara, she was staring at him as if he'd pulled a rabbit out of his pocket.

"Old habit," Will mumbled, embarrassed as he folded the cloth in two. He had been made well aware over the years that only old men and dandies carried handkerchiefs, but all the boys at the Atlanta Children's Home had been made to carry them, and Will felt naked without one.

Sara shook her head, as if to say she didn't mind. Her lips pressed to the top of Felix's head. The child didn't move, but Will had seen his eyes dart to the side, checking out Will, trying to see what he was doing.

"What's this?" Will asked, noticing a book bag beside Sara's chair. He guessed from the cartoon characters and bright colors that the bag belonged to Felix. Will slid it toward him and opened the zip, brushing away stray pieces of colored confetti as he explored the contents.

Leo would've already gone through everything in the bag, but Will took out each item as if he was carefully examining it for clues. "Nice pencils." He held up a packet of colored pencils. The packaging was black, not the kind of thing you usually saw on children's items. "These are for grown-ups. You must be a very good artist."

Will didn't expect a response, and Felix didn't give one, but the boy's eyes were watching carefully now, as if he wanted to make sure Will didn't take anything from his bag.

Next, Will opened up a folder. There was an ornate crest on the front, probably from Felix's private school. Official-looking documents from the school were in one pocket. What looked like Felix's homework was in the other. Will couldn't make out the school memos, but he could tell from the double-lined paper on the homework side that Felix was learning how to write on a straight line.

He showed this to Sara. "His letters are pretty good."

"They are," Sara agreed. She was watching Will as carefully as Felix was, and Will had to put her out of his mind so he didn't forget how to do his job. She was too beautiful, and too smart, and too much of everything Will was not.

He put the folder back in the book bag and pulled out three slim books. Even Will could make out the first three letters of the alphabet that adorned the jacket of the first book. The other two were a mystery to him, and he held them up to Felix, saying, "I wonder what these are about?" When Felix didn't answer, Will looked back at the jackets, squinting at the images. "I guess this pig works at a restaurant, because he's serving people pancakes." Will looked at the next book. "And this mouse is sitting in a lunchbox. I guess somebody's going to eat him for lunch."

"No." Felix spoke so quietly that Will wasn't sure the boy had said anything at all.

"No?" Will asked, looking back at the mouse. The great thing about being around kids was you could be absolutely honest and they thought you were just teasing them. "I can't read very well. What does this say?"

Felix shifted, and Sara helped him turn toward Will. The child reached for the books. Instead of answering, Felix held the books close to his chest. His lip started to tremble, and Will guessed, "Your mom reads to you, doesn't she?"

He nodded, big fat tears rolling down his cheeks.

Will leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. "I want to find your mommy."

Felix swallowed, as if he was trying to choke down his grief. "The big man took her."

Will knew that to a kid, all adults were big. He sat up straight, asking, "As big as me?"

Felix really looked at Will for the first time since he'd walked into the room. He seemed to consider the question, then shook his head.

"What about the detective who was just in here—the stinky one? Was the man as tall as him?"

Felix nodded.

Will tried to keep the pace slow, casual, so Felix would keep answering the questions without feeling like he was being interrogated. "Did he have hair like mine, or was it darker?"

"Darker."

Will nodded, scratching his chin as if he was deliberating possibilities. Kids were notoriously unreliable witnesses. They either wanted to please the adults who questioned them or they were so open to suggestion that you could pretty much plant any idea in their heads and have them swear that it actually

happened.

Will asked, "What about his face? Did he have hair on his face? Or was it smooth like mine?"

"He had a mustache."

"Did he speak to you?"

"He told me that my mommy said to stay in the car."

Will treaded carefully. "Was he wearing a uniform like a janitor or a fireman or a police officer?"

Felix shook his head. "Just normal clothes."

Will felt a rush of heat to his face. He knew Sara was staring at him. Her husband had been a cop. She wouldn't like the implication.

Will asked, "What color were his clothes?"

Felix shrugged, and Will wondered if the boy was finished answering questions or if he really didn't remember.

Felix picked at the edge of his book. "He wore a suit like Morgan."

"Morgan is a friend of your mommy's?"

He nodded. "He's at her work, but she's mad at him because he's lying and he's trying to get her into trouble, but she's not going to let him get away with it because of the safe."

Will wondered if Felix had overheard some phone calls or if Pauline McGhee was the type of woman to vent her problems to a six-year-old boy. "Do you remember anything else about the man who took your mommy?"

"He said he would hurt me if I told anybody about him."

Will kept his face blank, as did Felix. "You're not scared of the man," he said, not a question but a statement.

"My mommy says that she'll never let anybody hurt me."

He seemed so sure of himself that Will couldn't help but feel a great deal of respect for Pauline McGhee's parenting skills. Will had interviewed a lot of children in his time, and while most of them loved their parents, not many of them exhibited this kind of blind trust.

Will said, "She's right. No one is going to hurt you."

"My mommy will protect me," Felix insisted, and Will started to wonder about his certainty. You usually didn't reassure a kid of something unless there was a real fear you were trying to combat.

Will asked, "Was your mom worried that someone might hurt you?"

Felix picked at the book jacket again. He gave an almost imperceptible nod.

Will waited, trying not to rush his next question. "Who was she afraid of, Felix?"

He spoke quietly, his voice little more than a whisper. "Her brother."

A brother. This could be some kind of family dispute after all. Will asked, "Did she tell you his name?"

He shook his head. "I never met him, but he was bad."

Will stared at the boy, wondering how to phrase his next question. "Bad how?"

"Mean," Felix said. "She said he was mean, and that she would protect me from him because she loves me more than anybody in the world." There was a finality to his tone, as if that was all he was willing to say on the matter. "Can I go home now?"

Will would've preferred a knife to his chest rather than have to answer this question. He glanced at Sara for support, and she took over, saying, "Remember that lady you met earlier? Miss Nancy?"

Felix nodded.

"She's going to find someone to take care of you until your mom comes to get you."

The boy's eyes filled with tears. Will couldn't blame him. Miss Nancy was probably from social services. She would be a far cry from the women at Felix's private school and his mother's well-heeled friends.

He said, "But I want to go home."

"I know, sweetheart," Sara soothed. "But if you go home, you'll be all alone. We need to make sure that you're safe until your mom comes to get you."

He didn't seem convinced.

Will got down on one knee so that he was face-to-face with the boy. He wrapped his hand around Felix's shoulder, his fingers accidentally brushing Sara's arm in the process. Will felt a lump rise in his throat, and he had to swallow before he could speak. "Look at me, Felix." He waited until the child complied. "I'm going to make sure your mom comes back to you, but I need you to be brave for me while I'm working to make that happen."

Felix's face was so open and trusting that it was painful to look at him. "How long will it take?" There was a wobble in his voice as he asked the question.

"Maybe a week at the most," Will said, fighting the urge to break eye contact. If Pauline McGhee was gone longer than a week, she would be dead, and Felix would be an orphan. "Can you give me a week?"

The boy kept staring at Will as if to judge whether or not he was being told the truth. Finally, he nodded.

"All right," Will said, feeling as if an anvil had been placed on his chest. He saw that Faith was sitting in a chair by the door and wondered when she had come into the room. She stood, nodding for him to follow her outside. Will patted Felix on the leg before joining Faith in the hallway.

"I'll tell Leo about the brother," Faith said. "Sounds like a family dispute."

"Probably." Will glanced back at the closed door. He wanted to go back in there, but not because of Felix. "What'd Jackie's sister say?"

"Joelyn," Faith provided. "She's not exactly torn up about her sister being killed."

"What do you mean?"

"Bitch runs in the family."

Will felt his eyebrows go up.

"I'm just having a bad day," Faith said, but that was hardly an explanation. "Joelyn lives in North Carolina. She said it'll take her about five hours to drive down." Almost as an afterthought, Faith added, "Oh, and she's going to sue the police and get us fired if we don't find out who killed her sister."

"One of those," Will said. He didn't know which was worse—family members who were so torn up with grief that you felt like they were reaching into your chest and squeezing your heart or family members who were so angry that you felt like they were squeezing you a little farther down.

He said, "Maybe you should have another go at Felix."

"He seemed pretty tapped out to me," Faith replied. "I probably couldn't get

any more out of him than you did.”

“Maybe talking to a woman—”

“You’re good with kids,” Faith interrupted, a hint of surprise in her tone. “More patient than me right now, anyway.”

Will shrugged. He had helped out with some of the younger kids at the children’s home, mostly to keep the new ones from crying all night and keeping everyone awake. He asked, “Did you get Pauline’s work number from Leo?” Faith nodded. “We need to call and see if there’s a Morgan there. Felix says the abductor dressed like him—maybe there’s a kind of suit that Morgan favors. Also, our guy’s about five-six with dark hair and a mustache.”

“The mustache could be fake.”

Will admitted as much. “Felix is smart for his age, but I’m not sure he can tell the difference between real and fake. Maybe Sara got something out of him?”

“Let’s give them a few more minutes alone,” Faith suggested. “You sound like you think Pauline’s one of our victims.”

“What do you think?”

“I asked you first.”

Will sighed. “My gut is pointing that way. Pauline’s well-off, well employed. She’s got brown hair, brown eyes.” He shrugged, contradicting himself. “That’s not much to hang your hat on.”

“It’s more than we had when we got up this morning,” she pointed out, though he couldn’t tell if she was agreeing with his gut or clutching at straws. “Let’s be careful about this. I don’t want to get Leo in trouble by snooping around his case, then leaving him hanging out to dry when nothing comes out of it.”

“Agreed.”

“I’ll call Pauline McGhee’s work and ask about Morgan’s suits. Maybe I can get some information out of them without stepping on Leo’s toes.” Faith took out her phone and looked at the screen. “My battery is dead.”

“Here.” Will offered his. She took it gently in both hands and dialed a number from her notebook. Will wondered if he looked as silly as Faith did holding the two pieces of the phone to his face and figured he probably looked even more so. Faith was not really his type, but she was an attractive woman, and attractive women could get away with a lot. Sara Linton, for instance, could probably get away with murder.

“Sorry,” Faith said into the phone, her voice raised. “I’m having trouble hearing you.” She shot Will a look, as if this was his fault, before heading down the hall where the reception was better.

Will leaned his shoulder against the doorjamb. Replacing the phone represented a seemingly insurmountable problem—the sort of problem that Angie usually handled for him. He’d tried to get the device replaced by calling the cell phone company, but they had told him he would have to go to the store and fill out paperwork. Assuming that miracle occurred, Will would then have to figure out the new features on the phone—how to set the ring tone to something that wouldn’t annoy him, how to program in the numbers he needed for work. Will supposed he could ask Faith, but his pride kept getting in the way. He knew that she would gladly help him, but she would want to have a conversation about it.

For the first time in his adult life, Will found himself wishing that Angie would come back to him.

He felt a hand on his arm, then heard an “Excuse me” as a thin brunette opened the door to the doctors’ lounge. He guessed she was Miss Nancy from social services, come to collect Felix. The day was early enough that the boy wouldn’t immediately be taken to a shelter. There might be a foster family who could look after him for a while. Hopefully, Miss Nancy had been at this job long enough so that she had some good families who owed her favors. It was hard to place children who were in limbo. Will had been in limbo himself, just long enough to get to that age where adoption was almost impossible.

Faith was back. She had a disapproving frown on her face as she handed Will back his phone. “You should get that replaced.”

“Why?” he asked, pocketing the phone. “It works fine.”

She ignored his obvious lie. “Morgan only wears Armani, and he seemed pretty convinced that he’s the only man in Atlanta with enough style to pull it off.”

“So, we’re talking anywhere from twenty-five hundred to five thousand dollars for a suit.”

“I’d bet it’s on the high end, judging by his haughty tone. He also told me that Pauline McGhee is estranged from her family, going back at least twenty years. He says she ran away at seventeen and never looked back. He’s never heard her mention a brother before.”

“How old is Pauline now?”

“Thirty-seven.”

“Did Morgan know how to get in touch with her family?”

“He doesn’t even know what state she’s from. She didn’t talk about her past much. I left a message on Leo’s cell. I’m pretty sure he’ll track down the brother before the day is out. He’s probably already running all the fingerprints from her SUV.”

“Maybe she’s living under an alias? You don’t run away from home at seventeen without a reason. Pauline’s obviously doing pretty well for herself financially. Maybe she had to change her name to make that happen.”

“Obviously, Jackie’s been in touch with her family and hasn’t changed her name. Her sister was going by Zabel, too.” Faith laughed, pointing out, “All of their names rhyme—Gwendolyn, Jacquelyn, Joelyn. It’s kind of weird, don’t you think?”

Will shrugged. He’d never been able to recognize words that rhymed, a problem he thought might be coupled with his reading issues. Fortunately, it wasn’t the sort of thing that came up much.

Faith continued, “I don’t know what it is, but something about having a baby makes you think the stupidest names are beautiful.” She sounded wistful. “I almost named Jeremy Fernando Romantico after one of the guys from Menudo. Thank God my mother put her foot down.”

The door opened. Sara Linton joined them in the hallway, looking exactly how you’d expect someone to look if they felt like they’d just abandoned a child to social services. Will wasn’t one to rail against the system, but the reality was that no matter how nice the social workers were, or how hard they tried, there weren’t enough of them and they didn’t get nearly the support they needed. Add

to that the fact that foster parents were either the salt of the earth or money-hungry, child-hating sadists, and you quickly understood how soul-killing the entire enterprise could be. Unfortunately, it was Felix McGhee's soul that would pay the most.

Sara told Will, "You were good in there."

He fought the urge to smile like a kid who'd just been patted on the head.

Faith asked, "Did Felix say anything else?"

Sara shook her head. "How are you feeling?"

"Much better," Faith answered, a defensive edge to her tone.

Sara said, "I heard about the second victim you found last night."

"Will found her." Faith paused a moment, as if to draw out the information.

"This isn't for public consumption, but she snapped her neck when she fell from a tree."

Sara frowned. "What was she doing in a tree?"

Will took over the story. "She was waiting for us to find her. Apparently, we didn't get there quickly enough."

"You have no way of knowing how long she was in the tree," Sara told him.

"Time of death isn't an exact science."

"Her blood was warm," he returned, feeling that same darkness come as he thought about the hot liquid hitting the back of his neck.

"There are other reasons the blood might still be warm. If she was in a tree, then the leaves could've acted as an insulation from the cold. She could've been medicated by her abductor. Several pharmaceuticals can raise the body's core temperature and keep it high even after death."

He countered, "The blood hadn't had time to clot."

"Something as simple as a couple of aspirin could keep it from coagulating."

Faith provided, "Jackie had a large bottle of aspirin by her bed. It was half empty."

Will was unconvinced, but Sara had moved on. She asked Faith, "Is Pete Hanson still the coroner for this region?"

"You know Pete?"

"He's a good ME. I did a couple of courses with him when I first got elected."

Will had forgotten that in small towns, the medical examiner's job was an elected position. He couldn't picture Sara's face on a yard sign.

Faith said, "We were actually about to head over there for the autopsy on the second victim."

Sara seemed to take on an air of uncertainty. "Today's my day off."

"Well," Faith began, again drawing out the moment. "I hope you enjoy your day." She said it as a parting shot, but didn't make a move to leave.

Will noticed that the hallway had gone quiet enough to hear the clacking of high heels on the tiles behind him. Amanda Wagner walked briskly toward them. She looked well rested despite the fact that she had stayed out in the forest as late as Will. Her hair was in its usual unmoving helmet and her pantsuit was a muted dark purple.

As usual, she jumped right into the middle of things. "The bloody fingerprint on Jacquelyn Zabel's Florida driver's license belongs to our first victim. Are you still calling her Anna?" She didn't give them time to answer. "Is this grocery store abduction related to our case?"

Will told her, "It could be. The mother was abducted around five-thirty this morning. The kid, Felix, was found sleeping in his mother's car. We've got a sketchy description from him, but he's only six years old. The Atlanta police are cooperating. As far as I know, they haven't asked for help."

"Who's on point?"

"Leo Donnelly."

"Worthless," Amanda grumbled. "We'll let him keep his case for the time being, but I want a very tight leash on him. Let Atlanta do the footwork and pay for the forensics, but if he starts to screw things up, yank him off."

Faith said, "He's not going to like that."

"Do I look like I give a damn?" She didn't wait for a response. "Our friends in Rockdale County apparently have some regrets about turning over their case," she informed them. "I've called a press conference outside in five minutes and I want you and Faith flanking me, looking reassuring as I explain to the public at large that their kidneys are safe from the hands of vicious organ harvesters." She held out her hand to Sara. "Dr. Linton, I suppose it's not a stretch to say we're meeting under better circumstances this time around."

Sara shook her hand. "For me, at least."

"It was a moving service. A fitting tribute to a great officer."

"Oh ..." Sara's voice trailed off, confused. Tears welled into her eyes. "I didn't realize you were ..." She cleared her throat, and tried to collect herself. "That day is still a blur for me."

Amanda gave her a close look of appraisal, and her tone was surprisingly soft when she asked, "How long has it been?"

"Three and a half years."

"I heard about what happened at Coastal." Amanda was still holding Sara's hand, and Will could see her give the woman a reassuring squeeze. "We take care of our own."

Sara wiped her eyes, glancing at Faith as if she felt foolish. "I was actually about to offer my services to your agents."

Will saw Faith's mouth open, then close just as quickly.

Amanda said, "Go on."

"I worked on the first victim—Anna. I didn't have the opportunity to do a full exam, but I had time with her. Pete Hanson is one of the finest medical examiners I've ever met, but if you want me to sit in on the autopsy of the second victim, I might be able to offer a perspective on the differences and similarities between the two."

Amanda didn't waste time thinking over the decision. "I'll take you up on that offer," she said. "Faith, Will, come with me. Dr. Linton, my agents will meet you at City Hall East in an hour." When no one moved, she clapped her hands. "Let's go." She was halfway down the hall before Faith and Will found it in themselves to follow.

Will walked behind Amanda, keeping his stride short so he wouldn't run her over. She walked fast for such a small woman, but his height always made him feel a bit like the Green Giant as he tried to keep a respectful distance. Looking down at the back of her head, he wondered whether their killer worked for a woman like Amanda. Will could see where a different kind of man might feel outright hatred instead of the mix of exasperation with a dash of burning desire

to please that Will felt toward the older woman.

Faith put her hand on his arm, pulling him back. "Can you believe that?"

"Believe what?"

"Sara elbowing in on our autopsy."

"She had a point about seeing both victims."

"*You* saw both victims."

"I'm not a coroner."

"Neither is she," Faith shot back. "She's not even a real doctor. She's a pediatrician. And what the hell was Amanda talking about at Coastal?"

Will was curious about what had happened at Coastal State Prison, too, but mostly he wondered why Faith was so angry about it all.

Amanda called over her shoulder, "You're to take any and all help Sara Linton is willing to offer." She had obviously heard them whispering. "Her husband was one of the finest cops in this state, and I'd stake any investigation on Sara's medical skills."

Faith didn't bother hiding her curiosity. "What happened to him?"

"Line of duty," was all Amanda would say. "How are you doing after your tumble, Faith?"

Faith sounded unusually chipper. "Perfect."

"Doctor cleared you?"

She got even chipper. "One hundred percent."

"We're going to have a talk about that." Amanda waved the security guards away as they entered the lobby, telling Faith, "I've got a meeting after this with the mayor, but I'll expect you in my office by the end of the day."

"Yes, ma'am."

Will wondered if he was turning more stupid by the minute or if the women in his life were just getting more obtuse. Now was not the time to figure it out, though. He reached ahead of Amanda and opened the glass entrance door. There was a podium outside, a small carpet behind it for Amanda to stand on. Will took his usual spot to the side, safe in the knowledge that the cameras would capture his chest and maybe the knot in his tie as they went in for the tight focus on Amanda. Faith obviously knew she would not be as lucky, and she perfected a scowl as she stood behind her boss.

The cameras flashed. Amanda stepped up to the microphones. Questions were shouted, but she waited for the ruckus to die down before taking out a folded sheet of paper from her jacket pocket and smoothing it flat on the platform. "I'm Dr. Amanda Wagner, deputy director of the Georgia Bureau of Investigation's Atlanta regional office." She paused for effect. "Some of you have heard the spurious rumors about the so-called Kidney Killer. I am here to set the record straight that this rumor is false. There is no such killer in our midst. The victim's kidney was not removed; there was no surgical interference whatsoever. The Rockdale County Police Department has denied starting said rumors, and we have to trust that our colleagues are being honest in this matter."

Will didn't have to look at Faith to know she was fighting the urge to smile. Detective Max Galloway had certainly gotten under her skin, and Amanda had just slammed the entire Rockdale County police force on camera.

One of the reporters asked, "What can you tell us about the woman who was brought into Grady last night?"

Not for the first time, Amanda knew more about their case than Will or Faith had told her. She responded, “We should have a sketch of the victim for you by one o’clock this afternoon.”

“Why no photographs?”

“The victim suffered some blows to the face. We want to give the public their best chance to identify her.”

A woman from CNN asked, “What’s her prognosis?”

“Guarded.” Amanda moved on, pointing to the next person with his hand up. It was Sam, the guy who had called to Faith when they first entered the hospital. He was the only reporter Will could see who was taking notes the old-fashioned way instead of using a digital recorder. “Do you have a comment about the statement from Jacquelyn Zabel’s sister, Joelyn Zabel?”

Will felt his jaw tighten as he forced himself to stare impassively ahead. He imagined Faith was doing the same thing, because the crowd of reporters was still focused on Amanda instead of the two shocked agents behind her.

“The family is obviously very upset,” Amanda answered. “We’re doing everything we can do to solve this case.”

Sam pressed, “You can’t be pleased that she’s using such harsh language about your agency.”

Will could imagine Amanda’s smile just by the look on Sam’s face. They were both playing a game, because the reporter obviously knew full well that Amanda had no idea what he was talking about.

She said, “You’ll have to ask Ms. Zabel about her statements. I have no further comment on the matter.” Amanda took two more questions, then wrapped up the press conference with the usual request for anyone with information to come forward.

The reporters started to dissipate, off to file their stories—though Will was fairly certain that none of them would take responsibility for failing to fact-check their reports before running the specious rumor about the so-called Kidney Killer.

Amanda’s voice was a low grumble that Will could barely make out when she told Faith, “Go.”

Faith didn’t need an explanation, nor did she need backup, but she still grabbed Will by the arm as she walked toward the crowd of reporters. She brushed past Sam, and she must’ve said something to him because the man started following her toward a narrow alley between the hospital and the parking garage.

Sam said, “Caught the dragon off guard, didn’t I?”

Faith indicated Will. “Agent Trent, this is Sam Lawson, professional asshole.”

Sam flashed him a smile. “Pleased to meet you.”

Will didn’t offer a response, and Sam didn’t appear to mind. The reporter was more interested in Faith, and he was looking at her in such a predatory way that Will felt a caveman urge to punch the guy squarely in the jaw.

Sam said, “Damn, Faith, you’re looking really hot.”

“Amanda’s pissed at you.”

“Isn’t she always?”

“You don’t want to be on her bad side, Sam. You remember what happened last time.”

"The great thing about drinking so much is that I don't." He was grinning again, looking her up and down. "You look really good, babe. I mean—just fantastic."

She shook her head, though Will could tell she was softening. He'd never seen her look at a man the way she was looking at Sam Lawson. There was definitely something unresolved between them. Will had never felt more like a third wheel in his life.

Thankfully, Faith seemed to realize she was here for a reason. "Did Rockdale give you Zabel's sister?"

"Reporters' sources are confidential," Sam answered, all but confirming her guess.

Faith asked, "What's Joelyn's statement?"

"In a nutshell, she said you guys stood around with your thumbs up your asses for three hours arguing about who would get the case while her sister was dying up in a tree."

Faith's lips were a thin white line. Will felt physically ill. Sam must have talked to the sister right after Faith had, which explained why the reporter had been so sure Amanda was in the dark.

Finally, Faith asked, "Did you feed Zabel that information?"

"You know me better than that."

"Rockdale fed her the information, then you got her on the record."

He shrugged another confirmation. "I'm a reporter, Faith. I'm just doing my job."

"That's a pretty shitty job—ambushing grieving family members, trashing the cops, printing what you know are lies."

"Now you know why I was a drunk for so many years."

Faith tucked her hands into her hips, gave a heavy, frustrated sigh. "That's not what happened with Jackie Zabel."

"I figured it wasn't." Sam took out his notepad and pen. "So give me something else to lead with."

"You know I can't—"

"Tell me about the cave. I heard he had a boat battery down there so he could burn them."

The boat battery was what they called "guilty knowledge," the sort of information only the killer would know. There were a handful of people who had seen the evidence Charlie Reed had collected belowground, and they all wore badges. At least for now.

Faith said what Will was thinking. "Either Galloway or Fierro is feeding you inside information. They get to screw us over, and you get your front-page story. Win-win, right?"

Sam's toothy grin confirmed her speculation. Still he said, "Why would I talk to Rockdale when you're my inside man on this case?"

Will had seen Faith's temper turn on a dime over the last few weeks, and it was nice to not be on the receiving end of her anger for a change. She told Sam, "I'm not your inside anything, asshole, and your facts are wrong."

"Set me straight, babe."

She seemed about to, but sanity caught up with her at the last minute. "The GBI has no official comment on Joelyn Zabel's statement."

“Can I quote you on that?”

“Quote this, *babe*.”

Will followed Faith to the car, but not before flashing a smile at the reporter. He was pretty sure the gesture Faith had made was not something you could put in a newspaper.

CHAPTER NINE

Sara had spent the last three and a half years perfecting her denial skills, so it shouldn't have come as a surprise that it took a solid hour before she realized what a horrible mistake she had made by offering her services to Amanda Wagner. In that hour, she'd managed to drive home, shower, change her clothes and get all the way to the basement of City Hall East before the truth hit her like a sledgehammer. She had put her hand to the door marked GBI MEDICAL EXAMINER, then stopped, unable to open it. Another city. Another morgue. Another way to miss Jeffrey.

Was it wrong to say that she had loved working with her husband? That she had looked at him over the body of a gunshot victim or drunken driver and felt like her life was complete? It seemed macabre and foolish and all the things that Sara had thought she'd put behind her when she moved to Atlanta, but here she was again, her hand pressed against a door that separated life and death, incapable of opening it.

She leaned her back against the wall, staring at the painted letters on the opaque glass. Wasn't this where they had brought Jeffrey? Wasn't Pete Hanson the man who had dissected her husband's beautiful body? Sara had the coroner's report somewhere. At the time, it had seemed of vital importance that she have all the information pertaining to his death—the toxicology, the weights and measures of organ, tissue and bone. She had watched Jeffrey die back in Grant County, but this place, this basement under City Hall, was where everything that had made him a human being had been reduced, removed, redacted.

What was it, exactly, that had convinced Sara to bring herself to this place? She thought about the people she had come into contact with over the last few hours: Felix McGhee—the lost look on his pale face, his lower lip trembling as he searched the hospital corridors for his mother, insisting she would never leave him alone. Will Trent offering the child his handkerchief. Sara had thought that her father and Jeffrey were the only two men left on earth who carried them around anymore. And then Amanda Wagner, commenting on the funeral.

Sara had been so sedated the day Jeffrey was buried that she'd barely been able to stand. Her cousin had kept his arm around her waist, literally holding her up so that she could walk to Jeffrey's grave. Sara had held her hand over the coffin that lay in the ground, her fingers refusing to release the clump of dirt she held. Finally, she had given up, clutching her fist to her chest, wanting to smooth the dirt onto her face, inhale it, climb into the earth with Jeffrey and hold him until her lungs could no longer draw breath.

Sara put her hand in the back pocket of her jeans, felt the letter there. She had folded it so many times that the envelope was tearing at the crease, showing the bright yellow of the legal paper inside. What would she do if one day it suddenly opened? What would she do if she happened to glance down one morning and saw the neat scrawl, the pained explanations or blatant excuses from the woman

whose actions had led to Jeffrey's death?

"Sara Linton!" Pete Hanson boomed as his foot hit the bottom stair. He was wearing a bright Hawaiian shirt, a style she recalled that he favored, and the expression on his face was a mix of delight and curiosity. "To what do I owe this tremendous pleasure?"

She told him the truth. "I managed to worm my way onto one of your cases."

"Ah, the student taking over for the teacher."

"I don't think you're ready to give all this up."

He gave her a bawdy wink. "You know I've got the heart of a nineteen-year-old."

Sara recognized the setup. "Still keep it in a jar over your desk?"

Pete guffawed as if he was hearing the line for the first time.

Sara thought she should explain herself, offering, "I saw one of the victims at the hospital last night."

"I heard about her. Torture, assault?"

"Yes."

"Prognosis?"

"They're trying to get the infection under control." Sara didn't elaborate, but she didn't need to. Pete saw his share of hospital patients who'd not responded to antibiotic treatment.

"Did you get a rape kit?"

"There wasn't enough time pre-op, and post—"

"Spoils the chain of evidence," he provided. Pete was up on his case law. Anna had been doused in Betadine, exposed to countless different environments. Any good defense attorney could find an expert witness who would argue that a rape kit taken after a victim had undergone the rigors of surgery was too contaminated to use as evidence.

Sara told him, "I managed to remove some splinters from under her nails, but I thought the best thing I could offer is a forensic comparison between the two victims."

"Rather dubious reasoning, but I'm so happy to see you that I'll overlook your faulty logic."

She smiled; Pete had always been blunt in that polite, southern way—one of the reasons he made such a great teacher. "Thank you."

"The pleasure of your company is more than enough reward." He opened the door, ushering her inside. Sara hesitated, and he pointed out, "Hard to see from the hallway."

Sara put on what she thought of as her game face as she followed him into the morgue. The smell hit her first. She had always thought the best way to describe it would be cloying, a word that made no sense until you smelled something cloying for yourself. The predominant odor wasn't from the dead but from the chemicals used around them. Before scalpel touched flesh, the deceased were catalogued, X-rayed, photographed, stripped and washed down with disinfectant. A different cleaner was used to swab the floors, another to wash down the stainless steel tables; yet another chemical cleaned and sterilized the tools of autopsy. Together, they created an unforgettable, overly sweet smell that permeated your skin, lived in the back of your nose so that you didn't realize it was there until you had been away from it for a while.

Sara followed Pete to the back of the room, feeling caught in his wake. The morgue was as far from the constant hustle of Grady as Grant County was from Grand Central. Unlike the endless treadmill of cases in the ER, an autopsy was a contained question that almost always had an answer. Blood, fluid, organ, tissue—each component contributed a piece to the puzzle. A body could not lie. The dead could not always take their secrets to the grave.

Almost two and a half million people die in America each year. Georgia is responsible for about seventy thousand of these deaths, less than a thousand of which are homicides. By state law, any unattended death—which is to say a person who dies outside of a hospital or nursing home—has to be investigated. Small towns that do not often see violent death, or communities that are so strapped for cash that the local funeral director fills in for the job of coroner, usually let the state handle their criminal cases. The majority of them end up in the Atlanta morgue. Which explained why half the tables were occupied with corpses in various stages of autopsy.

“Snoopy,” Pete said, calling to an elderly black man in scrubs. “This is Dr. Sara Linton. She’s going to be assisting me on the Zabel case. Where are we?”

The man didn’t acknowledge Sara as he told Pete, “X-rays are on the screen. I can bring her out now if you want.”

“Good man.” Pete went to the computer and tapped the keyboard. A series of X-rays came onto the screen. “Technology!” Pete exclaimed, and Sara could not help but be impressed. Back in Grant County, the morgue had been in the basement of the hospital, almost an afterthought. The X-ray machine was designed for living humans, unlike the setup here, where it didn’t really matter how much radiation shot into the dead body. The films were pristine, read on a twenty-four-inch flat-panel monitor instead of a lightbox that flickered enough to cause an epileptic fit. The single porcelain table Sara had used in Grant was no match for the rows of stainless steel gurneys behind her. She could see junior coroners and medical investigators bustling back and forth in the glassed-off hallway running beside the morgue. She realized that she and Pete were alone, the only living beings in the main autopsy suite.

“We cleared out all the other cases when we brought him in,” Pete said, and for a moment, Sara did not understand what he meant.

He pointed to an empty gurney, the last in the row. “This is where I worked on him.”

Sara stared at the empty table, wondering why the image didn’t flash in her head, that horrible vision of the last time she had seen her husband. Instead, all she saw was a clean gurney, the overhead light bouncing off the dull stainless steel. This is where Pete collected the evidence that had led to Jeffrey’s killer. This is where the case broke open, proving without a shadow of a doubt who was involved in his murder.

Standing here now, Sara had expected her memories to overwhelm her, but there was only calmness, a certainty of purpose. Good things were done here. People were helped, even in death. Particularly in death.

Slowly, she turned back to Pete, still not seeing Jeffrey, but feeling him, as if he was in the room with her. Why was that? Why was it that after three and a half years of begging her brain to come up with some sensation that might replicate what it felt like to have Jeffrey with her, being in the morgue had

brought him to her in a flash?

Most cops hated sitting in on an autopsy, and Jeffrey was no exception, but he considered his attendance a sign of respect, a promise to the victim that he would do everything he could to bring the killer to justice. That was why he had become a cop—not just to help the innocent, but to punish the criminals who preyed upon them.

In all honesty, that was why Sara had taken the coroner's job. Jeffrey hadn't even heard of Grant County the first time she had walked into the morgue under the hospital, examined a victim, helped break a case. Many years ago, Sara had seen violence firsthand, had herself been the victim of a horrific assault. Every Y-incision she made, every sample she collected, every time she testified in court to the horrors she had documented, she had felt a righteous revenge burning in her chest.

"Sara?"

She realized she'd gone quiet. She had to clear her throat before she could tell Pete, "I had Grady send over the films of our Jane Doe from last night. She was able to speak before she went under. We think her name is Anna."

He clicked through to the file, pulling up Anna's X-rays onscreen. "Is she conscious?"

"I called the hospital before I got here. She's still out."

"Neurologic damage?"

"She pulled through the surgery, which is more than anyone expected. Reflexes are good, pupils are still nonreactive. There's some swelling in her brain. They've got a scan scheduled for later today. It's the infection that's the real concern. They're doing some cultures, trying to figure out the best way to treat it. Sanderson called in the CDC."

"Oh, my." Pete was studying the X-ray. "How much hand strength do you think that would take, ripping out the rib?"

"She was starved, dehydrated. I suppose that would've made it easier."

"Tied down—couldn't have put up much of a fight. But, still ... goodness. Reminds me of the third Mrs. Hanson. Vivian was a body builder, you know. Biceps as big around as my leg. Quite a woman."

"Thank you, Pete. Thank you for taking care of him."

He gave her another wink. "You earn respect by giving it to others."

She recognized the dictum from his lectures.

"Snoopy," Pete pronounced as the man pushed a gurney through the double doors. Jacquelyn Zabel's head showed above a white sheet, her skin purple with lividity from hanging upside down in the tree. The color was even darker around the woman's lips, as if someone had smeared a handful of blueberries over her mouth. Sara noticed that the woman had been attractive, with only a few fine lines at the edges of her eyes to show age. Again, she was reminded of Anna, the fact that she, too, was a striking woman.

Pete seemed to be thinking the same thing. "Why is it that the more beautiful the woman, the more horrendous the crime?"

Sara shrugged. It was a phenomenon she'd seen as a coroner back in Grant County. Beautiful women tended to pay a heavier price where homicide was concerned.

"Put her in my spot," Pete told his assistant.

Sara watched the expressionless way Snoopy approached his job, the methodical care he took as he angled the body toward an empty slot in the row. Pete was in the minority here; most of the people working in the morgue were either African-American or women. It was the same at Grady Hospital, which made sense, because Sara had noticed that the more horrible the job, the more likely a woman or minority was to do it. The irony was not lost on Sara that she was included in this mix.

Snoopy kicked down the brakes on the wheels and started to organize the various scalpels, knives and saws Pete would need over the next few hours. He had just pulled out a pair of large pruning shears that you normally find in the gardening section of a hardware store when Will and Faith walked into the room.

Will seemed nonplussed as they passed by open bodies. Faith, on the other hand, looked worse than she had when Sara had first seen her in the hospital. The woman's lips were white, and she stared straight ahead as she walked past a man with his face peeled from his skull so the doctor could check for contusions.

"Dr. Linton," Will began. "Thank you for coming. I know this is supposed to be your day off."

Sara could only smile and nod, wondering at his formal tone. Will Trent sounded more like a banker with every passing minute. She was still having trouble reconciling the man with his job.

Pete held out a pair of gloves to Sara, but she demurred, saying, "I'm just here to observe."

"Don't want to get your hands dirty?" He blew into the glove to open it, sliding in his hand. "Wanna go to lunch after this? There's a great new Italian place on Highland. I can print out a coupon from the web."

Sara was about to beg off when Faith made a noise that caused them all to look her way. She waved her hand in front of her face, and Sara guessed that it was nothing more nefarious than her presence in the morgue that was causing Faith Mitchell's skin to go ashen.

Pete ignored the reaction, telling Will and Faith, "Found plenty of sperm and fluids on the skin before we scrubbed her down. I'll bag them with the rape kit and send them off."

Will scratched his arm under his jacket sleeve. "I doubt our guy's been caught before, but we'll see what the computer kicks back."

For the sake of procedure, Pete turned on the Dictaphone, giving the time and date, then saying, "This is the body of Jacquelyn Alexandra Zabel, a malnourished female, reportedly thirty-eight years of age. She was found in a wooded area near Route 316 in Conyers, which is located in the Georgia county of Rockdale, in the early hours of Saturday, April eighth. The victim was hanging from a tree, upside down, her right foot caught in the branches. There is an obvious broken neck and signs of severe torture. Performing the procedure is Pete Hanson. Attending are Special Agents Will Trent and Faith Mitchell, and the inimitable Dr. Sara Linton."

He pulled back the sheet and Faith gasped. Sara realized that this was the first time she had seen the abductor's handiwork. In the harsh light of the morgue, every injustice was on display: the dark bruises and welts, the rips in the skin, the black electrical burns that looked like powder but could never be wiped off.

The body had been washed prior to examination, the blood scrubbed away, so that the waxy white of the skin stood in stark contrast to the injuries. Shallow slices crisscrossed the victim's flesh, each cut deep enough to bleed but not bring about mortality. Sara guessed the cuts had been made by a razor blade or a very sharp, very thin knife.

"I need to—" Faith didn't finish the sentence. She just turned on her heel and left. Will watched her go, shrugging an apology to Pete.

"Not her favorite part of the job," Pete noted. "She's a bit thin. The victim, that is."

He was right. Jacquelyn Zabel's bones were pronounced under her skin.

Pete asked Will, "How long was she held?"

He shrugged. "We're hoping you can tell us."

"Could be from dehydration," Pete mumbled, pressing his fingers against the woman's shoulder. He asked Sara, "What do you think?"

"The other victim, Anna, was in the same physical condition. He could have been giving them diuretics, withholding food and water. Starvation isn't an unusual form of torture."

"He certainly tried every other kind." Pete sighed, puzzled. "The blood should tell us more."

The examination continued. Snoopy laid down a ruler by the cuts and took photographs as Pete drew hatches on the sketch for the autopsy report, trying to approximate the damage. Finally, he put down the pen, peeling back the eyelids to check the color.

"Interesting," he murmured, indicating Sara should look for herself. Absent a moist environment, the organs of a decomposing body would shrink, the flesh contracting away from any wounds. Sara found several holes in the sclera as she examined the eyes, tiny red dots that opened in perfect round circles.

"Needles or straight pins," Pete guessed. "He pierced each eyeball at least a dozen times."

Sara checked the woman's eyelids, saw the holes went clean through. "Anna's pupils were fixed and dilated," she told him, taking a pair of gloves off the tray, slipping them on as she looked into the woman's bloody ears. Snoopy had cleaned away the clots, but the canals were still coated in dried blood. "Do you have a—"

Snoopy handed her an otoscope. Sara pressed the tip into Zabel's ear, finding the sort of damage she had seen only in child abuse cases. "The drum has been punctured." She turned the head to check the other ear, hearing the broken vertebrae in the neck crunch from the movement. "This one, too." She handed the scope to Pete so he could see.

"Screwdriver?" he asked.

"Scissors," she suggested. "See the way the skin at the opening of the canal has been shaved off?"

"The pattern slants upwards, deeper at the top."

"Right, because the scissors narrow at the point."

Pete nodded, making more notes. "Deaf and blind."

Sara made the obvious leap, opening the woman's mouth. The tongue was intact. She pressed her fingers against the outside of the trachea, then used the laryngoscope Snoopy handed her to look down the throat. "The esophagus is

raw. Smell that?"

Pete leaned down. "Bleach? Acid?"

"Drain cleaner."

"I had forgotten your father is a plumber." He pointed to a dark staining around the woman's mouth. "See this?"

Blood always pooled to the lowest point of a dead body, leaving a stain on the skin called lividity. The face was a deep, dark purple from hanging upside down. It was hard to isolate the rash around her lips, but once Pete pointed it out, Sara could see where liquid had been poured into the mouth and dripped down the sides of the face as the victim gagged.

Pete palpated the neck. "Lots of damage here. It definitely looks like he had her drink some kind of astringent. We'll see if it made it to her stomach when we cut her open."

Sara startled when Will spoke; she had forgotten he was there. "It looked like she broke her neck in the fall. That she slipped."

Sara remembered their earlier conversation, his certainty that Jacquelyn Zabel had been hanging in the tree while he looked for her on the ground. He had told her the woman's blood was still warm. She asked, "Were you the one who took her down?"

Will shook his head. "They had to photograph her."

"You checked her carotid for a pulse?" Sara asked.

He nodded. "The blood was dripping from her fingers. It was hot."

Sara checked the woman's hands, saw the fingernails had been broken, some ripped straight out of the nail beds. Per routine, photographs had been taken of the body before Snoopy had cleaned it. Pete knew what Sara was thinking. He indicated the computer monitor. "Snoopy, do you mind pulling up the pre-wash photos?"

The man did as he was asked, Pete and Sara standing over either shoulder. Everything was on the database, from the initial crime-scene photos to the more recent ones taken at the morgue. Snoopy had to click through them all, and Sara saw the original scene in quick succession, Jacquelyn Zabel hanging from the tree, her neck awkwardly bent to the side. Her foot was so firmly caught in the branches that they probably had to cut the limbs to get her down.

Snoopy finally reached the autopsy series. Blood caked the face, the legs, the torso. "There," Sara said, pointing to the chest. They both returned to the body, and Sara stopped herself before reaching down. "Sorry," she apologized. This was Pete's case.

His ego seemed unharmed. He lifted the breast, exposing another crisscrossed wound. This one was deeper in the center of the X. Pete pulled down the overhead light, trying to get a closer look as he pressed the skin apart. Snoopy handed him a magnifying glass, and Pete leaned in even closer, asking Will, "You found a pocketknife at the scene?"

Will provided, "The only print was the victim's, a latent on the case of the knife."

Pete handed Sara the magnifying glass so she could see for herself. He asked Will, "Left or right hand?"

"I—" Will stopped, glancing back toward the door for Faith. "I don't remember."

“Was the print a thumb? Index?”

Snoopy had gone to the computer to pull up the information, but Will said, “Partial thumb on the butt of the knife.”

“Three-inch blade?”

“About.”

Pete nodded to himself as he made the notation on his diagram, but Sara wasn't going to make Will wait for him to finish. “She stabbed herself,” she told him, holding the magnifying glass over the site, motioning him over. “See the way the wound is V-shaped at the bottom and flat on the top?” Will nodded. “The blade was upside down and moved in an upward trajectory.” Sara made the motion, stabbing herself in the chest. “Her thumb was on the butt of the knife, driving it in deeper. She must have dropped it, then fallen. Look at her ankle.” She indicated the slight marks around the base of the fibula. “The heart had stopped beating when her foot caught. The bones were broken, but there's no swelling, no sign of trauma. There would be serious bruising if the blood was still circulating when she fell.”

Will shook his head. “She wouldn't have—”

“The facts bear it out,” Sara interrupted. “The wound was self-inflicted. It would've been fast. She didn't suffer for long.” Sara felt the need to add, “Or much longer than she already had.”

Will's eyes locked with hers, and Sara had to force herself not to look away. The man may not have looked like a cop, but she was certain he thought like one. Whenever an open case stopped moving forward, any policeman worth his salt took the time to beat himself up for making an ill-timed decision, missing an obvious clue. Will Trent would be doing that now—searching for ways to blame himself for the death of Jacquelyn Zabel.

Sara said, “Your time to help her is now. Not back in that forest.”

Pete put down his pen. “She's right.” He pressed his hands against the chest. “Feels like there's a lot of blood in here, and she made a damn lucky guess about where to sink the blade. Probably hit the heart immediately. I'd agree that the break in the foot as well as the neck came postmortem.” He slipped off a glove as he walked to the computer and pulled up the crime-scene photos. “Look at how her head seems to be resting against the branches, tilted. That's not what happens when you snap your neck during a fall. It would be pressed hard against the offending object. When you're alive, your muscles are taught to prevent such an injury. It's a violent event, not a gentle twisting. Good call, kiddo.”

Pete beamed at Sara, and she felt herself blush with a student's pride.

“Why would she kill herself?” Will asked, as if the tortured woman had had everything to live for.

Pete supplied, “She was probably blind, most certainly deaf. I'm surprised she was able to make it up the tree. She wouldn't have heard the searchers, would have no idea that you were looking for her.”

“But she—”

“The infrared on the helicopters didn't pick up her signature,” Pete interrupted. “But for you being out there, just happening to look up, I imagine the only way you would have found her body is tracking down a DRT call come deer season.”

Dead Right There, he meant. All police agencies had their slang, some of it more colorful than others. Hunters were notorious for calling in bodies they'd found DRT.

Pete turned to Sara. "Do you mind?" he asked, nodding toward the bag for the rape kit. Snoopy was an excellent assistant, but Sara got the message: She was back to being an observer. She peeled off her gloves and opened the kit, laying out the swabs and vials. Pete picked up the speculum, pressing open the legs so he could insert it into the vagina.

As with some violent rapes that resulted in homicide, the vaginal walls had stayed clenched postmortem, and the plastic speculum broke as Pete tried to pry it open. Snoopy handed him a metal speculum, and Pete tried again, his hands shaking as he forced open the clamp. It was rough to watch, and Sara was glad that Faith was not there as the wrenching sound of metal parting flesh filled the room. Sara handed Pete a swab, and he inserted the cotton-tipped stick, only to meet resistance.

Pete bent over, trying to find the obstruction. "Dear Lord," he mumbled, his hand scattering the tray of tools as he snatched up a pair of thin-nosed forceps. His voice was absent any charm as he told Sara, "Glove up—help me with this."

Sara snapped on the gloves, wrapping her hands around the speculum as he reached in with the forceps, which were nothing more than a long pair of tweezers. The tips grabbed something, and he pulled back his arm. A long, single piece of white plastic came out, like a silk cloth from a magician's sleeve. Pete kept pulling, layering the plastic into a large bowl. Section after section came, each streaked in dark, black blood, each connected to the next in a perforated line.

"Trash bags," Will said.

Sara could not breathe. "Anna," she said. "We need to check Anna."

CHAPTER TEN

Will's office on the third floor of City Hall East was little more than a storage closet with a window that looked down onto a pair of abandoned railroad tracks and a Kroger grocery store parking lot that seemed to be the meeting place for many suspicious-looking people in very expensive cars. The back of Will's chair was pressed so tightly against the wall that it gouged the sheetrock every time he turned. Not that he needed to turn. He could see the entire office without moving his head. Even getting into the chair was difficult because Will had to squeeze between his desk and the window in order to reach it—a maneuver that made him glad he wasn't planning on having children.

He leaned on his elbow as he watched his computer boot up, the screen flickering, the little icons flashing into place. Will opened his email first, tucking a pair of headphones into his ears so he could hear them through the SpeakText program he'd installed a few years ago. After deleting a couple of sexual enhancement offers and a plea from a deposed Nigerian president, he found a note from Amanda and a policy-change notice on the state health insurance plan that he sent to his private email so he could muddle through his loss of covered items from the comfort of his own home.

Amanda's email needed no such study. She always wrote in all caps and she seldom bothered with proper sentence construction. `UPDATE ME` was plastered across the screen in a thick, bold font.

What could he tell her? That their victim had eleven kitchen garbage bags shoved up inside her? That Anna, the victim who had survived, had the same number inside of her? That twelve hours had passed and they were no closer to finding out who had taken the women, let alone what pattern connected the two victims?

Blind, possibly deaf, possibly mute. Will had been in the cave where the women were kept. He could not imagine the horrors they experienced. Seeing the torturer's instruments had been bad enough, but he imagined not seeing them would be worse. At least the burden of Jackie Zabel's death was off his shoulders, though knowing that the woman had chosen death when help was so nearby brought him no comfort.

Will could still hear the compassionate tone Sara Linton had used as she'd explained how Zabel had taken her life. He could not remember the last time a woman had talked to him that way—tried to throw him a life vest instead of yelling at him to swim harder the way Faith did or, worse, grabbing onto his legs and pulling him farther down the way Angie always tried.

Will slumped back in his chair, knowing he should put Sara out of his mind. There was a case in front of him that needed his undivided attention, and Will made himself focus on the women he could actually have an impact on.

Both Anna and Jackie had probably escaped from the cave at the same time, Jackie unable to hear or see, Anna most probably blind. There would have been

no way for the two damaged women to communicate with each other except through touch. Had they held hands, stumbling together blindly as they'd tried to find their way out of the forest? Somehow, they'd been separated, lost from each other. Anna must have known she was on a road, felt the cool asphalt on the soles of her bare feet, heard the roar of an approaching car. Jackie had gone the other way—finding a tree, climbing to what must have felt like safety. Waiting. Every creak of the tree, every movement of the branches, sending panic through her body as she waited for her abductor to find her and take her back to that cold, dark place.

She would have been holding her license, her identity, in one hand and the means of her death in the other. It was an almost incomprehensible choice. Climb down, walk aimlessly to look for help, risking possible capture? Or plunge the blade into her chest? Fight for her life? Or seize control and end it on her own terms?

The autopsy bore witness to her decision. The blade had pierced her heart, severing the main artery, filling the chest with blood. According to Sara, Jackie had probably passed out almost instantly, her heart stopping even as she fell from the tree. Knife dropping. Driver's license dropping. They had found aspirin in her stomach. It had thinned her blood so that it was still dripping long after her death. This was the hot splatter on Will's neck. Looking up, seeing her hand reaching down, he had thought she was grasping for freedom, but she had actually managed to find it on her own.

He opened a large folder on his desk and fanned out the photos of the cave. The torture devices, the marine battery, the unopened cans of soup—Charlie had documented all of it, recording the descriptions on a master list. Will thumbed through the photographs, finding the best view of the cave. Charlie had squatted at the base of the ladder the same way Will had last night. Xenon lights pulled every nook and cranny out of shadow. Will found another photo, this one showing the sexual devices laid out like artifacts at an archaeological dig. He could figure out from first glance how most of them were used, but some were so complicated, so horrific, that his mind could not grasp how they operated.

Will was so lost in thought that his brain took its time registering the fact that his cell phone was ringing. He opened the pieces, saying, "Trent."

"It's Lola, baby."

"Who?"

"Lola. One of Angie's girls."

The prostitute from last night. Will tried to keep his tone even, because he was more furious with Angie than the hooker, who was just doing what bottom feeders always did—trying to exploit an angle. Will wasn't Angie's angle, though, and he was sick of these girls trying to play him. He said, "Listen, I'm not getting you out of jail. If you're one of Angie's girls, then get Angie to help you."

"I can't get ahold of her."

"Yeah, well, I can't either, so stop calling me for help when I don't even know her phone number. Understand?" He didn't give her time to respond. He ended the call and gently put his cell phone on his desk. The tape was starting to peel, the string coming loose. He had asked Angie to help him with the phone before she left, but, like a lot of things regarding Will, it hadn't been a priority.

He looked down at his hand, the wedding ring on his finger. Was he stupid or just pathetic? He couldn't tell the difference anymore. He bet Sara Linton wasn't the sort of woman who pulled this kind of crap in a relationship. Then again, Will bet Sara's husband hadn't been the kind of pussy who would let it happen.

"God, I hate autopsies." Faith pushed her way into his office, her color still off. Will knew she hated autopsies—it was an obvious aversion—but this was the first time he'd ever heard Faith admit to it. "Caroline left a message on my cell." She meant Amanda's assistant. "We can't talk to Joelyn Zabel without counsel present."

Jackie Zabel's sister. "Is she really going to sue the department?"

She dropped her purse on his desk. "As soon as she finds a lawyer in the Yellow Pages. Are you ready to go?"

He looked at the time on the computer. They were supposed to meet the Coldfields in half an hour, but the shelter was less than ten minutes away. "Let's talk this through a little bit more," he suggested.

There was a folding chair against the wall, and Faith had to close the door before she could sit down. Her own office was not much larger than Will's, but you could at least stretch your legs out in front of you without your feet hitting a wall. Will wasn't sure why, but they always ended up back in his office. Maybe it was because Faith's office had, in fact, been a storage closet. There was no window and it still held the lingering scent of urine cake and toilet cleaner. The first time she had closed the door, she'd nearly passed out from the fumes.

Faith nodded toward the computer. "What've you got?"

Will turned the monitor around so that Faith could read Amanda's email.

Faith squinted at the screen, scowling. He kept the background bright pink and the letters navy blue, which for some reason made it easier for him to make out the words. She mumbled under her breath as she adjusted the colors, then slid over the keyboard so she could type a reply. The first time she had done this, Will had complained, but over the last few months, he'd come to realize that Faith was just plain bossy, no matter who she was dealing with. Maybe it came from being a mother since the age of fifteen, or maybe it was just a natural inclination, but she wasn't comfortable unless she was doing everything herself.

With Jeremy off to college and Victor Martinez apparently out of the picture, Will was taking the brunt of her bossiness. He supposed this was what it was like to have an older sister. But then again, Angie acted the same way with Will and he was sleeping with her. When she was around.

Faith said, "Amanda should already have the autopsy report on Jacquelyn Zabel by now." She typed as she talked. "What do we have? No fingerprints or trace evidence to follow. Plenty of DNA in sperm and blood, but no matches so far. No ID or even last name on Anna. An attacker who blinds his victims, punches out their eardrums, makes them drink Drano. The trash bags ... shit, I can't even begin to understand that. He tortures them with God knows what. One had a rib removed ..." She hit the arrow key, going back to add something earlier in the line. "Zabel was probably going to be next."

"The aspirin," Will said. The aspirin found in Jacquelyn Zabel's stomach was ten times more than the average person would take.

"Nice of him to give them something for their pain." Faith arrowed back down the screen. "Can you imagine? Trapped in that cave, can't hear him coming,

can't see what he's doing, can't scream for help." Faith clicked the mouse, sending the email, then sat back in the chair. "Eleven trash bags. How did Sara miss that on the first victim?"

"I don't imagine you stop to do a pelvic exam when a woman comes in with nearly every bone in her body broken and one foot in the grave."

"Don't get testy with me," she said, though Will didn't think he was being testy at all. "She doesn't belong in the middle of this case."

"Who?"

Faith rolled her eyes, using the mouse to click open the browser.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I'm going to look her up. Her husband was a cop when he died. I'm sure whatever happened to him made the news."

"That's not fair."

"Fair?" Faith tapped the keyboard. "What do you mean, 'fair'?"

"Faith, don't intrude in her personal—"

She hit the enter key. Will didn't know what else to do, so he reached down and unplugged the computer. Faith jiggled the mouse, then pressed the space bar. The building was old—the power was always going off. She glanced up, noticing the lights were still on.

"Did you turn off the computer?"

"If Sara Linton wanted you to know the details of her personal life, then she would tell you."

"You'd think you'd have better posture with that stick up your ass." Faith crossed her arms, giving him a sharp look. "Don't you think it's weird how she's inserting herself into our investigation? I mean, she's not a coroner anymore. She's a civilian. If she wasn't so pretty, you'd see how strange—"

"What does her beauty have to do with anything?"

Faith was kind enough to let his words hang over their heads like a neon sign flashing *idiot*. She gave it almost a full minute to burn out before saying, "Don't forget I have a computer in my office. I can look her up there just as easily."

"Whatever you find out, I don't want to know."

Faith rubbed her face with her hands. She stared at the gray sky outside the window for another solid minute. "This is crazy. We're spinning our wheels here. We need a break, something to follow."

"Pauline McGhee—"

"Leo is drawing a blank on the brother. He says her house is clean—no documents, no indication of parents, relatives. No record of an alias, but that's easy enough to hide if you pay the right people enough money. Pauline's neighbors haven't changed their story, either: They either don't know her or don't like her. Either way, they can't tell us anything about her life. He talked to the teachers at the kid's school. Same thing. I mean, Christ, her son is in care right now because the mother doesn't have any close friends who are willing to take him."

"What's Leo doing now?"

She checked her watch. "Probably trying to figure out how to knock off early." She rubbed her eyes again, obviously tired. "He's running McGhee's fingerprints, but that's a long shot unless she's ever been arrested."

"Is he still worried about us treading on his case?"

"Even more so than before." Faith pressed her lips together. "I bet it's because he's been sick. They do that, you know—look at what your insurance is costing, try to push you out if you're too much of a drain on the system. God forbid you have a chronic disease that requires expensive medication."

Thankfully, that wasn't something Will or Faith had to worry about yet. He said, "Pauline's abduction could be separate from our case, something as simple as an argument that set off her brother, or a stranger abduction. She's an attractive woman."

"If she's not connected to our case, it's more likely someone she knew is involved."

"So, that's the brother."

"She wouldn't have warned the kid about him unless she was worried." Faith added, "Of course, there's also that Morgan guy—arrogant bastard. I was ready to slap him through the phone when I talked to him. Maybe there was something going on between him and Pauline."

"They worked together. She could've pushed him too far and he snapped. That happens a lot when men work with bossy women."

"Ha-ha," Faith allowed. "Wouldn't Felix recognize Morgan if he was the abductor?"

Will shrugged. Kids could block out anything. Adults weren't bad at it, either.

Faith pointed out, "Neither of our two known victims has children. Neither of them has been reported missing, as far as we know. Jacquelyn Zabel's car is gone. We have no idea if Anna has a car, since we don't even know her last name." Her tone was getting sharper as she ticked off each dead end. "Or her first name. It could be something other than Anna. Who knows what Sara heard?"

"I heard it," Will defended. "I heard her say 'Anna.'"

Faith skipped over his response. "Do you still think there might be two abductors?"

"I'm not sure about anything right now, except that whoever is doing this is no amateur. His DNA is everywhere, which means he probably doesn't have a criminal record he's worried about. We don't have any clues because he didn't leave any. He's good at this. He knows how to cover his tracks."

"A cop?"

Will let the question go unanswered.

Faith reasoned it out. "There's something he's doing that makes women trust him—lets him get close enough to snatch them without anyone seeing."

"The suit," Will said. "Women—men, too—are more likely to trust a well-dressed stranger. It's a class judgment, but it's true."

"Great. We just need to round up all the men in Atlanta who were wearing suits this morning." She held up her fingers, ticking off a list. "No fingerprints on the trash bags found in either woman. Nothing to trace on any of the items found in the cave. The bloody print on Jacquelyn Zabel's driver's license belongs to Anna. We don't know her last name. We don't know where she lived or worked or if she has family." Faith had run out of fingers.

"The abductor obviously has a method. He's patient. He excavates the cave, gets it ready for his captives. Like you said, he probably watches the women before he abducts them. He's done this before. Who knows how many times."

"Yeah, but his victims haven't lived to talk about it, or we'd have something come up in the FBI database."

Will's desk phone rang, and Faith picked it up. "Mitchell." She listened for a few beats, then took her notepad out of her purse. She wrote in neat block letters, but Will was incapable of deciphering the words. "Can you follow up on that?" She waited. "Great. Call me on my cell."

She hung up the phone. "That was Leo. The prints came back from Pauline McGhee's SUV. Her real name is Pauline Agnes Seward. She had a missing persons report filed in Ann Arbor, Michigan, back in '89. She was seventeen. According to the report, her parents said there was some kind of argument that set things off. She was off the straight and narrow—doing drugs, sleeping around. Her prints were on file because of a shoplifting rap she pleaded *nolo* on. The locals made a cursory search, put her in the database, but this is the first hit they've had in twenty years."

"That jibes with what Morgan said. Pauline told him she ran away from home when she was seventeen. What about the brother?"

"Nothing came up. Leo's going to do a deeper background search." Faith put the pad back in her pocketbook. "He's trying to track down the parents. Hopefully they're still in Michigan."

"Seward doesn't sound like a common name."

"It's not," she agreed. "Something would've come up in the computer if the brother was involved in a serious crime."

"Do we have an age range? A name?"

"Leo said he'd get back to us as soon as he found something."

Will sat back in his chair, leaned his head against the wall. "Pauline still isn't part of our case. We don't have a pattern to match her with."

"She looks like our other victims. No one likes her. She's not close to anyone."

"She might be close to her brother," Will said. "Leo says Pauline had Felix through a sperm donor, right? Maybe the brother is the donor?"

Faith made a noise of disgust. "God, Will."

Her tone made him feel guilty for suggesting such a thing, but the fact was their job was all about thinking of the worst things that could happen. "Why else would Pauline warn her son that his uncle is a bad man she needed to protect him from?"

Faith was reluctant to answer. Finally, she said, "Sexual abuse."

"I could be way off," he admitted. "Her brother could be a thief or an embezzler or a drug addict. He could be a con."

"If a Seward had a record in Michigan, Leo would have already pulled him up on the computer search."

"Maybe the brother's been lucky."

Faith shook her head. "Pauline was scared of him, didn't want her son around him. That points to violence, or fear of violence."

"Like you said, if the brother was threatening or stalking her, there'd be a report somewhere."

"Not necessarily. He's still her brother. People don't run to the police when it's a family matter. You know that."

Will wasn't so sure, but she had a point about Leo's computer search. "What would make you warn Jeremy away from your brother?"

She gave it some thought. "I can't think of anything Zeke could do that would make me tell Jeremy not to talk to him."

"What if he hit you?"

She opened her mouth to answer, then seemed to change her mind. "It's not about whether I would put up with it—it's about what Pauline would do." Faith was quiet, thinking. "Families are complicated. People put up with a lot of shit because of blood."

"Blackmail?" Will knew he was grasping at straws, but he continued, "Maybe the brother knew something bad about Pauline's past? There has to be a reason she changed her name at seventeen. Fast-forward to now. Pauline has a lucrative job. She's good on her mortgage. She drives a nice car. She'd probably be willing to pay a lot of money to keep it that way."

Will shot down his own idea. "On the other hand, if the brother is blackmailing her, he needs her to keep working. There's no reason to take her."

"It's not like she's being held for ransom. Nobody cares that she's gone."

Will shook his head. Another dead end.

Faith said, "Okay, maybe Pauline's not involved in our case. Maybe she's got some kind of weird *Flowers in the Attic* thing going on with her brother. What do we do now? Just sit around and wait for a third—or fourth—woman to be taken?"

Will didn't know how to answer that. Fortunately, he didn't have to.

Faith looked at her watch. "Let's go talk to the Coldfields."

There were children at the Fred Street Women's Shelter—something Will hadn't anticipated, though of course it made sense that homeless women would also have homeless children. A small area at the front of the shelter was cordoned off for their play. Their ages were varied, but he assumed they were all under the age of six, because the older kids would be in school this time of day. All the children were dressed in mismatched, faded clothes and playing with toys that had seen better days: Barbie dolls with short haircuts, Tonka toys with missing wheels. Will supposed he should have felt sad for them, because watching them play was much like a scene from his own childhood, but the exception here was that these kids had at least one parent who was looking out for them, one connection to the normal world.

"Good Lord," Faith mumbled, digging into her purse. There was a jar for donations on the counter by the front entrance, and she shoved in a couple of tens. "Who's watching these kids?"

Will looked down the hall. The walls were decorated with paper Easter cutouts and some of the children's drawings. He saw a closed door with the symbol for a women's restroom. "She's probably in the toilet."

"Anyone could snatch them."

Will didn't think many people wanted these children. That was part of the problem.

"Ring bell for service," Faith said, he supposed reading from the sign below the bell, which even a monkey could have figured out.

Will reached over and rang the bell.

She said, "They do computer training here."

“What?”

Faith picked up one of the brochures on the counter. Will saw pictures of smiling women and children on the front, a couple of corporate logos that named the big-money sponsors along the bottom. “Computer training, counseling, meals.” Her eyes went back and forth as she skimmed the text. “Medical counseling with a Christian focus.” She dropped the pamphlet back in with the others. “I guess that means they tell you you’re going to hell if you have an abortion. Good advice for women who’ve already got one mouth they can’t afford to feed.” She tapped the bell again, this time hard enough to make it spin off the counter.

Will picked up the bell from the floor. When he stood, he found a large Hispanic woman behind the counter, an infant in her arms. She spoke in a distinctive Texas drawl, her words directed toward Faith. “If you’re here to arrest someone, we ask that you don’t do it in front of the children.”

“We’re here to talk to Judith Coldfield,” Faith replied, keeping her voice low, mindful that the kids were not only watching but had guessed her occupation just like the woman.

“Walk around the side of the building to the storefront. Judith’s working retail today.” She didn’t wait for a thank-you. Instead, she turned around with the child and went back down the hallway.

Faith pushed open the door, heading out into the street again. “These places annoy the hell out of me.”

Will thought a homeless shelter was a strange thing to hate, even for Faith. “Why is that?”

“Just help them. Don’t make them pray about it.”

“Some people find solace in prayer.”

“What if they don’t? Then they’re not worthy of being helped? You may be homeless and starving to death, but you can’t have a free meal or a safe place to sleep unless you agree that abortion is an abomination and that other people have the right to tell you what to do with your body?”

Will wasn’t sure how to answer her, so he just followed her around the side of the brick building, watching her angrily hitch her purse up on her shoulder. She was still mumbling when they rounded the corner to the storefront. There was a large sign out front that probably had the name of the shelter on it. The economy was bad for everybody these days, but especially for charities who depended on people feeling flush enough to help their fellow man. Many of the local shelters took in donations that they sold in order to help pay for basic operations. Window lettering advertised various items inside the store. Faith read them off as they walked to the entrance.

“Housewares, linens, clothes, donations welcome, free pickup for larger items.”

Will opened the door, willing her to shut up.

“‘Open every day but Sunday.’ ‘No dogs allowed.’”

“I got it,” he told her, glancing around the store. Blenders were lined up on a shelf, toasters and small microwaves underneath. There were some clothes on racks, mostly the kind of styles that were very popular during the eighties. Canned soups and various pantry staples were stored away from the sun streaming in through the windows. Will’s stomach grumbled, and he

remembered sorting cans of food that came into the orphanage over the holidays. Nobody ever gave the good stuff. It was usually Spam and pickled beets, just the sort of thing every kid wanted for Christmas dinner.

Faith had found another sign. “‘All donations are tax deductible. Proceeds go directly to help homeless women and children. God blesses those who bless others.’”

He realized that his jaw was aching from clenching his teeth so hard. Luckily, he didn’t have to dwell on the pain for long. A man popped up from behind the counter like Mr. Drucker from *Green Acres*. “How y’all doin’?”

Faith’s hand flew to her chest. “Who the hell are you?”

The man blushed so hard that Will could almost feel the heat coming off his face. “Sorry, ma’am.” He wiped his hand on the front of his T-shirt. Black finger marks showed where he had done this many times before. “Tom Coldfield. I’m helping my mom with ...” He indicated the floor behind the counter. Will saw he was working on a push-style lawnmower. The engine was partially disassembled. It looked like he was trying to put on a new fan belt, which hardly explained why the carburetor was on the floor.

Will told him, “There’s a nut on the—”

Faith interrupted. “I’m Special Agent Faith Mitchell. This is my partner, Will Trent. We’re here to meet with Judith and Henry Coldfield. I assume you’re related?”

“My folks,” the man explained, a prominent pair of buckteeth sticking out as he smiled at Faith. “They’re in the back. Dad’s kind of unhappy about missing his golf game.” He seemed to realize how inconsequential this seemed to them. “Sorry, I know what happened to that woman was awful. It’s just that—well—they told that other detective everything that happened.”

Faith kept up her sweet side. “I’m sure they won’t mind telling us again.”

Tom Coldfield seemed to disagree, but he motioned for them to follow him to the back room anyway. Will let Faith go ahead of him, and they all had to pick their way around boxes and various piles of items that had been donated to the shelter. Will guessed Tom Coldfield had been athletic at one point in his life, but his early thirties had beaten that out of him, giving a round spread to his waist and a stoop to his shoulders. There was a bald spot on the crown of his head, almost like a tonsure that a Franciscan monk would sport. Without even asking, Will guessed that Tom Coldfield had a couple of kids. He looked like a textbook soccer dad. He probably drove a minivan and played online fantasy football.

Tom said, “Sorry about the mess. We’re short volunteers.”

Faith asked, “Do you work here?”

“Oh, no. I’d go crazy if I did.” He gave a chuckle at what must have been Faith’s surprised reaction. “I’m an air traffic controller. My mom guilts me into helping out when they’re shorthanded.”

“Were you in the military?”

“Air Force—six years. How’d you guess?”

Faith shrugged. “Easiest way to get training.” Then, probably to build a rapport with the man, she added, “My brother’s in the Air Force, stationed in Germany.”

Tom moved a box out of their way. “Ramstein?”

“Landstuhl. He’s a surgeon.”

"That's a bad mess over there. Your brother's doing the Lord's work."

Faith was in cop mode now, her personal opinions set aside. "He certainly is."

Tom stopped in front of a closed door and knocked. Will looked down the hallway, seeing the other end of the shelter, the counter they'd stood in front of while they waited for the woman to come out of the bathroom. Faith noticed this, too, and she rolled her eyes at Will as Tom opened the door.

"Mom, this is Detective Trent and—I'm sorry, is it Mitchell?"

"Yes," Faith confirmed.

Tom introduced his parents, though this was certainly a formality as the room contained only two people. Judith was sitting behind a desk, a ledger opened in front of her. Henry was in a chair by the window. He had a newspaper in his hands, and he shook the paper, creasing it carefully before he gave Will and Faith his attention. Tom hadn't been lying when he'd said his father was annoyed about missing his golf game. Henry Coldfield looked like a parody of a grumpy old man.

"Should I get some more chairs?" Tom offered. He didn't wait for a response, disappearing before anyone could answer. The office was regular-size, which was to say it was big enough for four people to occupy without knocking elbows. Still, Will stood in the doorway while Faith took the only other vacant chair in the room. Normally, they figured out ahead of time who would do the talking, but they were going into this interview cold. When Will looked to Faith for guidance, she only shrugged. The family was hard to read. They would have to figure this out as they went along. The first step in an interview was to make the witness feel comfortable. People didn't tend to open up and start being helpful until you made them realize that you weren't the enemy. Since she was sitting closest to them, Faith started.

"Mr. and Mrs. Coldfield, thank you for meeting with us. I know you already spoke to Detective Galloway, but what you went through the other night was very traumatic. Sometimes it takes a few days before you remember everything."

"We've never really had anything like this happen to us before," Judith Coldfield said, and Will wondered if she thought people routinely rammed their cars into women who had been raped and tortured in an underground cavern.

Henry seemed to realize this as well. "Judith."

"Oh, dear." Judith put her hand to her mouth, covering the embarrassed smile on her face. Will saw where Tom had gotten his buckteeth as well as his easy blush. The woman explained, "I meant to say, we've never talked to the police before." She patted her husband's hand. "Henry got a speeding ticket once, but once was enough. When was that, dear?"

"Summer of '83," Henry answered, the set to his jaw indicating he still hadn't gotten over the experience. He looked at Will as he spoke, as if only a man would understand. "Seven miles over the limit."

Will tried to think of something that sounded commiserating, but his mind drew a blank. He asked Judith, "You're from up North?"

"Is it that obvious?" She laughed, putting her hand to her mouth again, covering her smile. She was painfully self-conscious about her protruding teeth. "Pennsylvania."

"Is that where you lived before you retired?"

"Oh, no," Judith said. "Henry's job moved us around a bit. Mostly in the

Northwest. We lived in Oregon, Washington State, California—but we didn't like that, did we?" Henry made a grumpy sound. "We were in Oklahoma, but not for long. Have you ever been? It's so flat there."

Faith cut to the chase. "How about Michigan?"

Judith shook her head, but Henry supplied, "I saw a football game in Michigan back in '71. Michigan and Ohio State. Ten to seven. Nearly froze to death."

Faith lighted on the opportunity to draw him out. "You're a football fan?"

"Can't stand it." His frown seemed to indicate he was still unhappy about the situation, though most people would kill to see a rivalry game.

"Henry was a salesman," Judith supplied. "He traveled around quite a bit even before that. His father was in the Army for thirty years."

Faith took over, trying to find a way to open up the man. "My grandfather was Army."

Judith jumped in again. "Henry had a college deferment for the war." Will guessed she meant Vietnam. "We had friends who served, of course, and Tom was in the Air Force, which we're really proud of. Isn't that right, Tom?"

Will hadn't realized Tom was back. The Coldfields' son smiled an apology. "Sorry, no more chairs. The kids are using them to build a fort."

"Where were you stationed?" Faith asked him.

"I was at Keesler both tours," he answered. "I started out my training, then worked my way up to the Three-thirty-fourth's master sergeant in charge of tower class fundamentals. They were talking about sending me to Altus when I put in for discharge."

"I was going to ask you why you left the Air Force, then I remembered Keesler's in Mississippi."

The blush came back in full force, and Tom gave an embarrassed laugh. "Yes, ma'am."

Faith turned her attention to Henry, probably guessing that they wouldn't get much from Judith without Henry's blessing. "Ever leave stateside?"

"Always stayed in the U.S."

"You have an Army accent," Faith noted, which Will gathered meant he had no accent at all.

Henry's reticence seemed to slowly melt away under Faith's attention. "You go where they tell you to go."

"That's exactly what my brother said when he shipped overseas." Faith leaned forward. "If you want the truth, I think he likes moving around all the time, never putting down roots."

Henry started to open up some more. "Married?"

"Nope."

"Lady in every port?"

"Lord, I hope not." Faith laughed. "As far as my mother's concerned, it was the Air Force or the priesthood."

Henry chuckled. "Most mothers feel that way about their sons." He squeezed his wife's hand, and Judith beamed proudly at Tom.

Faith turned her attention to the son. "You said you're an air traffic controller?"

"Yes, ma'am," he answered, though Faith was probably younger than Tom.

Tom told them, "I work out of Charlie Brown." He meant the general aviation airport just west of Atlanta. "Been there about ten years. It's a nice gig. Sometimes we handle Dobbins traffic overnight." Dobbins was an Air Force base just outside the city. "I bet your brother's flown out of there before."

"I bet he has," Faith agreed, keeping eye contact with the man just long enough to make him feel flattered. "You live out in Conyers now?"

"Yes, ma'am." Tom smiled openly, his buckteeth jutting out like tusks on an elephant. He was more relaxed now, talkative. "I moved to Atlanta when I left Keesler." He nodded toward his mother. "I was real happy when my parents decided to move down here."

"They're on Clairmont Road, right?"

Tom nodded, still smiling. "Close enough to visit without having to pack a suitcase."

Judith didn't seem to like the easy rapport that was developing between the two. She quickly inserted herself back into the conversation. "Tom's wife loves her flower garden." She started to rummage around in her purse. "Mark, his son, is obsessed with aviation. Every day, he looks more and more like his father."

"Mom, they don't need to see—"

He was too late. Judith pulled out a photograph and handed it to Faith, who made the proper appreciative noises before passing it to Will.

He kept his expression neutral as he looked at the family photo. The Coldfield genes were certainly strong. The girl and boy in the picture were carbon copies of their father. Making matters worse, Tom had not found himself an attractive wife to dilute the Coldfield gene pool. She had stringy-looking blonde hair and a resigned set to her mouth that seemed to indicate this was as good as it would ever get.

"Darla," Judith supplied, naming the wife. "They've been married for almost ten years. Isn't that right, Tom?"

He shrugged in that embarrassed way children shrug at their parents.

"Very nice," Will said, handing the picture back to Judith.

Judith asked Faith, "Do you have children?"

"A son." Faith didn't offer any more information. Instead she asked Judith, "Is Tom an only child?"

"That's right." Judith smiled again, covering her mouth. "Henry and I didn't think we'd be able to ..." Her voice trailed off, and she just stared at Tom with obvious pride. "He was a miracle."

Again Tom shrugged, obviously embarrassed.

Faith subtly shifted the topic onto the reason they were all here. "And you were visiting Tom and his family the day of the accident?"

Judith nodded. "He wanted to do something nice for our fortieth anniversary. Didn't you, Tom?" Her voice took on a distant quality. "Such a horrible thing to happen. I don't think another anniversary will go by without remembering ..."

Tom spoke. "I don't understand how this could happen. How could that woman—" He shook his head. "It makes no sense. Who the hell would do something like that?"

"Tom," Judith shushed. "Language."

Faith gave Will a glance that indicated she was using every ounce of willpower in her body not to roll her eyes. She recovered quickly, directing her

words toward the elderly couple. "I know you've already told Detective Galloway everything, but let's start fresh from the beginning. You were driving down the road, you saw the woman, and then ...?"

"Well," Judith began. "At first I thought it might be a deer. We've seen deer on the side of the road many times. Henry always goes slow if it's dark in case one darts out."

"They see the lights and it just freezes them," Henry explained, as if a deer caught in headlights was an obscure phenomenon.

"It wasn't dark," Judith continued. "It was dusk, I suppose. And I saw this thing in the road. I opened my mouth to tell Henry, but it was too late. We had already hit it. *Her*." She took out a tissue from her purse and pressed it to her eyes. "Those nice men tried to help her, but I don't think—surely, after all that ..."

Henry took his wife's hand again. "Has she ... is the woman ...?"

"She's still in the hospital," Faith provided. "They're not sure if she'll ever regain consciousness."

"My Lord," Judith breathed, almost a prayer. "I hope she doesn't."

"Mother—" Tom's voice rose in surprise.

"I know that sounds mean, but I hope she never knows."

The family went quiet. Tom looked at his father. Henry's throat worked, and Will could tell the man was starting to get overwhelmed by his memories. "Thought I was having a heart attack," he managed around a harsh laugh.

Judith lowered her voice, confiding as if her husband were not right beside her, "Henry has heart issues."

"Nothing bad," he countered. "Stupid air bag hit me square in the chest. Safety device, they call it. Damn thing almost killed me."

Faith asked, "Mr. Coldfield, did you see the woman on the road?"

Henry nodded. "It's what Judith said. It was too late to stop. I wasn't speeding. I was going the posted limit. I saw something—thought it was a deer, like she said. Jammed my foot on the brake. She just appeared out of nowhere. Right out of nowhere. I still didn't think it was a woman until we got out of the car and saw her there. Awful. Just awful."

"Have you always worn glasses?" Will broached the subject carefully.

"I'm an amateur pilot. Get my eyes checked twice a year." He took off the glasses, his feathers ruffled but his tone steady. "I may be old, but I'm flight ready. No cataracts, corrected to twenty-twenty."

Will decided he might as well get it all out of the way. "And your heart?"

Judith intervened. "It's nothing really. Just something to keep an eye on, make sure he's not straining himself too much."

Henry took over, still indignant. "Nothing that concerns the doctors. I take some horse pills. I don't do any heavy lifting. I'm fine."

Faith tried to soothe him, changing the subject. "An Army brat flying airplanes?"

Henry seemed to be debating whether or not to let the topic of his health go. Finally, he answered, "My dad got me lessons when I was a kid. We were stationed up in Nowhere, Alaska. He thought it was a good way to keep me out of trouble."

Faith smiled, helping him relax again. "Good flying weather?"

"If you were lucky." He laughed, wistful. "Had to be careful landing—cold wind would whip that plane around like a flyswatter. Some days, I'd just close my eyes and hope I touched down on the field and not in the ice."

"Cold field," Faith pointed out, making a play on his name.

"Right," Henry said, as if he'd heard the pun many times. He put his glasses back on, all business. "Listen, I'm not one to tell other people how to go about their business, but why aren't you asking us about that other car?"

"What other car?" Faith echoed. "The one that stopped to help?"

"No, the other one we saw streaking down the road, opposite. It must have been about two minutes before we hit that girl."

Judith filled their stunned silence. "Surely you know this already. We told the other policeman all about it."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The drive to the Rockdale County police station was a blur that Faith filled with every expletive she could think of.

"I knew that jackass was lying to me," she said, cursing Max Galloway and the entire Rockdale police force. "You should've seen that smug way he looked at me when he left the hospital." She slammed her palm into the steering wheel, wishing she were slamming it into Galloway's Adam's apple. "Do they think this is some kind of game? Didn't they see what was done to that woman? For the love of God."

Beside her, Will remained silent. As usual, she had no idea what was going through his mind. He'd been quiet the entire trip, and did not speak until she pulled into the visitors' parking lot in front of the Rockdale County police station.

He asked, "Are you finished being mad?"

"Hell, no, I'm not finished. They lied to us. They haven't even faxed us the damn crime-scene report. How the hell can we work a case when they're holding back information that could—"

"Think about why they did it," Will countered. "One woman is dead, the other's just as good as, and they're still hiding evidence from us. They don't care about the people involved, Faith. All they care about is their egos, and showing us up. They're leaking information to the press, they're refusing to cooperate. You think us going in there with guns blazing is going to get us what we want?"

Faith opened her mouth to answer, but Will was already getting out of the car. He walked around to the driver's side and opened her door like they were on a date.

He told her, "Trust me on this one thing, Faith. You can't push a string."

She waved his hand away. "I'm not going to eat shit from Max Galloway."

"I'll eat it," he assured her, holding out his hand like she needed help getting out of the car.

Faith grabbed her purse from the back seat. She followed him up the sidewalk, thinking it was no wonder everyone who met Will Trent took him for a certified public accountant. She could not fathom the man's meagerness of ego. In the year she had worked with him, the strongest emotion she'd seen Will display was irritation, usually at her. He could be moody or wistful and God knew he could beat himself up about a lot of things, but she'd never seen him truly angry. He'd once been alone in a room with a suspect who had just hours before tried to put a bullet in his head, and the only feeling Will had shown was empathy.

The uniformed patrolman behind the front counter obviously recognized Will. His lip went up into a sneer. "Trent."

"Detective Fierro," Will replied, though the man was obviously no longer a detective. His sizable stomach pressed against the buttons of his patrol uniform like the filling oozing out of a jelly doughnut. Considering what Fierro had said

to Amanda about greasing Lyle Peterson's pole, Faith was surprised the man wasn't using a wheelchair.

Fierro said, "I should've put that board back over your head and left you in that cave."

"I'm really glad you didn't." Will indicated Faith. "This is my partner, Special Agent Mitchell. We need to speak with Detective Max Galloway."

"About what?"

Faith was over the niceties. She opened her mouth to blast him, but Will cut her off with a look.

He said, "Maybe we could talk to Chief Peterson if Detective Galloway isn't available."

Faith added, "Or we could talk to your buddy Sam Lawson at the *Atlanta Beacon* and tell him those stories you've been feeding him are just your way of covering your fat ass for all the mistakes you've made in this case."

"You are some kind of bitch, lady."

"I haven't even started," Faith told him. "Get Galloway out here right now before we put our boss on this. She already took your shield. What do you think she's going to take next? My guess is your little—"

"Faith," Will said, more a warning than a word.

Fierro picked up the phone, punched in an extension. "Max, you got a couple'a cocksuckers wanna talk to you." He dropped the phone back into the cradle. "Down the hall, take your first right, first room on the left."

Faith led the way because Will would not know how to. The station was the usual 1960s government building with plenty of glass block and very poor ventilation. The walls were lined with commendations, photographs of police officers at city barbecues and fundraisers. As instructed, she took a right and stopped in front of the first door on the left.

Faith read the sign on the door. "Asshole," she breathed. He'd sent them to an interrogation room.

Will leaned across and opened the door. She saw him register the table bolted to the floor, the bars running along the sides so that suspects could be cuffed down while they were interviewed. All he said was, "Ours is more homey."

There were two chairs, one on either side of the table. Faith threw her purse on the one with its back to the two-way mirror, crossing her arms, not wanting to be sitting when Galloway entered the room. "This is bullshit. We should get Amanda involved in this. She wouldn't put up with this goat roping."

Will leaned against the wall, tucked his hands into his pockets. "If we get Amanda in on this, then they've got absolutely nothing to lose. Let them save a little face by jerking us around. What does it matter, if we get the information we need?"

She glanced at the two-way mirror, wondering if there was a peanut gallery. "I'm filing a formal report when this is over. Obstruction of justice, impeding an active case, lying to a police officer. They bumped that fat fuck Fierro back to uniform. Galloway's gonna be lucky if he gets to be county dogcatcher."

Down the hall, she heard a door open, then click closed. Seconds later, Galloway stood in the doorway, looking every bit the ignorant hick he had the night before.

"I heard you wanted to talk to me."

Faith told him, "We just talked to the Coldfields."

Galloway nodded at Will, who returned the gesture, his back still against the wall.

Faith demanded, "Is there a reason you didn't tell me about the other car last night?"

"I thought I had."

"Bullshit." Faith didn't know which was making her angrier, the fact that he was playing at this like it was some kind of game or that she felt compelled to use the same tone she used when she was about to put Jeremy on restriction.

Galloway held up his hands, smiling at Will. "Your partner always this hysterical? Maybe it's her time of month."

Faith felt her fists clench. He was about to see hysterical in the worst way.

"Listen," Will interrupted, stepping between the two of them. "Just tell us about the car, and anything else you know. We're not going to make trouble for you. We don't want to have to get this information the hard way." Will walked over to the chair and picked up Faith's purse before sitting down. He kept the bag in his lap, which made him look ridiculous, a man standing outside the changing room while his wife tried on clothes.

He indicated that Galloway should sit across from him, saying, "We've got one victim in the hospital who's probably in an irreversible coma. Jacquelyn Zabel, the woman from the tree, her autopsy didn't give us any leads. There's another woman missing now. She was taken from the parking lot of a grocery store. Her child was left in the front seat. Felix—six years old. He's in custody now, staying with strangers. He just wants his mom back."

Galloway was unmoved.

Will continued, "They didn't give you that detective shield for your good looks. There were roadblocks last night. You knew about the second car the Coldfields saw. You were stopping people." He changed tactics. "We didn't go to your boss on this. We didn't get our boss to come down like a hammer. We don't have the luxury of time here. Felix's mom is missing. She could be in another cave, strapped to another bed, with another spot underneath for the next victim. You want that on your head?"

Finally, Galloway heaved a heavy sigh and sat down. He leaned up in the chair, pulling his notebook out of his back pocket, groaning like it caused him physical pain.

Galloway said, "They told you it was white, probably a sedan?"

"Yes," Will answered. "Henry Coldfield didn't know the model. He said it was an older car."

Galloway nodded. He handed Will his notebook. Will looked down, flipped through the pages like he was taking the information on board, then handed it to Faith. She saw a list of three names with a Tennessee address and phone number. She took her purse back from Will so she could copy the information.

The detective said, "Two women—sisters—and their father. They were on their way back from Florida, going home to Tennessee. Their car broke down on the side of the road about six miles from where the Buick hit our first victim. They saw a white sedan coming. One of the women tried to flag it down. It slowed but didn't stop."

"Could she see the driver?"

"Black, baseball cap, loud music thumping. She said she was kind of glad he didn't stop."

"Did they see a license plate?"

"Just three letters, alpha, foxtrot, charlie, which pulled up about three hundred thousand cars, sixteen thousand of them are white, half of them are registered in the immediate area."

Faith wrote down the corresponding letters, A-F-C, thinking the license plate was a bust unless they just happened to stumble on the matching car. She flipped through Galloway's notes, trying to find what else he was hiding.

Will said, "I'd like to talk to all three of them."

"Too late," Galloway said. "They went back to Tennessee this morning. The father's an old guy, not doing too well. Sounded like they were taking him home to die. You could call them, maybe drive up there. I'm telling you, though, we got everything out of them that we could."

Will asked, "Was there anything else at the scene?"

"Just what you read in the reports."

"We haven't gotten the reports yet."

Galloway seemed almost contrite. "Sorry. The girl should've faxed them to you first thing. They're probably buried on her desk somewhere."

"We can get them before we leave," Will offered. "Can you just run it down for me?"

"It's what you'd expect. When the cruiser showed up, the guy who stopped, the paramedic, was working on the victim. Judith Coldfield was freaking out about her husband, worried he was having a heart attack. The ambulance came and took the victim away. The old man was better by then, so he waited for the second ambulance. That came a few minutes later. Our guys called in the detectives, started marking out the scene. The usual stuff. I'm being honest here. Nothing came up."

"We'd like to talk to the cop who was first on the scene, get his impressions."

"He's fishing in Montana with his father-in-law right now." Galloway shrugged. "I'm not giving y'all the runaround here. The guy's had this vacation planned for a while."

Faith had found a familiar name in Galloway's notes. "What's this about Jake Berman?" For Will's benefit, she explained, "Rick Sigler and Jake Berman were the two men who stopped to help Anna."

"Anna?" Galloway asked.

"That's the name she gave at the hospital," Will told him. "Rick Sigler was the off-duty EMT, right?"

"Right," Galloway confirmed. "Their story about the movie seemed kind of sketchy to me."

Faith made a noise of disgust, wondering how many dead ends this guy had to hit before he passed out from sheer stupidity.

"Anyway," Galloway said, making a point of ignoring Faith. "I ran them both through the computer. Sigler's clean, but Berman's got a record."

Faith felt her stomach drop. She'd spent two hours on the computer this morning and it had never occurred to her to check the men for a criminal history.

"Solicitation for lewd acts." Galloway smiled at Faith's stunned reaction.

"Guy's married with two kids. Got picked up for screwing another guy in a toilet stall at the Mall of Georgia six months ago. Some teenage kid walked in and found them heel to toe. Goddamn pervert. My wife shops at that mall."

"Have you talked to Berman?" Will asked.

"He gave me a bogus number." Galloway shot Faith another scathing look. "The address on his driver's license is out of date, too, and nothing came up on a cross-match."

She saw a hole in his story and pounced. "How do you know he has a wife and two kids?"

"It's in the arrest report. He had them with him at the mall. They were waiting for him to come out of the bathroom." Galloway's lips twisted in disgust. "You want my advice, he's the one you should be looking at."

"The women were raped," Faith said, tossing back his notebook. "Gay men don't go after women. It's sort of what makes them gay."

"This bad guy strike you as the type of person who likes women?"

Faith didn't answer him, mostly because he had a point.

Will asked, "What about Rick Sigler?"

Galloway took his time folding his notebook closed, sticking it into his pocket. "He came back clean. Been working as a paramedic for sixteen years. Guy went to Heritage High School right down the road from here." His mouth twisted in disgust. "Played on the football team, if you can believe that."

Will took his time getting to his last question. "What else are you holding back?"

Galloway looked him right in the eye. "That's all I got, kemo sabe."

Faith didn't believe him, but Will seemed satisfied. He actually reached out and shook the man's hand. "Thank you for your time, Detective."

Faith turned on the lights as she walked into her kitchen, dropping her purse on the counter, sinking into the very same chair she'd started her day in. Her head was aching, her neck so tense that it hurt to turn her head. She picked up the phone to check her voicemail. Jeremy's message was short and unusually sweet. "*Hi, Mom, just calling to see how you're doing. I love you.*" Faith frowned, guessing he'd either made a bad grade on his chem test or needed money.

She dialed his number, but hung up the phone before the call went through. Faith was bone tired, so exhausted that her vision was blurring, and she wanted nothing more than a hot bath and a glass of wine, neither of which was recommended for her current state. She did not need to make matters worse by yelling at her son.

Her laptop was still on the table, but Faith didn't check her email. Amanda had told her to report to her office by the end of the day to talk about the fact that Faith had passed out in the parking lot at the courthouse. Faith glanced at the clock on the kitchen stove. It was well past the end of the business day, almost ten o'clock. Amanda was probably at home draining the blood from the insects that had gotten caught in her web.

Faith wondered if her day could get any worse, then decided it was a mathematical improbability, considering the time. She had spent the last five hours with Will, getting in and out of her car, ringing doorbells, talking to

whatever man, woman or child answered the door—if they answered the door at all—looking for Jake Berman. All told, there were twenty-three Jake Bermans scattered around the metropolitan area. Faith and Will had talked to six of them, ruled out twelve, and been unable to find the other five, who were either not at home, not at work, or not answering the door.

If finding the man was easier, maybe Faith wouldn't have been so worried about him. Witnesses lied to the police all the time. They gave wrong names, wrong phone numbers, wrong details. It was so common that Faith seldom got annoyed when it happened. Jake Berman was another story, though. Everyone left a paper trail. You could pull up old cell phone records or past addresses and pretty soon, you were staring your witness in the face, pretending like you hadn't wasted half a day tracking him down.

Jake Berman didn't have a paper trail. He hadn't even filed a tax return last year. At least, he hadn't filed one in the name of Jake Berman—which in turn raised the specter of Pauline McGhee's brother. Maybe Berman had changed his name just like Pauline Seward. Maybe Faith had sat across the table from their killer in the Grady Hospital cafeteria the first night this case had started.

Or maybe Jake Berman was a tax dodger who never used credit cards or cell phones and Pauline McGhee had walked away from her life because sometimes that's what women did—they just walked away.

Faith was beginning to understand how that option had its benefits.

In between knocking on doors, Will had telephoned Beulah, Edna and Wallace O'Connor of Tennessee. Max Galloway had not been lying about the elderly father. The man was in a home, and Faith gathered from Will's part of the conversation that his mind was none too sharp. The sisters were talkative, and obviously tried to be helpful, but there was nothing more they could offer on the white sedan they'd seen barreling down the road just miles from the crime scene other than to say there was mud on the bumper.

Finding Rick Sigler, the focus of Jake Berman's Route 316 assignation, had been only slightly more productive. Faith had made the call, and the man had sounded as if he was going to have a heart attack the second she'd identified herself. Rick was in his ambulance, taking a patient to the hospital, scheduled for two more pickups. Faith and Will were going to meet him at eight the following morning when he got off work.

Faith stared at her laptop. She knew that she should put this in a report so that Amanda had the information, though her boss seemed quite capable of finding out things on her own. Still, Faith went through the motions. She slid her computer across the table, opened it and hit the space bar to wake it up.

Instead of going into her email program, she launched the browser. Faith's hands hovered over the keys, then her fingers started to move of their own accord: SARA LINTON GRANT COUNTY GEORGIA.

Firefox shot back almost three thousand hits. Faith clicked on the first link, which took her to a page on pediatric medicine that required a username and password to access Sara's paper on ventricular septal defects in malnourished infants. The second link was on something equally as riveting, and Faith scrolled down to the bottom to find an article about a shooting at a Buckhead bar where Sara had been the attending on call at Grady.

Faith realized she was being stupid about this. A general search was fine, but

even the newspaper articles would tell only half the story. In an officer-involved death, the GBI was always called in. Faith could access actual case files through the agency's internal database. She opened the program and did a general search. Again Sara's name was all over the place, case after case where she had testified in her capacity as a coroner. Faith narrowed the scope of the search, taking out expert testimony.

This time, only two matches came up. The first was a sexual assault case that was over twenty years old. As with most browsers, there was a short description of the contents underneath the link, a few lines of text that gave you an idea of what the case was about. Faith scanned the description, moving the mouse to the link without actually clicking. Will's words came back to her, his valiant speech about Sara Linton's privacy.

Maybe he was half right.

Faith clicked the second link, opening up the file on Jeffrey Tolliver. This was a cop killing. The reports were lengthy, detailed, the kind of narrative you wrote when you wanted to make sure that every single word held up when you were cross-examined in court. Faith read about the man's background, his years of service to the law. There were hyperlinks connecting the cases he had worked, some of which Faith was familiar with from the news, some she knew about from shoptalk around the squad room.

She scrolled through page after page, reading about Tolliver's life, gleaning the character of the man from the respectful way people described him. Faith didn't stop until she got to the crime-scene photos. Tolliver had been killed by a crude pipe bomb. Sara had been standing right there, seen it all happen, watched him die. Faith braced herself, opening up the autopsy files. The pictures were shocking, the damage horrifying. Somehow, photographs from the scene had gotten mixed in: Sara with her hands out so the camera could document the blood spray. Sara's face, caught in close-up, dark blood smearing her mouth, eyes looking as flat and lifeless as her husband's photos from the morgue.

All the files listed the case as still open. No resolution was listed. No arrest. No conviction. Strange, in a cop killing. What had Amanda said about Coastal?

Faith opened up a new browser window. The GBI was responsible for investigating all deaths that occurred on state property. She did a search for deaths at Coastal State Prison in the last four years. There were sixteen in all. Three were homicides—a skinny white supremacist who was beaten to death in the rec room and two African-Americans who were stabbed almost two hundred times between them with the sharpened end of a plastic toothbrush. Faith skimmed the other thirteen: eight suicides, five natural causes. She thought about Amanda's words to Sara Linton: *We take care of our own.*

Prison guards called it "paroling an inmate to Jesus." The death would have to be quiet, unspectacular and wholly believable. A cop would know how to cover his tracks. Faith guessed one of the overdoses or suicides was Tolliver's killer—a sad, pitiful death, but justice nonetheless. She felt a lightness in her chest, a relief that the man had been punished, a cop's widow spared a lengthy trial.

Faith closed the files, clicking through them one by one until they were all gone, then opened up Firefox again. She entered Jeffrey Tolliver's name behind Sara Linton's. Articles came up from the local paper. The *Grant Observer* wasn't exactly in line for a Pulitzer. The front page carried the daily lunch menu for the

elementary school and the biggest stories seemed to revolve around the exploits of the high school football team.

Armed with the correct dates, it didn't take Faith long to find the stories on Tolliver's murder. They dominated the paper for weeks. She was surprised to see how handsome he was. There was a picture of him with Sara at some kind of formal affair. He was in a tux. She was in a slinky black dress. She looked radiant beside him, a totally different person. Oddly, it was this picture that made Faith feel bad about her clandestine investigation into Sara Linton's life. The doctor looked so damn blissful in the photograph, like every single thing in her life was complete. Faith looked at the date. The photo had been taken two weeks before Tolliver's death.

On this last revelation, Faith closed down the computer, feeling sad and slightly disgusted with herself. Will was right at least about this—she should not have looked.

As penance for her sins, Faith took out her monitoring device. Her blood sugar was on the high side, and she had to think for a second about what she needed to do. Another needle, another shot. She checked her bag. There were only three insulin pens left and she had not made an appointment with Delia Wallace as she had promised.

Faith pulled up her skirt, exposing her bare thigh. She could still see the needle mark where she had jabbed herself in the bathroom around lunchtime. A small bruise ringed the injection site, and Faith guessed she should try her luck on the other leg this time. Her hand didn't shake as much as it usually did, and it only took to the count of twenty-six for her to sink the needle into her thigh. She sat back in her chair, waiting to feel better. At least a full minute passed, and Faith felt worse.

Tomorrow, she thought. She would make an appointment with Delia Wallace first thing in the morning.

She pushed down her skirt as she stood. The kitchen was a mess, dishes stacked in the sink, trash overflowing. Faith was not naturally a tidy person, but her kitchen was generally spotless. She had been called out to too many homicide scenes where women were found sprawled on the floor of their filthy kitchens. The sight always triggered a snap judgment in Faith, as if the woman deserved to be beaten to death by her boyfriend, shot and killed by a stranger, because she had left dirty dishes in her sink.

She wondered what Will thought when he came onto a crime scene. She had been around countless dead bodies with the man, but his face was always inscrutable. Will's first job in law enforcement had been with the GBI. He had never been in uniform, never been called out on a suspicious smell and found an old woman dead on her couch, or worked patrol, stopping speeders, not knowing if it was going to be a stupid teenager behind the wheel or a gangbanger who would put a gun in his face, pull the trigger, rather than have the points on his license.

He was just so damn *passive*. Faith didn't understand it. Despite the way Will carried himself, he was a big man. He ran every day, rain or shine. He worked out with weights. He had apparently dug a pond in his backyard. There was so much muscle under those suits he wore that his body could have been carved from rock. And yet, there he was this afternoon, sitting with Faith's purse in his

lap while he begged Max Galloway for information. If Faith had been in Will's shoes, she would've backed the idiot against the wall and squeezed his testicles until he sang out every detail he knew in high soprano.

But she wasn't Will, and Will wasn't going to do that. He was just going to shake Galloway's hand and thank him for the professional courtesy like some gigantic, half-witted patsy.

She searched the cabinet under the sink for dishwashing powder, only to find an empty box. She left it in the cabinet and went to the fridge to make a note on the grocery list. Faith had written the first three letters of the word before she realized that the item was already on the list. Twice.

"Damn," she whispered, putting her hand to her stomach. How was she going to take care of a child when she could not even take care of herself? She loved Jeremy, adored everything about him, but Faith had been waiting eighteen years for her life to start, and now that it was here, she was looking at another eighteen-year wait. She would be over fifty by then, eligible for movie discounts through AARP.

Did she want this? Could she actually do it? Faith couldn't ask her mother to help again. Evelyn loved Jeremy, and she had never complained about taking care of her grandson—not when Faith was away at the police academy, or when she had to work double shifts just to make ends meet—but there was no way that Faith could expect her mother to help out like that again.

But then, who else was there?

Certainly not the baby's father. Victor Martinez was tall, dark, handsome ... and completely incapable of taking care of himself. He was a dean at Georgia Tech, in charge of nearly twenty thousand students, but he could not keep a clean pair of socks in his drawer to save his life. They had dated for six months before he moved into Faith's house, which had seemed romantic and impetuous until reality set in. Within a week, Faith was doing Victor's laundry, picking up his dry cleaning, fixing his meals, cleaning up his messes. It was like raising Jeremy again, except at least with her son she could punish him for being lazy. The last straw had come when she had just finished cleaning the sink and Victor had dropped a knife covered in peanut butter on the draining board. If Faith had been wearing her gun, she would have shot him.

He moved out the next morning.

Even with all that, Faith couldn't help but feel herself softening toward Victor as she gathered up the drawstring on the trash. That was one good difference between her son and her ex-lover: Victor never had to be told six times to take out the trash. It was one of the chores Faith most hated, and—ridiculously—she felt tears well in her eyes as she thought about having to lift the bag and heft it down the stairs, outside, to the garbage can.

There was a knock at the door: three sharp raps followed by the doorbell chime.

Faith wiped her eyes as she walked down the hall, her cheeks so wet that she had to use her sleeve. She still had her gun on her hip, so she didn't bother to check the peephole.

"This is a switch," Sam Lawson told her. "Women usually cry when I leave, not when I show up."

"What do you want, Sam? It's late."

"You gonna invite me in?" He wiggled his eyebrows. "You know you wanna."

Faith was too tired to argue, so she turned around, letting him follow her back to the kitchen. Sam Lawson was an itch she had really needed to scratch for a few years, but now she couldn't remember why she had bothered. He drank too much. He was married. He didn't like kids. He was convenient and he knew how to make an exit, which, as far as Faith was concerned, meant he left shortly after he had served his purpose.

Okay, now she remembered why she had bothered.

Sam took a glob of gum out of his mouth and dropped it into the trash. "I'm glad I saw you today. I need to tell you something."

Faith braced herself for bad news. "Okay."

"I'm sober now. Almost a year."

"You're here to make amends?"

He laughed. "Hell, Faith. You're about the only person in my life I didn't screw over."

"Only because I kicked you to the curb before you could." Faith pulled the string on the trash, tying it tight.

"Bag's gonna tear."

The plastic ripped just as he said the words.

"Shit," she muttered.

"You want me to—"

"I've got it."

Sam leaned against the counter. "I love watching a woman do manual labor."

She shot him a withering look.

He flashed another smile. "I heard you cracked some heads at Rockdale today."

Faith said a silent curse in her head, remembering that Max Galloway had yet to give them the initial crime-scene reports. She had been so furious that she hadn't thought to follow up on it, and she would be damned if she'd take the man's word for it that everything had been fairly routine.

"Faith?"

She fed him the standard line. "The Rockdale police are cooperating fully with our investigation."

"It's the sister you need to worry about. You seen the news? Joelyn Zabel's all over the place saying your partner's the reason her sister died."

That rankled more than she wanted to let on. "Check the autopsy summary."

"I saw it already," he said. Faith guessed Amanda had shared the report with a few key people in order to spread the news as quickly as possible. "Jacquelyn Zabel killed herself."

"Did you tell that to the sister?" Faith asked.

"She's not interested in the truth."

Faith gave him a pointed look. "Not many people are."

He shrugged. "She got what she wanted from me. She's moved on to network television."

"The *Atlanta Beacon*'s not big enough for her, huh?"

"Why are you being so hard on me?"

"I don't like your job."

"I'm not crazy about yours, either." He went to the sink cabinet and took out

the box of trash bags. "Slide a new one over the old one."

Faith took a bag, holding the white plastic in her hands, trying not to think about what Pete had found during the autopsy.

Sam was oblivious as he put back the box. "What's that guy's story, anyway? Trent?"

"All inquiries should go through the public relations office."

Sam had never been one to take no for an answer. "Francis tried to feed me something about Trent getting circle-jerked by Galloway today. Made it out like he was some kinda Keystone Kop."

Faith stopped worrying about the trash. "Who's Francis?"

"Fierro."

Faith took childish pleasure in the girlish name. "And you printed every word the asshole said without bothering to run it by someone who could tell you the truth."

Sam leaned against the counter. "Cut me some slack, babe. I'm just doing my job."

"They let you make excuses in AA?"

"I didn't run the Kidney Killer stuff."

"That's only because it was proved wrong before you went to press."

He laughed. "You never let me bullshit you." He watched her wrestle the old bag into a new one. "Jesus, I've missed you."

Faith gave him another sharp glance, but she felt herself react to his words despite her best intentions. Sam had been her life raft a few years ago—just available enough to be there when she really needed him, but not so much that she felt smothered.

He said, "I didn't print anything about your partner."

"Thank you."

"What's going on with Rockdale anyway? They're really out to get you."

"They care more about screwing us over than finding out who abducted those women." Faith didn't give herself time to consider that she was echoing Will's sentiments. "Sam, it's bad. I saw one of them. This killer—whoever he is ..." She realized almost too late to whom she was talking.

"Off the record," he said.

"Nothing's ever off the record."

"Of course it is."

Faith knew he was right. She had told Sam secrets in the past that had never been repeated. Secrets about cases. Secrets about her mother, a good cop who had been forced off the job because some of her detectives had been caught skimming off drug busts. Sam had never printed anything Faith had told him, and she should trust him now. Only she couldn't. It wasn't just her anymore. Will was involved. She might hate her partner right now for being a pussy, but she would kill herself before she exposed him to any more scrutiny.

Sam asked, "What's going on with you, babe?"

Faith looked down at the torn trash bag, knowing he'd read everything in her face if she looked up. She remembered the day she'd found out her mother was being forced off the job. Evelyn hadn't wanted comfort. She had wanted to be alone. Faith had felt the same way until Sam showed up. He had talked his way into her house the same way he had tonight. Feeling his arms around her had

sent Faith over the edge, and she had sobbed like a child as he held her.

“Babe?”

She snapped open another new trash bag. “I’m tired, I’m cranky and you don’t seem to understand that I’m not going to give you a story.”

“I don’t want a story.” His tone had changed. She looked up at him, surprised to see the smile playing on his lips. “You look ...”

Faith’s mind filled with suggestions: *puffy, sweaty, morbidly obese*.

“Beautiful,” he said, which surprised them both. Sam had never been one for compliments, and Faith certainly wasn’t used to getting them.

He pushed away from the counter, moving closer. “There’s something about you that’s different.” He touched her arm, and the rough texture of his palm sent heat rushing through her body. “You just look so ...” He was close now, staring at her lips like he wanted to kiss them.

“Oh,” Faith said, then, “No, Sam.” She backed away from him. She’d experienced this the first time she was pregnant—men hitting on her, telling her she was beautiful even when her stomach was so huge she couldn’t bend over to tie her own shoes. It must be hormones or pheromones or something. At fourteen, it had been skeezy, at thirty-three it was just annoying. “I’m pregnant.”

The words hung between them like a lead balloon. Faith realized this was the first time she had said them aloud.

Sam tried to make a joke out of it. “Wow, I didn’t even have to take off my pants.”

“I’m serious.” She said it again. “I’m pregnant.”

“Is it ...” He seemed at a loss for words. “The father?”

She thought about Victor, his dirty socks in her laundry basket. “He doesn’t know.”

“You should tell him. He has a right.”

“Since when are you the arbiter of relationship morality?”

“Since I found out my wife had an abortion without telling me.” He leaned closer, put his hands on her arms again. “Gretchen didn’t think I could handle it.” He shrugged, keeping his hands on Faith’s arms. “She was probably right, but still.”

Faith bit her tongue. Of course Gretchen was right. She would’ve been better off asking a dingo to help raise her baby. She asked, “Did this happen when you were seeing me?”

“After.” He looked down, watching his hand stroke her arm, his fingers tracing the neck of her blouse. “I hadn’t hit bottom yet.”

“You weren’t exactly in a position to make an informed decision.”

“We’re still trying to work things out.”

“Is that why you’re here?”

He pressed his mouth to hers. She could feel the rough prickle of his beard, taste the cinnamon gum he’d been chewing. He lifted her onto the counter, his tongue finding hers. It wasn’t unpleasant, and when his hands slid up her thighs, lifting her skirt, Faith didn’t stop him. She helped him, actually, and in retrospect, she probably shouldn’t have, because it ended things a lot sooner than they needed to.

“I’m sorry.” Sam shook his head, slightly out of breath. “I didn’t mean to—I just—”

Faith didn't care. Even if her mind had blocked out Sam from her conscious thoughts over the years, her body seemed to remember every part of him. It felt so damn good to have his arms around her again, to feel the closeness of somebody who knew about her family and her job and her past—even if that particular body wasn't of much use to her at the moment. She kissed his mouth very gently and with no other meaning than to feel connected again. "It's okay."

Sam pulled back. He was too embarrassed to see that it didn't matter.

"Sammy—"

"I haven't gotten the hang of things being sober."

"It's okay," she repeated, trying to kiss him again.

He stepped back even farther, looking somewhere over her shoulder instead of in her eyes. "You want me to ...?" He made a halfhearted gesture toward her lap.

Faith let out a heavy sigh. Why were the men in her life such a constant disappointment? God knew she didn't have high standards.

He looked at his watch. "Gretchen's probably waiting up for me. Been working late a lot."

Faith gave up, leaning her head against the cabinet behind her. She might as well try to salvage something out of this. "Do you mind taking out the trash on your way out?"

CHAPTER TWELVE

“Goddamn it,” Pauline whispered, then wondered why she wasn’t screaming it at the top of her lungs. “Goddamn it!” she yelled, her voice catching in her throat. She rattled the handcuffs around her wrists, jerking at them even though she knew the gesture was useless. She was like a goddamn prisoner at a jail, her hands cuffed, strapped tight to a leather belt so that, even if she contorted herself into a ball, her fingertips barely grazed her chin. Her feet were chained, the thick links clanking against each other with every step she took. She had done enough damn yoga to be able to bend her feet up to her head, but what good was that? What the hell kind of help was the inversion plow pose when your fucking life was at stake?

The blindfold made it worse, though she had managed to move it up a little by rubbing her face against the rough concrete blocks lining one of the walls. The scarf was tight. Millimeter by millimeter, the blindfold was forced up, shaving away some of the skin on her cheek in the process. There was no difference above or below the strip of material, but Pauline felt like she had accomplished something, might be prepared when that door opened and she saw a sliver of light under the blindfold.

For now, it was darkness. That was all she saw. No windows, no lights, no way of judging the movement of time. If she thought about it, thought that she could not see, did not know if she was being watched or videotaped or worse, she would lose her mind. Hell, she was half losing her mind already. She was soaking wet, sweat pouring from her skin. Rivulets tickled her nose as they slid down her scalp. It was maddening, made all the more worse by the fucking darkness.

Felix liked the dark. He liked it when she got in bed with him and held him and told him stories. He liked being under the covers, blankets over his head. Maybe she had coddled him too much when he was a baby. She’d never let him out of her sight. She was scared that someone would take him away from her, someone would realize that she really shouldn’t be a mother, that she didn’t have it in her to love a child like a child should be loved. But she did. She loved her boy. She loved him so much that the thought of him was the only thing that was keeping her from twisting herself into a ball, wrapping the chains around her neck and killing herself.

“Help!” she screamed, knowing it was useless. If they were afraid of Pauline being heard, they would have gagged her.

She had paced out the room hours ago, approximating the size at twenty feet by sixteen. Cinderblock walls on one side, sheetrock on the others, with a metal door that was bolted from the outside. Vinyl mattress pad in the corner. A slop bucket with a lid. The concrete was cold against her bare feet. There was a hum in the next room, a hot-water heater, something mechanical. She was in a basement. She was underground, which made her feel as if her skin would crawl

right off her body. She hated being underground. She didn't even park in the damn garage at work, she hated it so much.

She stopped pacing, closed her eyes.

No one parked in her space. It was right by the door. Sometimes she'd go out for some air, stand at the entrance to the garage to make sure the space was empty. She could read the sign from the street: pauline mcghee. Christ, the battle with the sign company to get that "c" in lowercase. It had cost someone their job, which was just as well, since apparently they couldn't do it right.

If someone was parked in her space, she would call the attendant and have the asshole towed. Porsche, Bentley, Mercedes—Pauline didn't care. She had earned that fucking space. Even if she wasn't going to use it, she would be damned if someone else would.

"Let me out of here!" she screamed, jerking the chains, trying to wrench off the belt. It was thick, the sort of thing her brother wore back in the seventies. Two rows of riveted holes going the circumference, two prongs in the buckle. The metal felt like a wad of wax, and she knew the prongs had been soldered down. She couldn't remember when it had happened, but she knew what a fucking soldered belt felt like.

"Help me!" she screamed. "Help me!"

Nothing. No help. No response. The belt was biting into her skin, raking across her hip bones. If she wasn't so fucking fat, she could just slide out of the thing.

Water, she thought. When had she last had water? You could live without food for weeks, sometimes months, but water was different. You could go three, maybe four days before it hit you—the cramps, the cravings. The awful headaches. Were they going to give her water? Or were they going to let her waste away, then do whatever they wanted to her while she lay there, helpless as a child?

Child.

No. She would not think about Felix. Morgan would take him. He would never let anything bad happen to her baby. Morgan was a bastard and a liar, but he would take care of Felix, because underneath it all, he was not a bad person. Pauline knew what a bad person looked like, and it was not Morgan Hollister.

She heard footsteps behind her, outside the door. Pauline stopped, holding her breath so she could hear. Stairs—someone was coming down the stairs. Even in the dark, she could see the walls closing in around her. Which was worse: being alone down here, or being trapped with someone else?

Because she knew what was coming. Knew it just as certain as she knew the details of her own life. There was never just one. He always wanted two: dark hair, dark eyes, dark hearts that he could shatter. He had kept them apart for as long as he could stand it, but now he'd want them together. Caged, like two animals. Fighting it out. Like animals.

The first domino would soon fall, then the rest would follow one after the other. A woman alone, two women alone, and then ...

She heard a chattering, "No-no-no-no," and realized the words were coming from her own mouth. She backed up, pressing herself into the wall, her knees shaking so hard that she would've fallen to the floor but for the rough cinderblock bracing her. The handcuffs rattled as her hands trembled.

"No," she whispered, just one word, shaking herself out of it. She was a

survivor. She had not lived the last twenty years of her life so that she would die in some fucking underground hole.

The door opened. She saw a flash of light under the blindfold.

He said, "Here's your friend."

She heard something drop to the floor—a dank exhalation of air, the rattling of chains, then stillness. Then there was a second, quieter sound; a solid thud that echoed in the large room.

The door closed. The light was gone. There was a whistling sound, labored breathing. Groping, Pauline found the body. Long hair, blindfold, thin face, small breasts, hands cuffed in front of her. The whistling was coming from the woman's broken nose.

No time to worry about that. Pauline checked the woman's pockets, tried to find something that could get her out of here. Nothing. Nothing except another person who was going to want food and water.

"Fuck." Pauline sat back on her heels, fighting the urge to scream. Her foot struck something hard, and she reached around, remembering the second thud.

She traced her hands along the thin cardboard box, guessing it was about six inches square. It had some heft—maybe a couple of pounds. There was a perforation line along one side, and she pressed her fingers against it, breaking open the seal. Her fingers found something slick inside.

"No ..." she breathed.

Not again.

She closed her eyes, felt tears weep from under the blindfold. Felix, her job, her Lexus, her life—all of it slipped away as she felt the slick plastic trash bags between her fingers.

DAY THREE



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Will had forced himself to get up at his usual time of five o'clock. His run had been sluggish, his shower far from bracing. He was standing over the kitchen sink, his breakfast cereal soggy in the bowl, when Betty nudged his ankle to stir him from his stupor.

He found Betty's leash by the door and stooped down to clip it onto her collar. She licked his hand, and despite himself, he petted her little head. Everything about the Chihuahua was an embarrassment. She was the kind of dog a young starlet would carry in a leather satchel, hardly Will's speed. Making it worse, she was roughly six inches off the ground, and the only leash at the pet store that was long enough for him to comfortably hold came in hot pink. The fact that it matched her rhinestone collar was something many attractive women had pointed out to him in the park—right before they'd tried to set up Will with their brothers.

Betty had been an inheritance of sorts, abandoned by Will's next-door neighbor a couple of years ago. Angie had hated the dog on sight, and chastised Will for what they both knew was the truth: A man who was raised in an orphanage was not going to drop off a dog at the pound, no matter how ridiculous he felt when they were out in public.

There were more shameful aspects about his life with the dog that even Angie did not know about. Will worked odd hours, and sometimes when a case was breaking, he barely had time to go home and change his shirt. He had dug the pond in the backyard for Betty, thinking that watching the fish swim would be a nice way for her to pass the time. She had barked at the fish for a couple of days, but then she'd gone back to sitting on the couch, whiling away the hours until Will came home.

He half suspected the animal was playing him, that she jumped on the couch when she heard his key in the lock, pretending that she'd been waiting there all day when in fact she had been running in and out of the dog door, romping it up with the koi in the backyard, listening to his music.

Will patted his pockets, making sure he had his phone and wallet, then clipped his paddle holster onto his belt. He left the house, locking the door behind him. Betty's tail was pointed in the air, swishing back and forth like crazy, as he walked her toward the park. He checked the time on his cell phone. He was supposed to meet Faith at the coffee shop across from the park in half an hour. When cases were in full swing, he usually had her pick him up there instead of home. If Faith ever noticed that the coffee shop was right beside a dog day care center called Sir Barks-A-Lot, she'd been kind enough not to mention it.

They crossed the street against the light, Will slowing his pace so he didn't run over the dog, much as he had done with Amanda the day before. He did not know which was worrying him more—the case, in which they had very little to go on, or the fact that Faith was obviously mad at him. God knew Faith had

been mad before, but this particular anger had a tinge of disappointment to it.

He felt her pushing him, even though she wouldn't say the words. The problem was that she was a different cop than Will was. He had long known that his less aggressive way of approaching the Job was at odds with her own, but rather than being a point of contention, it was a contrast that had worked for them both. Now he wasn't so sure. Faith wanted him to be one of those kinds of cops that Will despised—someone who goes in with his fists swinging and worries about the consequences later. Will hated those cops, had worked more than a few cases where he'd gotten them kicked off the force. You couldn't say you were one of the good guys if you did the same thing the bad guys did. Faith had to know this. She'd grown up in a cop's family. Then again, her mother had been forced out of the job for improper conduct, so maybe Faith did know it and just didn't care.

Will couldn't accept that reasoning. Faith was not just a solid cop; she was a good person. She still insisted her mother was innocent. She still believed that there was a distinct line between good and bad, right and wrong. Will couldn't just tell her that his way was best—she would have to see it for herself.

He had never walked a beat like Faith, but he had walked into plenty of small communities and learned the hard way that you don't piss off the locals. By law, the GBI was called in by the bosses, not the detectives and patrolmen on the street. They were invariably still working their cases, still thinking they could crack them on their own and highly resentful of any outside interference. Chances were, you would need something from them later on, and if you left them in the gutter, took away all chances of them saving face, they would actively work to sabotage you, damn the consequences.

Case in point was Rockdale County. Amanda had made an enemy of Lyle Peterson, the chief of police, while she was working another case with him. Now that they needed cooperation from the local force, Rockdale was balking in the form of Max Galloway, who was straddling the line between being a jerk and being grossly negligent.

What Faith needed to realize was that the cops weren't always selfless in their actions. They had egos. They had territories. They were like animals marking their spots: If you encroached on their space, they didn't care about the bodies stacking up. It was just a game to some of them, one they had to win no matter who was hurt in the process.

As if she could read his mind, Betty stopped near the entrance of Piedmont Park to do her business. Will waited, then took care of the mess, dropping the bag into one of the trashcans as they cut through the park. Joggers were out in force, some with dogs, some alone. They were all bundled up to fight the cold in the air, though Will could tell from the way the sun was burning off the fog that it would be warm enough by noon so that his collar would start to rub against his neck.

The case was twenty-four hours old and he and Faith had a full day—talk to Rick Sigler, the paramedic who had been on the scene when Anna was hit by the car; track down Jake Berman, Sigler's hookup; then interview Joelyn Zabel, Jacquelyn Zabel's awful sister. Will knew he shouldn't make snap judgments, but he'd seen the woman all over the television news last night, both local and national. Apparently, Joelyn liked to talk. Even more apparently, she liked to

blame. Will was grateful he had been at the autopsy yesterday, had had the burden of Jacquelyn Zabel's death removed from his long list of burdens, or the sister's words would have cut into him like a thousand knives.

He wanted to search Pauline McGhee's house, but Leo Donnelly would probably protest. There had to be a way around that, and if there was any one thing Will wanted to do today, it was find a way to bring Leo on board. Rather than sleep, Will had thought about Pauline McGhee most of last night. Every time he closed his eyes, he mixed up the cave and McGhee, so that she was on that wooden bed, tied down like an animal, while Will stood helplessly by. His gut was telling him that something was going on with McGhee. She had run away once before, twenty years ago, but she had roots now. Felix was a good kid. His mother would not leave him.

Will chuckled to himself. He of all people should know that mothers left their sons all the time.

"Come on," he said, tugging Betty's leash, pulling her away from a pigeon that was almost as big as she was.

He tucked his hand into his pocket to warm it, his mind staying focused on the case. Will wasn't stupid enough to take full credit for the majority of the arrests he made. The fact was that people who committed crimes tended to be stupid. Most killers made mistakes, because they usually were acting on the spur of the moment. A fight broke out, a gun was handy, tempers flared and the only thing to figure out when it was all over was whether or not the prosecution was going to go for second-or first-degree murder.

Stranger abductions were different, though. They were harder to solve, especially when there was more than one victim. Serial killers, by definition, were good at their jobs. They knew they were going to murder. They knew who they were going to kill and exactly how they were going to do it. They had practiced their trade over and over again, perfecting their skills. They knew how to evade detection, to hide evidence or simply leave nothing at all. Finding them tended to be a matter of dumb luck on the part of law enforcement or complacency in the killer.

Ted Bundy had been captured during a routine traffic stop. Twice. BTK—who signed his letters taunting the cops with those initials, indicating he liked to bind, torture and kill his victims—was tripped up by a computer disc he accidentally gave his pastor. Richard Ramirez was beaten by a vigilante whose car he tried to steal. All captured by happenstance, all with several murders under their belts before they were stopped. In most serial cases, years passed, and the only thing the police could do was wait for more bodies to show up and pray that happenstance brought the killers to justice.

Will thought about what they had on their guy: a white sedan speeding down the road, a torture chamber in the middle of nowhere, elderly witnesses who could offer nothing usable. Jake Berman could be a lead, but they might never find him. Rick Sigler was squeaky clean except for being a couple of months behind on his mortgage, hardly shocking considering how bad the economy was. The Coldfields were, on paper, exemplars of an average retired couple. Pauline McGhee had a brother she was worried about, but then she might be worried about him for reasons that had nothing to do with their case. She might not have anything to do with their case at all.

The physical evidence was equally as thin. The trash bags found in the victims were of the sort you would find in any grocery or convenience store. The items in the cave, from the marine battery to the torture devices, were completely untraceable. There were plenty of fingerprints and fluids to enter into the computer, but nothing was coming back as a match. Sexual predators were sneaky, inventive. Almost eighty percent of the crimes solved by DNA evidence were actually burglaries, not assaults. Glass was broken, kitchen knives were mishandled, ChapStick was dropped—all inevitably leading back to the burglar, who generally already had a long record. But, with stranger rape, where the victim had no previous contact with the assailant, it was looking for a needle in a haystack.

Betty had stopped so she could sniff around some tall grass by the lake. Will glanced up, seeing a runner coming toward them. She was wearing long black tights and a neon green jacket. Her hair was pulled up under a matching ball cap. Two greyhounds jogged beside her, heads up, tails straight. They were beautiful animals, sleek, long-legged, muscled. Just like their owner.

“Crap,” Will muttered, scooping up Betty in his hand, holding her behind his back.

Sara Linton stopped a few feet away, the dogs heeling beside her like trained commandos. The only thing Will had ever been able to teach Betty to do was eat.

“Hi,” Sara said, her voice going up in surprise. When he didn’t respond, she asked, “Will?”

“Hi.” He could feel Betty licking his palm.

Sara studied him. “Is that a Chihuahua behind your back?”

“No, I’m just happy to see you.”

Sara gave him a confused smile, and he reluctantly showed her Betty.

Noises were made, some cooing, and Will waited for the usual question.

“Is she your wife’s?”

“Yes,” he lied. “Do you live around here?”

“The Milk Lofts off North Avenue.”

She lived less than two blocks from his house. “You don’t seem like a loft person.”

The confused look returned. “What do I seem like?”

Will had never been particularly skilled at the art of conversation, and he certainly didn’t know how to articulate what Sara Linton seemed like to him—at least not without making a fool of himself.

He shrugged, setting Betty down on the ground. Sara’s dogs stirred, and she clicked her tongue once, sending them back to attention. Will told her, “I’d better go. I’m meeting Faith at the coffee place across the park.”

“Mind if I walk with you?” She didn’t wait for an answer. The dogs stood and Will picked up Betty, knowing she would only slow them down. Sara was tall, nearly shoulder-to-shoulder with him. He tried to do some calculations without staring. Angie could almost put her chin on his shoulder if she rose up on her tiptoes. Sara would’ve had to make very little effort to do the same. Her mouth could have reached his ear if she wanted it to.

“So.” She took off her hat, tightened her ponytail. “I’ve been thinking about the trash bags.”

Will glanced her way. "What about them?"

"It's a powerful message."

Will hadn't thought of them as a message—more like a horror. "He thinks they're trash."

"And what he does to them—takes away their senses."

Will glanced at her again.

"See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil."

He nodded, wondering why he hadn't thought about it that way.

She continued, "I've been wondering if there's some kind of religious angle to this. Actually, something Faith said that first night got me thinking about it. God took Adam's rib to make Eve."

"Vesalius," Will mumbled.

Sara laughed in surprise. "I haven't heard that name since my first year in medical school."

Will shrugged, saying a silent prayer of thanks that he'd managed to catch the History Channel's *Great Men of Science* week. Andreas Vesalius was an anatomist who, among other things, proved that men and women have the same number of ribs. The Vatican almost put him in prison for his discovery.

Sara continued, "Also, there's the number eleven." She paused, as if she expected him to answer. "Eleven trash bags, eleventh rib. There must be a connection."

Will stopped walking. "What?"

"The women. They each had eleven trash bags inside them. The rib that was taken from Anna was the eleventh rib."

"You think the killer is hung up on the number eleven?"

Sara continued walking and Will followed. "If you consider how compulsive behaviors manifest themselves, like substance abuse, eating disorders, checking behaviors—where someone feels compelled to check things, like the lock on the door or the stove or the iron—then it makes sense that a serial killer, someone who is compelled to kill, would have a specific pattern he likes to follow, or in this case a specific number that means something to him. It's why the FBI keeps their database, so you can cross-reference methods and look for patterns. Maybe you could look for something significant surrounding the number eleven."

"I don't even know if it's set up to search that way. I mean, it's all about *things*—knives, razors, what they do, generally not how many times they do it unless it's pretty blatant."

"You should check the Bible. If there's a religious significance to the number eleven, then maybe you'll be able to figure out the killer's motivation." She shrugged as if she was finished, but added, "Easter's this Sunday. That could be part of the pattern, too."

"Eleven apostles," he said.

She gave him that strange look again. "You're right. Judas betrayed Christ. There were only eleven apostles left. There was a twelfth to replace him—Didymus? I can't remember. I bet my mother would know." She shrugged again. "Of course, it could all be a waste of your time."

Will had always been a firm believer that coincidences were generally clues. "It's something to look into."

"What about Felix's mother?"

"She's just a missing person for now."

"Did you find the brother?"

"The Atlanta police are looking for him." Will didn't want to give away any more than that. Sara worked at Grady, where cops were in and out of the emergency room all day with suspects and witnesses. He added, "We're not even sure she's connected to our case."

"I hope for Felix's sake she's not. I can't imagine what it's like for him being abandoned, stuck in some awful state home."

"Those places aren't so bad," Will defended. Before he realized what he was saying, he told her, "I grew up in state care."

She was as surprised as he was, though obviously for different reasons. "How old were you?"

"A kid," he answered, wishing he could take back his words, but unable to stop adding more. "Infant. Five months."

"And you weren't adopted?"

He shook his head. This was getting complicated and—worse—embarrassing.

"My husband and I ..." She stared ahead, lost in thought. "We were going to adopt. We'd been on the list for a while and ..." She shrugged. "When he was killed, it all ... it was just too much."

Will didn't know if he was supposed to feel sympathetic, but all he could think about was how many times as a kid he'd gone to a meet-and-greet picnic or barbecue, thinking he'd be going home with his new parents, only to end up back in his room at the children's home.

He felt inordinately grateful to hear the high-pitched horn from Faith's Mini, which she'd illegally parked in front of the coffee shop. She got out of the car, leaving the engine running.

"Amanda wants us back at the station." Faith lifted her chin toward Sara in greeting. "Joelyn Zabel moved up her interview. She's fitting us in between *Good Morning America* and CNN. We'll have to run Betty back home afterward."

Will had forgotten about the dog in his hand. She had her snout tucked into the space between the buttons on his vest.

"I'll take her," Sara offered.

"I couldn't—"

"I'm home all day doing laundry," Sara countered. "She'll be fine. Just come by after work and get her."

"That's really—"

Faith was more impatient than usual. "Just give her the dog, Will." She stomped off back to her car, and Will shot Sara a look of apology.

"The Milk Lofts?" he asked, as if he had forgotten.

Sara took Betty in her hands. He could feel how cold her fingers were as they brushed against his skin. "Betty?" she asked. He nodded, and she told him, "Don't worry if you're late. I don't have any plans."

"Thank you."

She smiled, hefting Betty like she was a glass of wine being offered in a toast.

Will walked across the street and got into Faith's car, glad that no one else had been in the passenger's seat since the last time he'd ridden with Faith so he didn't look like a monkey bending himself into the cramped space.

Faith cut straight to the chase as she pulled away from the curb. "What were

you doing with Sara Linton?"

"I just ran into her." Will wondered why he felt so defensive, which quickly led to him wondering why Faith was being so hostile. He guessed she was still angry with him about his interaction with Max Galloway the day before, and he didn't know what to do about the situation other than try to distract her. "Sara had an interesting question, or theory, about our case."

Faith merged into traffic. "I'm dying to hear it."

Will could tell she wasn't, but he ran down Sara's theory for her anyway, highlighting the number eleven, the other points she had raised. "Easter's this Sunday," he said. "This could have something to do with the Bible."

To her credit, Faith seemed to be considering it. "I don't know," she finally said. "We could get a Bible back at the station, maybe do a computer search for the number eleven. I'm sure there are a lot of religious nutballs out there with web pages."

"Where in the Bible does it say something about a rib being taken from Adam to make Eve?"

"Genesis."

"That's the old stuff, right? Not the new books."

"Old Testament. It's the first book in the Bible. It's where it all begins." Faith gave him the same sideways glance Sara had. "I know you can't read the Bible, but didn't you go to church?"

"I *can* read the Bible," Will shot back. Still, he preferred Faith's nosiness to her fury, so he kept talking. "Remember where I grew up. Separation of church and state."

"Oh, I didn't think about that."

Probably because it was an enormous lie. The children's home couldn't sanction religious activities, but there were volunteers from just about every local church who sent vans to pick up the children every week and cart them off to Sunday School. Will had gone once, realized that it really was a school, where you were expected to read your lessons, then never went back.

Faith pressed, "You've never been to church? Really?"

Will shut his mouth, thinking he had foolishly opened the wrong door.

Faith slowed the car as they pulled up to a light. She mumbled to herself, "I don't think I've ever met anyone who's never been to church."

"Can we change the subject?"

"It's just strange."

Will stared blankly out the window, thinking he had been called strange at one point or another by every person he had ever met. The light changed, and the Mini rolled ahead. City Hall East was a five-minute drive from the park. This morning, it seemed to be taking hours.

Faith said, "Even if Sara's right, she's doing it again, trying to talk her way onto this case."

"She's a coroner. At least, she used to be. She helped Anna at the hospital. It's normal for her to want to know what's going on."

"This is a murder investigation, not Big Brother," Faith countered. "Does she know where you live?"

Will hadn't considered the possibility, but he wasn't as paranoid as Faith. "I don't see how."

"Maybe she followed you."

Will laughed, then stopped when he realized she was being serious. "She lives right down the street. She was just running in the park with her dogs."

"It's just all very convenient."

He shook his head, exasperated. He wasn't going to let Faith use Sara Linton as a stand-in for her problems with him. "We've gotta get past this, Faith. I know you're ticked at me about yesterday, but going into this interview, we've got to be working as a team."

She accelerated as the light changed. "We *are* a team."

For a team, they didn't talk much the rest of the short trip. It wasn't until they were at City Hall East, riding up on the elevator, that Faith finally spoke.

"Your tie is crooked."

Will's hand went to the knot. Sara Linton probably thought he was a slob. "Better?"

Faith was scrolling through her BlackBerry, even though there was no signal in the elevator. She glanced up and gave him a quick nod before turning her attention back to the device.

He was trying to think of something to say when the doors opened. Amanda was waiting outside the elevator, checking her email just like Faith, except on an iPhone. Will felt like an idiot to be empty-handed, the same way he'd felt when Sara Linton had shown up with her big, impressive dogs and he'd scooped Betty into his palm like a ball of yarn.

Amanda used her finger to scroll through emails, her voice taking on a distracted quality as she led them down the hall toward her office. "Catch me up."

Faith ran down the list of things they didn't know, which were innumerable, and the things they did know, which were practically nonexistent. All the while, Amanda read her emails, walking and pretending to listen to Faith tell her what Amanda had surely already read in their report.

Will wasn't a fan of multitasking, mostly because it was more like half-tasking. It was humanly impossible to give two different things your complete attention. As if to prove this, Amanda looked up from her screen, asking, "What?"

Faith repeated, "Linton thinks there might be a biblical angle."

Amanda stopped walking. She held the iPhone at her side, giving them her full attention. "Why?"

"Eleventh rib, eleven trash bags, Easter at the end of the week."

Amanda used her iPhone again, talking as she punched the touch screen. "We've got Legal in for Joelyn Zabel. She's brought her lawyer, so I asked for three of ours. We've got to play this as if the world is listening because I'm sure whatever we say to her will be spun back out to the public at large." She looked at them both meaningfully. "I will do most of the talking. You ask your questions, but don't extemporize."

"We're not going to get anything out of Zabel," Will said. "Just with the lawyers, we've already got four people in the room. Add us and that's seven, with her at the center of it all, knowing she's going to have the cameras rolling as soon as she leaves the building. We need to take this down a notch."

Amanda looked back at her iPhone. "And your brilliant idea for doing this is ...?"

Will couldn't think of one. All he could say was, "Maybe we could talk to her after her television interviews, catch her at her hotel without all the press and attention."

Amanda did not do him the courtesy of looking up. "Maybe I'll win the lottery. Maybe you'll get a promotion. Do you see where these maybes are taking us?"

Frustration and lack of sleep caught up with him. "Then why are we here? Why aren't you taking Zabel and letting us get on with doing something more useful than giving her source material for her book deal?"

Amanda finally looked up from her iPhone. She handed the device to Will. "I'm at a loss, Agent Trent. Why don't you read this for me and let me know what you think?"

He felt his vision go sharp, and there was an odd, high-pitched ringing in his ears. The iPhone hung in the air like a well-baited hook. There were words on the screen. That much he could tell. Will tasted blood from biting the edge of his tongue. He reached to take the device, but Faith snatched it from Amanda before he could.

Her voice was terse as she read, "'Eleven generally represents judgment or betrayal in the Bible.... There were eleven commandments originally, but the Catholics combined the first two and the Protestants combined the last two in order to make it an even ten.'" She scrolled down. "'The Philistines gave Delilah eleven hundred pieces of silver to bring down Samson. Jesus told eleven parables on the way to his death in Jerusalem.'" She paused again, scrolling. "'The Catholic Church accepts eleven books as canonical in the Apocrypha.'"

Faith handed back the device to Amanda. "We could do this all day. Flight 11 on 9/11 hit one of the Twin Towers, which themselves looked like the number 11. Apollo 11 made the first moon landing. World War I ended on eleven-eleven. You should get an eleventh circle in hell for what you just did to Will."

Amanda smiled, tucking the iPhone into her pocket, continuing down the hall. "Remember the rules, children."

Will didn't know if she meant the rules that put her in charge or the ones she'd given them about interviewing Joelyn Zabel. There was no time to reflect, however, because Amanda walked through the anteroom to her office and opened the door. She made introductions all around as she went behind her desk and took a seat. Her office was, of course, larger than any other in the building, closer to the size of the conference room on Will and Faith's floor.

Joelyn Zabel and a man who could only be her lawyer were in the visitors' seats opposite Amanda. There were two chairs beside Amanda's desk, one each for Faith and Will, he supposed. The state lawyers were on a couch in the back of the room, three in a row, their black suits and muted silk ties giving them away. Joelyn Zabel's lawyer was dressed in a blue the color of a shark, which seemed more than fitting, considering his smile reminded Will of the aquatic carnivore.

"Thank you for coming in," Faith said, shaking the woman's hand, then taking a seat.

Joelyn Zabel looked like a chubbier version of her sister. Not that she was fat, but she had a healthy curve to her hips whereas Jacquelyn had been boyishly thin. Will caught the scent of cigarette smoke as he shook her hand.

He said, "I'm so sorry about your loss."

"Trent," she noted. "You're the one who found her."

Will tried to keep eye contact, to not convey the gut-level guilt he still felt for not reaching the woman's sister in time. All he could think to do was repeat himself. "I'm so sorry about your loss."

"Yeah," she snapped. "I got that."

Will sat down beside Faith, and Amanda clapped her hands together like a kindergarten teacher getting the class's attention. She rested her hand on top of a manila folder, which Will guessed contained the abridged autopsy summary. Pete had been instructed to leave off the information about the trash bags. Considering the Rockdale County force's cozy relationship with the press, they were running thin on guilty knowledge to pin down any future suspect.

Amanda began, "Ms. Zabel, I take it you've had time to go over the report?"

The lawyer spoke. "I'll need a copy of that for my files, Mandy."

Amanda smiled an even sharkier smile than the lawyer had. "Of course, Chuck."

"Great, so y'all know each other." Joelyn crossed her arms, her shoulders bunching around her neck. "You want to explain to me what the hell you're doing to find my sister's killer?"

Amanda's smile did not falter. "We're doing everything we can to—"

"You find a suspect yet? I mean, shit, this guy's a fucking *animal*."

Amanda didn't answer, which Faith took as her cue to begin. "We agree with you. Whoever did this is an animal. That's why we need to talk to you about your sister. We need to know about her life. Who her friends were. What her habits were."

Joelyn's eyes flashed down a minute, guilty. "I didn't have much contact with her. We were both pretty busy. She lived in Florida."

Faith tried to soften things up. "She lived on the Bay, right? Must've been nice down there. Good reason to sneak in a vacation with a family visit."

"Well, yeah, it would've been, but the bitch never invited me."

Her lawyer reached out, touching her arm as a gentle reminder. Will had watched Joelyn Zabel on every major channel, sobbing anew over the tragic death of her sister for each new reporter. He'd not seen one tear drop from her eyes, though she made all the motions of someone who was crying—sniffling, wiping her eyes, rocking back and forth. She wasn't even doing that now. Apparently, she needed a camera rolling to feel her pain. Even more apparent, the lawyer wasn't going to let her play anything other than the grieving family member.

Joelyn sniffed, still with no tears. "I loved my sister very much. My mother just moved into a nursing home. She's got maybe six months left, and this happens to her daughter. The loss of a child is devastating."

Faith tried to ease into more questions. "Do you have children?"

"Four." She seemed proud.

"Jacquelyn didn't have—"

"Fuck no. Three abortions before she was thirty. She was terrified of getting fat. Can you believe that? Her sole reason for flushing them down the toilet is her fucking weight. And then she gets in the shadow of forty, and suddenly she wants to be a mother."

Faith hid her surprise well. "Was she trying to conceive?"

"Did you not hear me about the abortions? You can look that up. I'm not lying about that."

Will always assumed that when people insisted they weren't lying about a particular thing, that meant they were lying about something else. Finding out the what else would be the key to Joelyn Zabel. She didn't strike him as a particularly caring person, and she would want to make sure her ten minutes of fame stretched out as long as possible.

Faith asked, "Was Jackie looking for a surrogate?"

Joelyn seemed to realize how important her words were. She suddenly had everyone's rapt attention. She took her time answering. "Adoption."

"Private? Public?"

"Who the fuck knows? She had a lot of money. She was used to buying what she wanted." She was gripping the arms of her chair, and Will could see this was a subject she liked talking about. "That's the real tragedy here—not being able to see her adopt some reject retard who ends up stealing from her or going schizophrenic on her ass."

Will could feel Faith stiffen beside him. He took over the questioning. "When was the last time you talked to your sister?"

"About a month ago. She was waxing on about motherhood, like she understands the first thing about it. Talking about adopting some kid from China or Russia or something. You know, some of those kids turn out to be killers. They're abused, just sick in the head. They're never right."

"We see that a lot." Will shook his head sadly, like this was a common tragedy. "Was she making any progress? Do you know what agency she was working with?"

She turned reticent when pressed for details. "Jackie wasn't into sharing. She was always phobic about her privacy." She jerked her head toward the state lawyers, who were doing their best to blend in with the upholstery. "I know those tools sitting on the couch aren't going to let you apologize, but you could at least acknowledge that you fucked up."

Amanda jumped back in. "Ms. Zabel, the autopsy shows—"

Joelyn gave a belligerent half-shrug. "All it shows is what I already know: You dumbasses were standing around doing *nothing* while my sister died."

"Perhaps you didn't read the report carefully enough, Ms. Zabel." Amanda's voice was gentle sounding, the soothing sort of tone she'd used earlier in the hall before humiliating Will. "Your sister took her own life."

"Only because y'all weren't doing a damn thing to help her."

"You realize that she was blind and deaf?" Amanda asked.

Will could tell from the way that Zabel's eyes shifted to the lawyer that she had not, in fact, realized this.

Amanda removed another folder from the top drawer of her desk. She thumbed through it, and he could see color photos of Jacquelyn Zabel in the tree, in the morgue. Will found this particularly cruel, even for Amanda. No matter how horrible Joelyn Zabel was, she had still lost her sister in the worst way. He saw Faith shift in her seat and knew she was thinking the same thing.

Amanda took her time searching for the right page, which seemed to be buried among the worst of the photographs. Finally, she found the passage

relating to the external examination of the body. "Second paragraph," she said.

Joelyn hesitated before sitting on the edge of her seat. She was trying to get a better look at the photos the way some people slow down to look at a particularly terrible car accident. Finally, she sat back with the report. Will watched her eyes move back and forth as she read, but then they suddenly stopped tracking, and he knew that she wasn't seeing anything at all.

Her throat worked as she swallowed. She stood up, mumbling "Excuse me" as she bolted from the room.

The air seemed to leave with her. Faith stared straight ahead. Amanda took her time stacking the photos into a neat pile.

The lawyer said, "Not nice, Mandy."

"Them's the breaks, Chuck."

Will stood. "I'm going to stretch my legs."

He left the room before anyone could respond. Caroline, Amanda's secretary, was at her desk. Will lifted his chin, and she whispered, "In the bathroom."

Will walked down the hall, hands in his pockets. He stopped in front of the women's-room door, pressing it open with his foot. He leaned in. Joelyn Zabel stood in front of the mirror. She had a lighted cigarette in her hand, and she startled when she saw Will.

"You can't be in here," she snapped, holding up her fist like she expected some kind of fight.

"No smoking is allowed in the building." Will walked into the room and put his back against the closed door, keeping his hands in his pockets.

"What are you doing in here?"

"I wanted to make sure you were okay."

She took a hard hit off the cigarette. "By barging into the ladies' room? This is off-limits, okay? It's not allowed."

Will glanced around. He had never been in a women's restroom before. There was a comfortable-looking couch with flowers in a vase on the table beside it. The air had the scent of perfume, the paper dispensers were stocked and there was no water splashed around the basin so that you got the front of your pants wet when you washed your hands. It was no wonder women spent so much time in this place.

"Hello?" Joelyn asked. "Crazy man? Get out of the ladies' room."

"What aren't you telling me?"

"I told you everything I know."

He shook his head. "Cameras aren't rolling in here. No lawyers, no audience. Tell me what you're not telling me."

"Fuck off."

He felt the door being gently pressed against his back, then close just as quickly. He said, "You didn't like your sister."

"No shit, Sherlock." Her hand shook as she took another hit of smoke into her lungs.

"What did she do to you?"

"She was a bitch."

The same could be said for Joelyn, but Will kept that to himself. "Was there any specific way this manifested itself toward you, or is that just a general statement?"

She stared at him. "What the hell does that mean?"

"It means that I don't care what you're going to do after you leave here. Sue the state. Don't sue the state. Sue me personally. I don't care. Whoever killed your sister probably has someone else—some woman who's being tortured and raped right now as we speak—and your keeping something from me is just as good as saying that what's happening to this other woman is okay."

"Don't put that on me."

"Then tell me what you're hiding."

"I'm not hiding anything." She turned from the mirror, wiping under her eyes with her fingers so she wouldn't smudge her makeup. "It's Jackie who was hiding things."

Will kept silent.

"She was always secretive, always acting like she was better than me."

He nodded, like he got it.

"She got all the attention, all the boyfriends." She shook her head, turning to face Will. She leaned against the counter, hand beside the sink. "My weight went up and down when I was a kid. Jackie used to tease me about being beached whenever we'd go to lay out."

"You've obviously outgrown that problem."

She shook off the compliment, disbelieving. "Everything always came so easy to her. Money, men, success. People liked her."

"Not really," Will disagreed. "None of her neighbors seem too shaken up that she's missing. They didn't even notice until the cops knocked on their doors. I got the feeling they were relieved she's gone."

"I don't believe you."

"Your mother's neighbor, Candy, doesn't seem too broken up about it, either."

She was obviously unconvinced. "No, Jackie said Candy was like a toy poodle nipping at her heels, always wanting to hang out with her."

"That's not true," Will said. "Candy wasn't very fond of her. I'd even say she was less fond of your sister than you are."

She finished the cigarette, then went into one of the stalls to flush it down the toilet. Will could see her processing this new information about her sister, liking it. Joelyn went back to the sink, leaned against the counter again. "She was always a liar. Lied about little things, things that didn't even matter."

"Like what?"

"Like, that she was going to the store when she was going to the library. Like that she was dating one guy when she was really dating another one."

"Seems kind of devious."

"She was. That's a perfect word for her—'devious.' She drove our mother nuts."

"Did she get into much trouble?"

Joelyn snorted a laugh. "Jackie was always the teacher's pet, always sucking up to the right people. She had them all fooled."

"Not all of them," Will pointed out. "You said she drove your mother nuts. Your mom must've known what was going on."

"She did. Spent all kinds of money trying to get Jackie help. It ruined my fucking childhood. Everything was always *about Jackie*—how *she* was feeling, what *she* was out doing, whether *she* was happy. Nobody worried whether or not

I was happy.”

“Tell me about this adoption thing. What agency was she talking to?”

Joelyn looked down, guilt flashing in her eyes.

Will kept his tone neutral. “This is why I’m asking: If Jackie was trying to adopt a child, we’re going to have to go to Florida and find the agency. If there’s an overseas connection, we might have to go to Russia or China to see if their operations are legitimate. If Jackie was trying to contract with a surrogate at home, we’ll have to talk to every woman who might have spoken to her. We’ll have to dig into every agency down there until we find something, anything, that connects to your sister, because she met a very bad person who tortured and raped her for at least a week, and if we can find out how your sister met her abductor, then maybe we can find out who that man is.” He let her consider his words for a few seconds. “Will we find a connection through an adoption agency, Joelyn?”

She looked down at her hands, not answering. Will counted the tiles on the wall behind her head. He was at thirty-six when she finally spoke. “I just said that—the stuff about getting a kid. Jackie was talking about it, but she wasn’t going to do it. She liked the idea of being a mother, but she knew she would never be able to pull it off.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“It’s like when people are around well trained dogs, you know? They want a dog, but they want *that* dog, not a new one they’d have to work with and train on their own.”

“Did she like your kids?”

Joelyn cleared her throat. “She never met them.”

Will gave the woman some time. “She was picked up on a DUI before she died.”

Joelyn was surprised. “Really?”

“Was she much of a drinker?”

She shook her head vehemently. “Jackie didn’t like being out of control.”

“The neighbor, Candy, says they smoked some grass together.”

Her lips parted in surprise. She shook her head again. “I don’t buy it. Jackie never did shit like that. She liked it when other people drank too much, got out of hand, but she never did it herself. You’re talking about a woman who’s weighed the same weight since she was sixteen years old. Her ass was so tight it squeaked when she walked.” She thought about it some more, shook her head again. “No, not Jackie.”

“Why was she cleaning out your mother’s house? Why not pay someone else to do the dirty work?”

“She didn’t trust anybody else. She always had the right way to do things, and whoever you were, you were always doing it wrong.”

That, at least, jibed with what Candy said. Everything else was a completely different picture, which made sense considering that Joelyn was not particularly close to her sister. He asked, “Does the number eleven mean anything to you?”

She furrowed her brow. “Not a damn thing.”

“What about the words ‘I will not deny myself?’”

She shook her head again. “But it’s funny ... As rich as she was, Jackie denied herself all the time.”

"Denied herself what?"

"Food. Alcohol. Fun." She gave a rueful laugh. "Friends. Family. Love." Her eyes filled with tears—the first real tears Will had seen her cry. He pushed away from the door and left, finding Faith waiting in the hallway for him.

"Anything?" she asked.

"She lied about the adoption thing. At least she said she did."

"We can check it out with Candy." Faith took out her phone and flipped it open. She talked to Will as she dialed. "We were supposed to meet Rick Sigler at the hospital ten minutes ago. I called him to postpone, but he didn't pick up."

"What about his friend, Jake Berman?"

"I put some uniforms on it first thing. They're supposed to call if they find him."

"You think it's odd that we can't track him down?"

"Not yet, but talk to me at the end of the day if we still can't find him." She put the phone to her ear, and Will listened as she left a message for Candy Smith to return her call. Faith closed the phone and gripped it in her hand. Will felt dread well up inside him, wondering what she was going to say next—something about Amanda, a diatribe against Sara Linton, or Will himself. Thankfully, it was about the case.

She said, "I think Pauline McGhee is part of this."

"Why?"

"It's just gut. I can't explain it, but it's too coincidental."

"McGhee is still Leo's case. We've got no jurisdiction over it, no reason to ask him for a piece of it." Still, Will had to ask, "You think you can nuance him?"

She shook her head. "I don't want to make trouble for Leo."

"He's supposed to call you, right? When he tracks down Pauline's parents in Michigan?"

"That's what he said he'd do."

They stood at the elevator, both quiet.

Will said, "I think we need to go to Pauline's work."

"I think you're right."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Faith paced the lobby of Xac Homage, the ridiculously named design firm that employed Pauline McGhee. The offices took up the thirtieth floor of Symphony Tower, an architecturally awkward skyscraper that loomed over the corner of Peachtree and Fourteenth Street like a large speculum. Faith shuddered at the image, thinking about what she had read in Jacquelyn Zabel's autopsy report.

In keeping with the pretentiousness of their name, Xac Homage's window-lined lobby was furnished with low-to-the-floor couches that were impossible to sit in without either clenching every muscle in your ass or just falling back into a slouch that you would need help getting out of. Faith would've gone for the slouch if she hadn't been wearing a skirt that was prone to riding up even when she wasn't sitting like a gangster's whore in a rap video.

She was hungry but didn't know what to eat. She was running out of insulin and she still wasn't sure she was calculating the dosages correctly. She hadn't made an appointment with the doctor Sara had recommended. Her feet were swollen and her back was killing her and she wanted to beat her head against the wall because she could not stop thinking about Sam Lawson no matter how hard she tried.

And she had a sneaking suspicion from the way Will kept giving her sidelong glances that she was acting like a raving lunatic.

"God," Faith mumbled, pressing her forehead into the clean glass that lined the lobby. Why did she keep making so many mistakes? She wasn't a stupid person. Or maybe she was. Maybe all these years she had been fooling herself, and she was, in fact, one of the stupidest people on earth.

She looked down at the cars inching along Peachtree Street, ants scurrying across the black asphalt. Last month at her dentist's office, Faith had read a magazine article that posited that women were genetically wired to become clingy with the men they had sex with for at least three weeks after the event because that's how long it took for the body to figure out whether or not it was pregnant. She had laughed at the time, because Faith had never felt clingy with men. At least not after Jeremy's father, who had literally left the state after Faith had told him she was pregnant.

And yet, here she was checking her phone and her email every ten minutes, wanting to talk to Sam, wanting to see how he was doing and find out whether or not he was mad at her—as if what had happened was her fault. As if he had been such a magnificent lover that she couldn't get enough of him. She was already pregnant; it couldn't be her genetic wiring that was causing her to act like a silly schoolgirl. Or maybe it was. Maybe she was just a victim of her own hormones.

Or maybe she shouldn't be getting her science from *Ladies' Home Journal*.

Faith turned her head, watching Will in the elevator alcove. He was on his cell phone, holding it with both hands so it wouldn't fall apart. She couldn't be mad

at him anymore. He had been good with Joelyn Zabel. She had to admit that. His approach to the job was different than hers, and sometimes that worked for them and sometimes that worked against them. Faith shook her head. She couldn't dwell on these differences right now—not when her entire life was on the edge of a gigantic cliff, and the ground would not stop shaking.

Will finished his call and walked toward her. He glanced at the empty desk where the secretary had been. The woman had left to get Morgan Hollister at least ten minutes ago. Faith had images of the pair of them furiously shredding files, though it was more likely that the woman, a bottle blonde who seemed to have trouble processing even the smallest request, had simply forgotten about them and was on her cell phone in the bathroom.

Faith asked, "Who were you talking to?"

"Amanda," he told her, taking a couple of candies out of the bowl on the coffee table. "She called to apologize."

Faith laughed at the joke, and he joined her.

Will took some more candy, offering her the bowl to Faith. She shook her head, and he continued, "She's doing another press conference this afternoon. Joelyn Zabel's dropping her lawsuit against the city."

"What prompted that?"

"Her lawyer realized they didn't have a case. Don't worry, she's going to be on the cover of some magazine next week, and the week after she's going to be threatening to sue us again because we haven't found her sister's killer."

It was the first time either of them had voiced their real fear in all of this: that the killer was good enough to get away with his crimes.

Will indicated the closed door behind the desk. "You think we should just go back?"

"Give it another minute." She tried to wipe away her forehead print on the window, making the smear worse. The momentum of the tension between them had somehow shifted in the ride over, so that Will was no longer worried about Faith being mad at him. It was now Faith's turn to be worried that *she'd* upset *him*.

She asked, "Are we okay?"

"Sure we're okay."

She didn't believe him, but there was no way around someone who kept insisting there wasn't a problem, because all they would do is keep insisting until you felt like you were making the whole thing up.

She said, "Well, at least we know that bitchiness runs in the Zabel family."

"Joelyn's all right."

"It's hard to be the good sibling."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, if you're the good kid in the family, making good grades, staying out of trouble, et cetera, and your sister's always screwing up and getting all the attention, you start to feel left out, like no matter how good you are, it doesn't matter because all your parents can focus on is your crappy sibling."

She must have sounded bitter, because Will asked, "I thought your brother was a good guy?"

"He is," Faith told him. "I was the bad one who got all the attention." She chuckled. "I remember one time, he asked my parents if they would just give

him up for adoption.”

Will gave a half-smile. “Everyone wants to be adopted.”

She remembered Joelyn Zabel’s awful words about her sister’s quest for a child. “What Joelyn said—”

He interrupted her. “Why did her lawyer keep calling Amanda ‘Mandy’?”

“It’s short for Amanda.”

He nodded thoughtfully, and Faith wondered if nicknames were another one of his tics. It would make sense. You would have to know how a name was spelled before you could shorten it.

“Did you know that sixteen percent of all known serial killers were adopted?”

Faith wrinkled her brow. “That can’t be right.”

“Joel Rifkin, Kenneth Bianchi, David Berkowitz. Ted Bundy was adopted by his stepfather.”

“How is it that you’re suddenly an expert on serial killers?”

“History Channel,” he told her. “Trust me, it comes in handy.”

“When do you find time to watch so much television?”

“It’s not like I’ve got a busy social life.”

Faith looked back out the window, thinking about Will with Sara Linton this morning. From reading the report on Jeffrey Tolliver, Faith gathered he was exactly the kind of cop Will was not: physical, take-charge, willing to do whatever it took to get a case solved. Not that Will wasn’t driven, too, but he was more likely to stare a confession out of a suspect instead of beating it out of him. Faith knew instinctively that Will was not Sara Linton’s type, which was why she had felt so sorry for him this morning, watching how awkward he was with the woman.

He must have been thinking about this morning, too, because he said, “I don’t know her apartment number.”

“Sara?”

“She’s in the Milk Lofts over on Berkshire.”

“There’s bound to be a building di—” Faith stopped herself. “I can write out her last name for you so you can compare it to the directory. There can’t be that many tenants.”

He shrugged, obviously daunted.

“We could look it up online.”

“She’s probably not listed.”

The door opened and the bottle-blond secretary was back. Behind her was an extremely tall, extremely tanned and extremely good-looking man in the most beautiful suit Faith had ever seen.

“Morgan Hollister,” he offered, extending a hand as he walked across the room. “I’m so sorry I left you out here so long. I was on a conference call with a client in New York. This thing with Pauline has put a real spanner in the works, as they say.”

Faith wasn’t sure who said that sort of thing, but she forgave him as she shook his hand. He was at once the most attractive and most gay man she had met in a while. Considering they were in Atlanta, the gay capital of the South, this was saying quite a lot.

“I’m Agent Trent, this is Agent Mitchell,” Will said, somehow ignoring the predatory way Morgan Hollister stared at him.

"You work out?" Morgan asked.

"Free weights, mostly. A little bench work."

Morgan slapped him on the arm. "Solid."

"I appreciate your letting us look through Pauline's things," Will said, although Morgan had made no such offer. "I know the Atlanta police have already been here. I hope it's not too inconvenient."

"Of course not." Morgan put his hand on Will's shoulder as he led him toward the door. "We're really torn up about Paulie. She was a great girl."

"We've heard she could be a bit difficult to work with."

Morgan gave a chuckle, which Faith understood as code for "typical woman." She was glad to hear that sexism was just as rampant in the gay community.

Will asked, "Does the name Jacquelyn Zabel mean anything to you?"

Morgan shook his head. "I work with all the clients. I'm pretty sure I'd remember it, but I can check the computer." He put on a sad face. "Poor Paulie. This came as such a shock to all of us."

"We found temporary placement for Felix," Will told the man.

"Felix?" He seemed confused, then said, "Oh, right, the little guy. I'm sure he'll be okay. He's a trouper."

Morgan led them down a long hallway. Cubicles were on their right, windows looking out onto the interstate behind them. Material swatches and schematics littered the desktops. Faith glanced at a set of blueprints spread out on a conference table, feeling slightly wistful.

As a child, she had wanted to be an architect, a dream that was derailed promptly at the age of fourteen when she was kicked out of school for being pregnant. It was different now, of course, but back then, pregnant teenagers were expected to drop off the face of the earth, their names never mentioned again unless it was in reference to the boy who had knocked them up, and then they were only referred to as "that slut who nearly ruined his life by getting pregnant."

Morgan stopped in front of a closed office door. Pauline McGhee's name was on the outside. He took out a key.

Will asked, "You always keep it locked?"

"Paulie did. One of her things."

"She have a lot of *things*?"

"She had a way she liked to do stuff." Morgan shrugged. "I gave her a free hand. She was good with paperwork, good at keeping subcontractors in line." His smile dropped. "Of course, there was a problem there at the end. She messed up a very important order. Cost the firm a lot of money. Not sure she'd still be here if something hadn't happened."

If Will was wondering why Morgan was talking about Pauline as if she was dead, he didn't press it. Instead, he held out his hand for the key. "We'll lock up when we're finished."

Morgan hesitated. He had obviously assumed he would be there while they searched the office.

Will said, "I'll bring it back to you when we're finished, all right?"

He slapped Morgan on the arm. "Thanks, man." Will turned his back to him and went inside the office. Faith followed, pulling the door shut behind her.

She had to ask, "That doesn't bother you?"

"Morgan?" He shrugged. "He knows I'm not interested."

"But, still—"

"There were a lot of gay kids at the children's home. Most of them were a hell of a lot nicer than the straight ones."

She couldn't imagine any parent giving up their child for any reason, especially that one. "That's awful."

Will obviously didn't want to have a conversation about it. He looked around the office, saying, "I'd call this austere."

Faith had to agree. Pauline's office appeared as if it had never been occupied. There was not a scrap of paper on the desktop. The in and out trays were empty. The design books on the shelves were all arranged in alphabetical order, spines straightened. The magazines stood crisply at attention in colored boxes. Even the computer monitor seemed to be at a precise forty-five-degree angle on the corner of the desk. The only thing of sentimental value on display was a snapshot of Felix on a swing set.

"'He's a little trouper,'" Will said, mocking Morgan's words about Pauline's son. "I called the social worker last night. Felix isn't handling it very well."

"What's he doing?"

"Crying a lot. He won't eat."

Faith stared at the photograph, the unchecked joy in the young boy's eyes as he beamed at his mother. She remembered Jeremy at that age. He'd been so sweet she'd wanted to eat him up like a piece of candy. Faith had just graduated from the police academy and moved into a cheap apartment off Monroe Drive; the first time either she or Jeremy had lived away from Faith's mother. Their lives had become intertwined in a way she had never known was possible. He was so much a part of her that she could barely stand to drop him off at day care. At night, Jeremy would color pictures while she filled out her daily reports at the kitchen table. He would sing songs to her in his squeaky little voice while she fixed him supper and made lunches for the next day. Sometimes, he would crawl into bed and curl up under her arm like a kitten. She had never felt so important or needed—not before and certainly not since.

"Faith?" Will had said something she'd missed.

She put the photograph back on Pauline's desk before she started bawling like a baby. "Yeah?"

"I said, what do you want to bet Jacquelyn Zabel's house in Florida was neat like this?"

Faith cleared her throat, trying to shift her focus. "The room she was using in her mother's house was extremely orderly. I thought it was something she did because the rest of the house was so messy—you know, calm in the storm. Maybe it's because she's a neat freak."

"Type A personality." Will walked around the desk, opening drawers. Faith looked at what he'd found—a row of colored pencils side by side in a plastic tray. Extra Post-it notes in a squared stack. He opened the next drawer and found a large binder, which he pulled out and put on the desk. He thumbed through the pages, and Faith saw room sketches, swatches, clippings of furniture photos.

Faith booted up the computer while he looked through the other drawers. She was pretty sure they would find nothing here, but, oddly, it felt as if what they

were doing was helping the case. She was clicking with Will again, feeling more like his partner and less like an adversary. That had to be a good thing.

"Look at this." Will had opened the bottom drawer on the left side. It was a mess—the equivalent of a kitchen junk drawer. Papers were wadded up, and at the bottom were several empty bags of potato chips.

Faith said, "At least we know she's human."

"It's weird," he said. "Everything's so neat except this one drawer."

Faith picked up a balled piece of paper and smoothed it against the desk. There was a list on it, items checked off as they had probably been completed: grocery store; get lamp fixed for Powell living room; contact Jordan about couch swatches. She took out another balled piece of paper, finding much the same.

Will asked, "Maybe she wadded them up once she finished doing what she needed to do?"

Faith squinted at the list, blurring her eyes, trying to see it the way Will would. He was so damn good at fooling people into thinking he could read that sometimes Faith forgot he even had a problem.

Will searched the bookcase, taking down a magazine box from one of the middle shelves. "What's this?" He pulled down another box, then another. Faith could see the dial of a safe.

Will tried the handle, but there was no luck. He ran his fingers along the seam. "It's concreted into the wall."

"You want to go ask your buddy Morgan for the combination?"

"I'd bet some serious money he doesn't know it."

Faith didn't take the bet. Like Jacquelyn Zabel, Pauline McGhee seemed to enjoy keeping secrets.

Will said, "Check the computer first, then I'll go look for him."

Faith looked at the monitor. There was a box asking for a password.

Will saw it, too. "Try 'Felix.'"

She did, and miraculously, it worked. She made a mental note to change her password from "Jeremy" at home as she clicked open the email program. Faith skimmed the messages as Will went back to the bookshelves. She found the usual correspondence from people working in an office, but nothing personal that would point to a friend or confidant. Faith sat back in the chair and opened the browser, hoping to find an email service in the history. There was no Gmail or Yahoo, but she discovered several websites.

Randomly, she clicked on one, and a YouTube page came up. She checked the sound as the video loaded. A guitar squeaked through the speakers on the bottom of a monitor, and the words, "*I am happy*," came up, then, "*I am smiling*."

Will stood behind her. She read the words as they faded into the black. "*I am feeling. I am living. I am dying.*"

The guitar turned angrier with each word, and a photograph came up of a young girl in a cheerleading outfit. The shorts were low on her hips, the top barely enough to cover her breasts. She was so thin that Faith could count her ribs.

"Jesus," she mumbled. Another picture faded in, this one of an African-American girl. She was balled up on a bed, her back to the camera. Her skin was stretched, her vertebrae and ribs pronounced enough to show each individual piece of bone pressing against the thin flesh. Her shoulder blade stuck out like a

knife.

"Is this some kind of relief site?" Will asked. "Money for AIDS?"

Faith shook her head as the next picture came up—a model standing in front of a cityscape, her legs and arms as thin as sticks. Another girl came up; a woman actually. Her clavicle jutted out with painful sharpness. The skin across her shoulders looked like wet paper covering the sinew underneath.

Faith clicked on the browser history button. She pulled up another video. There was different music, but the same sort of intro. She read aloud, "*Eat to live. Don't live to eat.*" The words faded into a photo of a girl who was so painfully thin that she was hard to look at. Faith opened another page, then another. "*The only freedom left is the freedom to starve yourself.*" she read. "*Thin is beautiful. Fat is ugly.*" She looked at the top of the screen, the video category. "Thinspo. I've never heard of it."

"I don't understand. These girls look like they're starving, but they've got TVs in their rooms, they're wearing nice clothes."

Faith clicked on another link. "Thinspiration," she said. "Good Lord, I can't believe this. They're emaciated."

"Is there a newsgroup or something?"

Faith looked back at the history. She skimmed the list, finding more videos, but nothing that looked like a chat room. She scrolled to the next page and hit pay dirt. "Atlanta-Pro-Anna-dot-com," she read. "It's a pro-anorexia site." Faith clicked on the link, but all that came up was another screen asking for a password. She tried "Felix" again, but it didn't work. She read the fine print. "It's asking for a six-digit password and Felix is only five letters." She typed in variations on his name, saying them aloud for Will's benefit. "Zero-Felix, one-Felix, Felix-zero ..."

Will asked, "How many letters is 'thinspiration'?"

"Too many," she said. "'Thinspo' is seven." She tried this, to no avail.

Will asked, "What's her screen name?"

Faith read the name in the box above the password. "A-T-L thin." She realized spelling wouldn't help him. "It's shorthand for 'Atlanta thin.'" She entered in the screen name. "No dice. Oh." Faith mentally kicked herself. "Felix's birthday." She opened up the calendar program and did a search for "birthday." Only two hits came up, one for Pauline and one for her son. "One-two-eight-oh-three." The screen stayed stagnant. "Nope, didn't work."

He nodded, absently scratching his arm. "Safes have six-digit combinations, right?"

"Couldn't hurt to try it." Faith waited, but Will did not move. "One-two-oh-eight-oh-three," she repeated, knowing he was perfectly capable of processing numbers. Still he didn't move, and finally she felt something in her brain click. "Oh. I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize. It's my fault."

"It's mine." She stood up and went to the safe, spinning the dial to the right, locking onto the twelve, then going left two turns and dialing in eight. It wasn't the numbers Will couldn't manage. It was the left and right.

Faith dialed in the last number, and was slightly disappointed it had been so easy when she heard the instant *thunk* of the last tumbler falling into place. She opened the safe and saw a spiral-bound notebook, the sort of thing every

schoolkid had, and a single piece of laser paper. She skimmed the page. It was a printed-out email dealing with measuring an elevator so a couch could fit in it, something Faith had never considered had to be done, even though the first refrigerator she'd bought had been too big to fit through the kitchen door. "Work stuff," she told Will, taking out the notebook.

She flipped open the cover to the first page. The hair on the back of her neck went up, and Faith suppressed a shudder as she realized what she was seeing. Neat cursive lined the page, over and over again, the same line. Faith flipped to the next page, then the next. The words had been traced so hard in places that the pen ripped the paper. She was not one to believe in the supernatural, but the anger she felt coming out of the notebook was palpable.

"It's the same, right?" Will had probably recognized the spacing of the lines, the same short sentence repeatedly written, covering the notebook like a sadistic form of art.

I will not deny myself ... I will not deny myself ... I will not deny myself ...

"The same," Faith confirmed. "This connects Pauline to the cave, to Jackie Zabel and Anna."

"It's in pen," Will said. "The pages in the cave were in pencil."

"It's the same sentence, though. *I will not deny myself*. Pauline wrote this on her own, not because she had to. No one made her do it. As far as we know, she was never in that cave." Faith thumbed through the pages, making sure it was the same to the end of the notebook. "Jackie Zabel was thin. Not like the girls in the videos, but very thin."

"Joelyn Zabel said her sister weighed the same weight when she died as she did in high school."

"You think she had an eating disorder?"

"I think she had a lot of the same attributes that Pauline has—likes to be in control, likes to keep secrets." He added, "Pete thought Jackie was malnourished, but maybe she was starving herself already."

"What about Anna? Is she thin?"

"Same thing. You could see her ..." He put his hand to his collarbone. "We thought it was part of the torture—starving them. But, those girls in the videos, they do that on purpose, right? These videos are like pornography for anorexics."

Faith nodded, feeling a rush as she made the next connection. "Maybe they all met on the Internet." She went back to the password box overlaying the Pro-Anna chat room and entered Felix's birthday in every combination she could think of—leaving out the zeros, adding them back in, doing the full date, reversing the numbers. "It could be that Pauline was assigned a password she couldn't change."

"Or maybe what's in that chat room is more valuable to her than what's on the rest of the computer and in the safe."

"This is a connection, Will. If all the women had eating disorders, then we finally have something that links them all."

"And a chat room we can't get into, and family that isn't being exactly helpful."

"What about Pauline McGhee's brother? She told Felix that he was a bad man." She turned away from the computer, giving Will her full attention.

"Maybe we should go back to Felix and see if he remembers anything else."

Will seemed dubious. "He's only six years old, Faith. He's bereft about losing his mom. I don't think we can get anything else out of him."

They both jumped when the phone on the desk rang. Faith reached for it without thinking, saying, "Pauline McGhee's office."

"Hello." Morgan Hollister sounded none too pleased.

Faith asked, "Did you find Jacquelyn Zabel in your books?"

"'Fraid not, Detective, but—funny thing—I've got a call for you on line two."

Faith shrugged at Will as she pressed the lighted button. "Faith Mitchell."

Leo Donnelly went straight into a tirade. "Didn't occur to you to check with me before barging in on my case?"

Faith's mouth filled with apologies, but Leo didn't give her time to get them out.

"I got a call from my boss who got a call from your butt-boy Hollister asking why the state was pawing through McGhee's office when we'd already been through everything this morning." He was breathing hard. "My boss, Faith. He's wanting to know why I can't do my job on this thing. You know how that makes me look?"

"It's connected," Faith said. "We found a connection between Pauline McGhee and our other victims."

"I'm real fucking happy for you, Mitchell. Meanwhile, my balls are in a vise because you couldn't take two seconds to stop and give me a heads-up."

"Leo, I'm so sorry—"

"Save it," he snapped. "I should hold this back from you, but I'm not that kind of guy."

"Hold what back?"

"We've got another missing person."

Faith felt her heart do a double beat. "Another missing woman?" she repeated, for Will's benefit. "Does she match our profile?"

"Midthirties, dark hair, brown eyes. She works at some fancy bank in Buckhead where you gotta be filthy rich just to walk in the door. No friends. Everybody says she's a major bitch."

Faith nodded at Will. Another victim, another clock ticking down. "What's her name? Where does she live?"

"Olivia Tanner." He shot out the name and address so fast that she had to ask him to repeat it. "She's in Virginia Highland."

Faith scribbled the street address on the back of her hand.

He said, "You owe me for this."

"Leo, I'm so sorry I—"

He didn't let her finish. "If I were you, Mitchell, I'd watch myself. Except for the successful part, you're looking a hell of a lot like that profile lately."

She heard a soft *click*, which in some ways was worse than him slamming down the receiver in her ear.

Olivia Tanner lived in one of those deceptively small-looking Midtown bungalows that from the street appeared to be around a thousand square feet but ended up having six bedrooms and five and a half baths, with a price tag running slightly north of a million dollars. After being in Pauline McGhee's

office, seeing the missing woman's psyche laid bare, Faith looked at Olivia Tanner's house differently than she would have otherwise. The flower garden was beautiful, but all the plants were lined up in uniform rows. The outside of the house was crisply painted, the gutters in a graceful line along the eaves. Based on Faith's knowledge of the neighborhood, the bungalow was probably thirty years older than her own lowly ranch house, but comparatively speaking, it looked brand-new.

"All right," Will said into his cell phone. "Thank you for talking to me." He ended the call, telling Faith, "Joelyn Zabel says that her sister struggled with anorexia and bulimia when she was in high school. She's not sure what was going on recently, but it's a pretty fair bet that Jackie hadn't given it up."

Faith let the information settle in her brain. "Okay," she finally said.

"That's it. That's the connection."

"Where does it get us?" she asked, turning off the ignition. "Tech can't break into Jackie Zabel's Mac. It might take weeks for them to find the password on Pauline McGhee's computer, and we don't even know if the anorexia chat room is where she met the other women or if it was just something she cruised during her lunch hour. Not that she ate lunch." She looked back up at Olivia Tanner's house. "What do you want to bet we don't find a damn thing here, either?"

"You're focusing on Felix when you need to be thinking about Pauline," he said softly.

Faith wanted to tell him he was wrong, but it was true. All she could think about was Felix in some foster home, crying his eyes out. She needed to concentrate on the victims, the fact that Jacquelyn Zabel and Anna were precursors to Pauline McGhee and Olivia Tanner. How long could the two women endure the torture, the degradation? Every minute that passed was another minute they would suffer.

Every minute that passed was another minute Felix was without his mother.

Will told her, "The way we help Felix is to help Pauline."

Faith breathed a heavy sigh. "It's really starting to annoy me that you know me so well."

"Please," he muttered. "You are an enigma wrapped in a sticky bun." He opened the car door and got out. She watched him walk toward the house with a determined stride.

Faith got out of the car and followed him, noting, "No garage, no BMW." After her awful phone call with Leo, she had followed up with the desk sergeant who took the initial report on Olivia Tanner's disappearance. The woman drove a blue BMW 325, hardly distinctive in this neighborhood. Tanner was single, worked as a vice president at a local bank, had no children, and her only living relative was her brother.

Will tried the front door. Locked. "What's keeping the brother?"

Faith checked her watch. "His plane landed an hour ago. If traffic's bad ..." She let her voice trail off. Traffic was always bad in Atlanta, especially around the airport.

He leaned down, checking under the welcome mat for a key. When that didn't work, he ran his hand along the top of the doorsill and checked the flowerpots, coming up empty. "You think we should just go in?"

Faith suppressed a comment about his eagerness to commit breaking and

entering. She had worked with him long enough to know that frustration could act like adrenaline to Will, while it acted like Valium to Faith. "Let's give him another few minutes."

"We should go ahead and call a locksmith in case the brother doesn't have a key."

"Let's just take this slow, all right?"

"You're talking to me the way you talk to witnesses."

"We don't even know if Olivia Tanner is one of our victims. She could end up being bottle blonde and vibrant with tons of friends and a dog."

"The bank said she hasn't missed a day of work since she started there."

"She could've fallen down the stairs. Decided to skip town. Run away with a stranger she met in a bar."

Will didn't answer. He cupped his hands and peered into the front windows, trying to see inside. The uniformed patrolman who had taken the missing persons report yesterday would have already done this, but Faith let him waste his time as they waited for Michael Tanner, Olivia's brother, to show up.

Despite his anger, Leo had done them a solid by handing over the call. Procedure would have dictated a detective be assigned to the case. Depending on what the detective had on his books, it might have taken as long as twenty-four hours for Michael Tanner to talk to someone who could do more than fill out a report. From there, it might've taken another day before the GBI was alerted to a match on their profile. Leo had bought them two precious days on a case that desperately needed help. And they had kicked him in the teeth in the way of thanks.

Faith felt her BlackBerry start to vibrate. She checked the mail, saying a silent thank-you to Caroline, Amanda's assistant. "I've got Jake Berman's arrest report from the Mall of Georgia incident."

"What's it say?"

Faith watched the flashing file transfer icon. "It'll take a few minutes to download."

He walked around the house, checking each window. Faith followed him, keeping her BlackBerry in front of her like a divining rod. Finally, the first page of the report loaded, and she read from the narrative title. "'Pursuant to complaints made by patrons of the Mall of Georgia ...'" Faith scrolled down, looking for the relevant parts. "'Suspect then made the typical hand gesture indicating he was interested in sexual intercourse. I responded by nodding my head twice, at which point he directed me back toward the stalls at the rear of the men's room.'" She skimmed down some more. "'Suspect's wife and two sons, approximately age one and three, were waiting outside.'"

"Is the wife's name listed?"

"No."

Will walked up the steps of the deck that lined the back of Olivia Tanner's house. Atlanta was in the piedmont of the Appalachians, which meant it was riddled with hills and valleys. Olivia Tanner's bungalow was at the base of a steep slope, giving her backyard neighbors a clear view of her house.

"Maybe they saw something?" Will suggested.

Faith looked at the neighbor's house. It was huge, the sort of McMansion you usually only saw in the suburbs. The top two stories had large decks and the

basement had a terraced seating area with a brick fireplace. All the shutters and blinds on the back of the house were closed except for a pair of curtains that were pulled back on one of the basement doors.

"Looks empty," she said.

"Probably a foreclosure." Will tried Olivia Tanner's back door. It was locked. "Olivia has been missing since at least yesterday. If she's one of our victims, that means she was either taken right before or right after Pauline." He checked the windows. "Are we thinking Jake Berman might be Pauline McGhee's brother?"

"It's possible," Faith conceded. "Pauline warned Felix that her brother was dangerous. She didn't want him around her kid."

"She must have been scared of him for a reason. Maybe he's violent. Maybe the brother is the reason Pauline moved away and changed her name. She cut all ties at a very young age. She must have been terrified of him."

Faith listed it out. "Jake Berman was at the scene of the crime. He's disappeared. He wasn't very cooperative as a witness. He hasn't left a paper trail except for the one arrest for indecent exposure."

"If Berman is an alias Pauline's brother is using, then it's pretty established. He was arrested and went through the system with the name intact."

"If he changed it twenty years ago when Pauline ran away from home, that's a lifetime as far as public records are concerned. They were still playing catch-up, trying to enter info and old cases into computers. A lot of those files never made the transition, especially in small towns. Look at how hard it's been for Leo to track down Pauline's parents, and they filed a missing persons report."

"How old is Berman?"

Faith scrolled back to the front of the report. "Thirty-seven."

Will stopped. "Pauline is thirty-seven. Could they be twins?"

Faith rifled around in her purse and found the black-and-white copy of Pauline McGhee's driver's license. She tried to recall Jake Berman's face, but then remembered she was holding his file in her other hand. The BlackBerry was still loading. She held it up above her head, hoping the signal would get stronger.

"Let's go back to the front of the house," Will suggested. They went around the other side, Will checking the windows, making sure nothing looked suspicious. By the time they reached the front porch, the file had finally downloaded.

Jake Berman had a full beard in his arrest photo—the sort of unkempt kind that suburban dads sported when they were trying to look subversive. Faith showed Will the picture. "He was clean-shaven when I talked to him," she said.

"Felix said the man who took his mother had a mustache."

"He couldn't have grown one that quickly."

"We can get a sketch of what Jake would look like without facial hair, with a mustache, whatever."

"It's Amanda's call whether or not we put that out on the wire." Releasing a sketch could make Jake Berman panic and go even deeper into hiding. If he was their bad guy, it could also serve to tip him off. He might decide to kill any witnesses and leave the state—or worse, the country. Hartsfield International Airport offered over twenty-five hundred flights in and out of the city every day.

Will said, "He's got dark hair and dark eyes like Pauline."

"So do you."

Will shrugged, admitting, "He doesn't look like her twin. Maybe her brother."

Faith was being stupid again. She checked the birthdays. "Berman had a birthday after he was arrested. He was born eighteen months before Pauline. Irish twins."

"Was he wearing a suit when he was arrested?"

She scrolled through the file. "Jeans and a sweater. Same as when I talked to him at Grady."

"Does the report list his occupation?"

Faith checked. "Unemployed." She read the other details, shaking her head. "This is such a sloppy report. I can't believe a lieutenant passed this on."

"I've done those stings before. You get ten, maybe fifteen guys a day. Most of them plead it down or just pay the fine and hope it goes away. You're not going to be going to court, because the last thing they want to do is face their accuser."

"What's the 'typical hand gesture' they use to ask for sex?" Faith asked, curious.

Will did something absolutely obscene with his fingers, and she wished she hadn't asked.

He insisted, "There has to be a reason Jake Berman is hiding."

"What are our options? He's either a deadbeat, he's Pauline's brother or he's our bad guy. Or all three."

"Or none," Will pointed out. "Either way, we've got to talk to him."

"Amanda's got the whole team looking for him. They're doing all the derivations on his name they can think of—Jake Seward, Jack Seward. They're trying McGhee, Jackson, Jakeson. The computer will run the permutations."

"What's his middle name?"

"Henry. So, we've got Hank, Harry, Hoss ..."

"How can he have an arrest record and we still can't find him?"

"He's not using credit cards. He doesn't have a cell phone bill or a mortgage. None of his last known addresses have given up anything useful. We don't know who his employer is or where he's worked in the past."

"Maybe it's all in his wife's name—the name we don't have."

"If my husband got caught getting his willy winked at the mall while I was standing outside with our kids ..." Faith didn't bother to finish the sentence. "It would help if the lawyer who handled his public indecency case wasn't a total prick." The man was refusing to divulge any of his client's information and insisted he had no way to get in touch with Jake Berman. Amanda was filing warrants to look into the files, but warrants like that took time—something they were running out of.

A blue Ford Escape pulled up in front of the house. The man who got out of the car looked like the textbook example of anxiety, from his wrinkled brow to the way he was wringing his hands in front of his slightly paunched belly. He was average looking, balding, with stooped shoulders. Faith would have pegged his occupation as one that required him to sit in front of a computer for more than eight hours a day.

"Are you the police officers I spoke with?" the man asked brusquely. Then, perhaps realizing how abrupt he had been, he tried again. "I'm sorry, I'm

Michael Tanner, Olivia's brother. Are you the police?"

"Yes, sir." Faith pulled out her ID. She introduced herself and Will. "Do you have a key to your sister's house?"

Michael seemed worried and embarrassed at the same time, as if this could all just be a misunderstanding. "I'm not sure we should be doing this. Olivia likes her personal space."

Faith caught Will's eye. Another woman who was good at putting up boundaries.

Will offered, "We can call a locksmith if we need to. It's important we see inside the house in case anything happened. Olivia might've fallen, or—"

"I've got a key." Michael fished into his pocket and pulled out a single key on a springy band. "She mailed it to me three months ago. I don't know why. She just wanted me to have it. I guess because she knew I wouldn't use it. Maybe I *shouldn't* use it."

Will said, "You wouldn't have flown all the way from Houston unless you thought that something was wrong."

Michael's face went white, and Faith caught a glimpse of what the last few hours of his life must have been like—driving to the airport, getting on the plane, renting a car, all the while thinking that he was being foolish, that his sister was fine. All the while knowing in the back of his brain that the exact opposite was probably true.

Michael handed Will the key. "The policeman I spoke with yesterday said he sent a patrolman to knock on the door." He paused, as if he needed them to confirm this had happened. "I was worried they weren't taking me seriously. I know Olivia is a grown woman, but she's a creature of habit. She doesn't depart from her routine."

Will unlocked the door and went inside the house. Faith kept the brother on the porch. She asked him, "What's her routine?"

He closed his eyes for a moment as if to collect his thoughts. "She works at the private bank in Buckhead, has for almost twenty years. She goes in six days a week—every day but Monday, when she does her shopping and other chores: cleaners, library, grocery store. She's in the bank by eight, out by eight most nights unless there's some kind of event. Her job is community relations. If there's a party or a fundraiser or something the bank is sponsoring, she has to be there. Otherwise, she's always at home."

"Did the bank call you?"

He put his hand to his throat, rubbing a bright red scar. Faith guessed he'd had a tracheotomy or some type of throat surgery.

He said, "The bank didn't have my phone number. I called them when I didn't hear from Olivia yesterday morning. I called them when I landed. They have no idea where she is. She's never missed work before."

"Do you have a recent picture of your sister?"

"No." He seemed to realize why she wanted the photograph. "I'm sorry. Olivia hated to be photographed. Always."

"That's okay," Faith assured him. "We'll pull it from her driver's license if we need to."

Will came down the stairs. He shook his head, and Faith led the man into the house. She tried to make small talk, telling Michael, "This is a beautiful home."

"I've never seen it before," he confessed. He was looking around like Faith, probably thinking the same thing she was: The place was like a museum.

The front hall went all the way back to the kitchen, which gleamed with white marble countertops and white cabinets. The stairs were carpeted in a white runner, and the living room was equally Spartan; everything from the walls to the furniture to the rug on the floor was a pristine white. Even the art on the wall consisted of white canvases in white frames.

Michael shivered. "It's so cold in here."

Faith knew he didn't mean the temperature.

She led both men into the living room. There was a couch and two chairs, but she didn't know whether to sit or stand. Finally, she sat on the couch, the cushion so hard that she barely made a dent. Will took the chair beside her and Michael sat at the other end of the couch.

She said, "Let's take it from the beginning, Mr. Tanner."

"Doctor," he said, then frowned. "Sorry. It doesn't matter. Please call me Michael."

"All right, Michael." Faith kept her voice calm, soothing, sensing he was close to panic. She started with an easy question. "You're a doctor?"

"A radiologist."

"You work at a hospital?"

"The Methodist Breast Center." He blinked his eyes, and she realized he was trying not to cry.

Faith got to the point. "What made you call the police yesterday?"

"Olivia calls me every day now. She didn't do that before. We weren't close for many years, then she went off to college and we drifted even farther apart." He gave them a weak smile. "I got cancer two years ago. Thyroid." He touched his hand to the scar on his neck again. "I just felt an emptiness?" He said this as a question, and Faith nodded as if she understood. "I wanted to be with my family. I wanted to have Olivia back in my life. I knew it would be on her terms, but I was willing to make that sacrifice."

"What terms did she impose?"

"I could never call her. She always was the one to call me."

Faith wasn't sure what to say to that. Will asked, "Was there a particular pattern to the calls?"

Michael started nodding his head, like he was glad someone finally understood why he was so worried. "Yes. She's called me every single day for the last eighteen months. Sometimes she doesn't say much, but she always calls at the same time every morning no matter what."

Will asked, "Why doesn't she say much?"

Michael looked down at his hands. "It's hard for her. She went through some things when we were growing up. She's not someone who thinks of the word 'family' and smiles." He rubbed his scar again, and Faith felt a profound sadness coming off him. "She doesn't smile much about anything, actually."

Will glanced at Faith to confirm it was okay for him to take over. She gave him a slight nod. Obviously, Michael Tanner was more comfortable talking to Will. Her job now was to just blend in with the background.

Will asked, "Your sister wasn't a happy person?"

Michael slowly shook his head, his sadness filling the room.

Will was silent for a moment, giving the man some space. "Who abused her?"

Faith was shocked by the question, but the tears that fell from Michael's eyes told her that Will was spot-on. "Our father. Quite the cliché these days."

"When?"

"Our mother died when Olivia was eight. I guess it started shortly after that. It went on for a few months, until Olivia ended up at the doctor. She was damaged. The doctor reported it, but my father just ..." Tears came in earnest now. "My father said she had hurt herself on purpose. That she had put something down ... there ... to injure herself. To draw attention to herself because she missed our mother." He angrily wiped his tears away. "My father was a judge. He knew everyone on the police force, and they thought they knew him. He said that Olivia was lying, so everyone assumed she was a liar—especially me. For years, I just didn't believe her."

"What changed your mind?"

He gave a humorless laugh. "Logic. It didn't make sense that she would ... that she would be the way she is unless something horrible had happened."

Will kept staring straight into the man's eyes. "Did your father ever hurt you?"

"No." He had answered too quickly. "Not anything sexual, I mean. He punished me sometimes. Took out the belt. He could be a brutal man, but I thought that's what fathers did. It was normal. The best way to avoid a beating was to be a good son, so I was a good son."

Again Will took his time getting to the next question. "How did Olivia punish herself for what happened?"

Michael struggled with his emotions, trying to contain them but failing miserably. He finally pressed his thumb and forefinger into his eyes, sobbing. Will just sat there, motionless. Faith followed his lead. She knew instinctively that the worst thing she could do right now was comfort Michael Tanner.

He used the backs of his hands to wipe his tears. At last, he said, "Olivia was bulimic. I think she might still be anorexic, but she swore to me the purging was under control."

Faith realized she had been holding her breath. Olivia Tanner had an eating disorder, just like Pauline McGhee and Jackie Zabel.

Will asked, "When did it start?"

"Ten, eleven. I don't remember. I'm three years younger. All I can recall is that it was horrible. She just ... She just started to waste away."

Will only nodded, letting the man speak.

"Olivia was always obsessed with her looks. She was so pretty, but she never accepted ..." Michael paused. "I guess Dad made it worse. He was always pinching her, teasing her, telling her she needed to get rid of her baby fat. She wasn't fat. She was a normal girl. She was beautiful. *Was* beautiful. Do you know what happens when you starve yourself like that?"

Michael was looking at Faith now, and she shook her head.

"She got pressure sores on her back. Big, gaping wounds where her bones rubbed holes in her skin. She couldn't ever sit down, couldn't get comfortable. She was cold all the time, couldn't feel her hands and feet. Some days she didn't even have the energy to walk to the bathroom. She would just defecate on herself." He stopped as the memories obviously flooded back. "She slept ten, twelve hours a day. She lost her hair. She would go into these uncontrollable

shaking fits. Her heart would race. Her skin was just ... it was disgusting. Flaky, dry scales would just fleck off her body. And she thought it was all worth it. She thought it made her beautiful.”

“Was she ever hospitalized?”

He laughed, as if they couldn’t begin to understand how horrible the situation had been. “She was in and out of Houston General all the time. They would put her on a feeding tube. She would gain enough weight so that they would let her leave the hospital, then she’d go back to purging herself again as soon as she got out. Her kidneys shut down twice. There was a lot of concern about the damage she was doing to her heart. I was so angry with her then. I didn’t understand why she was doing something, willingly doing something so awful to herself. It just seemed ... Why would you starve yourself? Why would you put yourself through ...” He looked around the room, the cold place his sister had created for herself. “Control. She just wanted to control one thing, and I guess that one thing was what went into her mouth.”

Faith asked, “Was she better? I mean, recently.”

He nodded and shrugged at the same time. “She got better when she got away from my father. Went off to college, got a business degree. She moved here to Atlanta. I think the distance helped her.”

“Was she in therapy?”

“No.”

“How about a support group? Or maybe an online chat room?”

He shook his head, certain. “Olivia didn’t think she needed help. She thought she had it all under control.”

“Did she have any friends, or—”

“No. She had no one.”

“Is your father still alive?”

“He died about ten years ago. It was very peaceful. Everyone was so pleased that he just passed in his sleep.”

“Is Olivia a religious person? She doesn’t go to church or—”

“She would burn down the Vatican if she could get past the guards.”

Will asked, “Do the names Jacquelyn Zabel, Pauline McGhee or Anna mean anything to you?”

He shook his head.

“Have you or your sister ever been to Michigan?”

He gave them a puzzled look. “Never. I mean, I haven’t. Olivia has lived in Atlanta all her adult life, but she might have taken a trip there I wasn’t aware of.”

Will tried, “How about the words, ‘I will not deny myself.’ Does that mean anything to you?”

“No. But it’s the exact opposite of what Olivia does in her life. She denies herself everything.”

“How about ‘thinspo,’ or ‘thinspiration?’”

Again, he shook his head. “No.”

Faith took over. “What about kids? Did Olivia have children? Or want children?”

“It would have been physically impossible,” the man answered. “Her body ... the damage she did to herself. There was no way she could carry a child.”

"She could adopt."

"Olivia hated children." His voice was so low that Faith could barely hear him. "She knew what could happen to them."

Will asked the question that was on Faith's mind. "Do you think she was doing it again—starving herself?"

"No," Michael said. "Not like before, at least. That's why she called me every morning, six sharp, to let me know she was okay. Sometimes I'd pick up the phone and she'd talk to me; other times, she'd just say, 'I'm okay,' and hang up the phone. I think it was a lifeline for her. I hope it was."

Faith said, "But she didn't call you yesterday. Is it possible that she was mad at you?"

"No." He wiped his eyes again. "She never got mad at me. She worried about me. She worried about me all the time."

Will only nodded, so Faith asked, "Why did she worry?"

"Because she was ..." Michael stopped, clearing his throat a couple of times.

Will said, "She was protecting him from their dad."

Michael kept nodding, and the room got quiet again. He seemed to be working up his courage. "Do you think—" He stopped himself. "Olivia would never change her routine."

Will stared him straight in the eye. "I can be kind or I can be honest, Dr. Tanner. There are only three possibilities here. One is that your sister wandered off. People do that. You wouldn't believe how often it happens. The other is, she's been in an accident or she's hurt—"

"I called the hospitals."

"The Atlanta police did, too. They checked all their reports and everyone's accounted for."

Michael nodded, probably because he already knew this. "What's the third possibility?" he asked softly.

"Someone has taken her," Will answered. "Someone who means to do her harm."

Michael's throat worked. He stared down at his hands for a good long while before finally nodding. "Thank you for your honesty, Detective."

Will stood up. He asked, "Do you mind if we look around the house, check through your sister's things?"

Again the man nodded, and Will told Faith, "I'll check upstairs. You take down here."

He didn't give her time to discuss the plan, and Faith decided not to argue with him, even though Olivia Tanner probably kept her home computer upstairs.

She left Michael Tanner in the living room and wandered into the kitchen. Light poured in from the windows, making everything seem even more white. The kitchen was beautiful, but just as sterile as the rest of the house. The countertops were completely bare except for the thinnest television Faith had ever seen. Even the cords for the cable and plug were hidden, snaking down a thin hole in the lightly veined marble.

The walk-in pantry had very little food. What was there was stacked neatly in line, boxes face-out to show the brands, cans all turned in the same direction. There were six economy-size bottles of aspirin still in their packaging. The brand was different from the one Faith had found in Jackie Zabel's bedroom, but she

found it odd that both women took so much aspirin.

Yet another detail that did not make sense.

Faith made some phone calls as she searched the kitchen cabinets. As quietly as she could, she requested a background check on Michael Tanner, just to clear him from the picture. Her next call was a request to borrow some patrolmen from the Atlanta police to canvass the neighborhood. She'd put a phone dump on Olivia Tanner's home phone so they could see who she had been talking to, but the woman's cell phone was probably registered to the bank. If they were really lucky, there was a BlackBerry somewhere so they could read her email. Maybe Olivia had someone in her life that her brother didn't know about. Faith shook her head, knowing this was a long shot. The house was a showplace, but it didn't feel lived in. There were no parties here, no weekend get-togethers. Certainly, no man was living here.

What had Olivia Tanner's life been like? Faith had worked missing persons cases before. The key to finding out what happened to the women—they were all usually women—was to try to put yourself in their shoes. What were their likes and dislikes? Who were their friends? What was so awful about their boyfriend/husband/ lover that made them want to pick up and leave?

With Olivia, there were no clues, no emotional anchors to pounce on. The woman lived in a lifeless house without a comfortable chair to sink into at the end of the day. All her plates and bowls were unscratched, unchipped and looked unused. Even the coffee cups were sparkling at the bottom. How could Faith relate to a woman who lived in a perfectly kept white box?

Faith returned to the kitchen cabinets, again finding nothing out of place. Even what she would've considered the junk drawer was neat—screwdrivers in a plastic case, hammer resting on a ball of twine. Faith ran her finger along the inside seam of the cabinet, finding no grit or dirt. There was something to be said for a woman who dusted her kitchen cabinets inside and out.

Faith opened the bottom drawer and found an oversized envelope like the kind used for mailing photographs. She opened the top and found a stack of glossy pages that had been neatly cut from magazines. All of them showed models in various stages of undress, no matter whether they were selling perfume or gold watches. These weren't the usual women you found in sweater sets and pearls as they cheerily dusted their houses and cleaned up after adorable children. These models were meant to convey sex, wantonness and, above all, thinness.

Faith had seen some of these bone-thin models before. She skimmed the pages of *Cosmo* and *Vogue* and *Elle* just like every other person who ever waited in line at the grocery store, but seeing these anorexic women now, knowing that Olivia Tanner had chosen these pictures not because she wanted to remember to buy a new eye shadow or lip gloss, but because she considered the airbrushed skeletons an attainable goal, made Faith feel sick to her stomach.

She thought again about Michael Tanner's words, the torture his sister had put herself through in order to be thin. She couldn't figure out why Will was so certain the woman had been trying to protect her brother. It seemed unlikely that a man who raped his daughter would go after his son, but Faith had been a cop too long to believe criminals followed a logical pattern. Despite her own teenage pregnancy, the Mitchell family was fairly normal. There were no

abusive alcoholics or sex-crazed uncles. In matters of severe childhood dysfunction, she always deferred to Will.

He had never outright confirmed anything, but she guessed that he had suffered a great deal of abuse as a child. His upper lip had obviously been busted open and not allowed to heal properly. The faint scar running down the side of his jaw and going into his collar looked old, the type of thing you got as a kid and lived with for the rest of your life. She had worked with Will during the hottest months of the summer and never seen him roll up his shirtsleeves or even loosen his tie. His question about how Olivia Tanner punished herself was especially revealing. Faith often thought that Angie Polaski was a punishment that Will continually brought down on himself.

She heard footsteps on the stairs. Will entered the kitchen, shaking his head. "I hit the redial on the upstairs phone. I got the brother's answering machine in Houston."

There was a book in his hand. "What's that?"

He handed her the slim novel, which had a library band on the spine. The jacket showed a naked woman sitting on her haunches. She was wearing high heels, but the pose was more artistic than kinky, sending the distinct message that this was literature, not trash. So, not the type of book Faith would ever read. She skimmed the back copy and told Will, "It's about a woman who's a diabetic meth addict and her abusive father."

"A love story." He guessed the title. "*Exposé*?"

He was close enough. Faith had figured out that he generally read the first three letters of a word and guessed the rest. More often than not, he was right, but odd words threw him off.

She put the book facedown on the counter. "Did you find a computer?"

"No computer. No diary. No calendar." He opened drawers, finding the television remote. He turned on the set, tilting the screen toward him. "This is the only TV in the house."

"There isn't one in the bedroom?"

"No." Will flipped through the channels, finding the usual digital offerings. "She doesn't have cable. There's not a DSL modem on the junction box in the basement."

"So, she doesn't have high-speed Internet," Faith surmised. "Maybe she uses dial-up. She could have a laptop at work."

"Or someone could've taken it."

"Or she just keeps her work at the office. Her brother says she's on the job from sunup till sundown."

He turned off the television. "Did you find anything down here?"

"Aspirin," Faith said, indicating the bottles in the pantry. "What did you mean about Olivia protecting Michael?"

"It's what we were talking about at Pauline's. Did your parents have much time for your brother when you got into trouble?"

Faith shook her head, realizing what he had said made perfect sense. Olivia had drawn all the negative attention away from her brother so that he could have some semblance of a life. No wonder the man was racked with guilt. He was a survivor.

Will was looking out the back window, up at the seemingly vacant house

behind Olivia's. "Those curtains on the door are bothering me."

Faith joined him by the window. He was right. All the blinds were closed on the back windows except for the curtains that hung open on the basement doors.

Faith raised her voice. "Dr. Tanner, we're going to step outside a minute. We'll be right back."

"All right," the man returned.

His voice still sounded shaky, so Faith added, "We haven't found anything yet. We're still just looking."

She waited. There was no response.

Will held open the back door and they both walked onto the deck.

He said, "Her clothes are all size two. Is that normal?"

"I wish," Faith mumbled, then realized what she had said. "It's thin, but it's not horrible."

She scanned Olivia Tanner's backyard again. Like most in-town lots, it was barely more than a quarter of an acre, fences delineating the property lines and telephone poles springing up every two hundred feet. Faith followed Will down the deck stairs. Olivia's yard was cordoned off by an expensive-looking cedar fence. The boards were flat, the supports on the outside. She asked, "Does this look new to you?"

He shook his head. "It's been pressure-washed. Fresh cedar is more red than that."

They reached the back of the property and stopped. There were marks on the cedar planks. Deep scratches running up the center. Will leaned down, saying, "It looks like someone did this with their feet, probably trying to get over."

Faith glanced up at Olivia Tanner's backyard neighbor again. "It looks vacant to me. You think it's a foreclosure?"

"Only one way to find out." Will went to a different section of the fence and started to lift himself up and over before realizing that Faith was with him. "Do you want to wait for me here? Or we could walk around."

"Do I look that pathetic to you?" She grabbed the top of the fence. They had done this sort of thing at the police academy, but that was years ago, and she hadn't been in a skirt. Faith pretended not to notice when Will gave her an assist from behind, just as she hoped he would pretend not to notice that she was wearing her powder blue granny underwear.

Somehow, she managed to scramble to the other side. Will made sure she was clear, then bolted the fence like a ten-year-old Chinese gymnast.

"Show-off," she mumbled, making her way up the steep hill toward the empty house. The basement was a wall of windows onto the backyard with French doors at either end. As she got closer, she could see that one of the doors was open. The wind picked up, and a piece of white curtain flapped outside in the breeze.

"This can't be this easy," Will said, obviously thinking what Faith was thinking: *Was their suspect hiding inside? Was this where he was keeping his victims?*

Will walked toward the house with a determined gait.

She asked, "Should I call for backup?"

Will didn't seem concerned. He pushed open the door with his elbow and poked his head inside.

"Ever hear of probable cause?"

"Do you hear that noise?" he asked, even though they both knew that he hadn't heard a thing. Legally, they couldn't go into a private home without a search warrant or threat of imminent danger.

Faith turned around, looking back at Olivia Tanner's house. The woman obviously did not believe in window coverings. From Faith's vantage point, she could see clear through to the kitchen and what must have been Olivia's bedroom. "We should call for a warrant."

Will was already inside. Faith cursed him under her breath as she took her gun out of her purse. She went into the basement, stepping carefully onto the white Berber carpet. The basement was finished, probably a media room at one time. There was a pool table and a wet bar. Wires stuck out of the wall where a home theater system had been. Will was nowhere to be seen. "Idiot," she mumbled, taking another step inside, pressing back the door until it was flat against the wall. She listened, her ears straining so hard that she felt a phantom pain from the effort.

"Will?" she whispered. There was no answer, and Faith ventured farther, her heart pounding in her chest. She leaned over the wet bar, looking behind the counter and seeing an empty box and a soda can on its side. There was a closet behind her, the door partially open. Faith used the muzzle of her gun to open it wide.

"It's empty," Will said, rounding a corner and scaring the shit out of her.

"What the hell are you doing?" Faith snapped. "He could've been in here."

Will didn't seem fazed. "We need to find out who has access to this house. Realtors. Contractors. Anyone interested in buying the house." He took a pair of latex gloves out of his pocket and checked the lock on the French door. "There's tool marks here. Someone picked the lock." He walked over to the windows, which were covered in cheap plastic blinds. One of the blades was bent back. Will twisted open the plastic wand, letting natural light flood in. He squatted down and studied the floor.

Faith put her gun back into her purse. Her heart was still beating like a snare drum. "Will, you scared the crap out of me. Don't walk into a house like that without me with you."

"You can't have it both ways."

"What does that mean?" she demanded, though she figured it out before the question left her mouth. He was trying to be more aggressive to please her.

"Look." He motioned her over. "Footprints."

Faith could see a reddish outline of a pair of shoes on the flat surface of the carpet. One of the great things about living in Georgia was the red clay that stuck to every surface, whether it was wet or dry. She glanced out the window, past the broken blade on the blinds. Olivia's house was on full display.

Will said, "You were right. He's been watching them. He follows them, learns their routines, knows who they are." He walked behind the wet bar, opening and closing cabinet doors. "Someone used this Coke can as an ashtray."

"Movers, probably."

He opened the refrigerator. She heard glass rattling. "Doc Peterson's Root Beer." He had probably recognized the logo.

"We should get out of here before we contaminate the scene any more than we already have."

Thankfully, Will seemed to agree. He followed Faith outside, pulling the door back to where they'd found it.

She said, "This feels different."

"How so?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "We didn't find anything at Jackie's mother's house or Pauline's work. Leo searched her house. There was nothing there. Our guy doesn't leave clues, so why do we have a pair of shoe prints? Why was the door left open?"

"He lost his first two victims. Anna and Jackie escaped. Maybe Olivia Tanner was in the pipeline. Maybe he had to move her ahead to replace them."

"Who would know this house was vacant?"

"Anybody who was paying attention."

Faith looked back at Olivia's house and saw Michael Tanner standing on the back porch. The thought of wrangling her ass over that fence again was not a welcome one.

Will said, "I'll go. You walk around."

She shook her head, walking back down the yard with a determined gait. The fence would be easier from this side, since the supports were facing out. There was a long two-by-four down the middle that served as a step, and Faith was able to lift herself over with less assistance than before. Will did another swoop, vaulting over with one hand.

Michael Tanner stood at the back door of his sister's house, hands clasped together as he watched them approach. "Is something wrong?"

"Nothing we can share with you right now," Faith told him. "I'm going to need you to—"

Her foot slipped out from under her as she stepped on the bottom stair. A comical noise close to a *woof* came out of her mouth, but there was nothing funny about the way Faith felt. Her vision went crazy for a few seconds, her head spinning. Without thinking, her hand went to her stomach and all she could think about was what was growing inside.

"You okay?" Will asked. He was kneeling beside her, his hand cupping the back of her head.

Michael Tanner was on her other side. "Just breathe very slowly until you catch your breath." His hands went down her spine, and she was about to slap him away before she remembered he was a doctor. "Slow breaths. In and out."

Faith tried to do as he said. She had been panting for no apparent reason.

Will asked, "Are you okay?"

She nodded, thinking maybe she was. "Just knocked the breath out of me," she managed. "Help me up."

Will's hands went under her arms, and she realized how strong he was as he easily lifted her to standing. "You've got to stop falling down like this."

"I'm such an idiot." She still had her hand on her stomach. Faith made herself move it away. She stood there, silent, listening for something inside her body, trying to feel a twinge or a spasm that might indicate something was wrong. She felt nothing, heard nothing. But was she okay?

"What's this?" Will asked, pulling something out of her hair. He held up a piece of confetti between his thumb and forefinger.

Faith ran her fingers through her hair, looked behind her. She saw tiny pieces

of confetti in the grass.

“Dammit,” Will cursed. “I saw one of these on Felix’s book bag. It’s not confetti. These are from a Taser.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Sara had no idea why she was at Grady on her day off. She'd only gotten through half her laundry, the kitchen was barely functional, and the bathroom was in such a sorry state that she felt a rush of shame every time she thought about it.

Yet, here she was, back at the hospital, climbing the stairs up to the sixteenth floor so that no one would see her as she made her way to the ICU.

She felt responsible for not doing a more thorough examination on Anna when the woman was first brought into the emergency room. X-rays, MRIs, ultrasounds, body scans. Almost every surgeon in the hospital had laid hands on the woman and they had all missed the eleven trash bags. The CDC had even been called in to culture the infection and had come up empty-handed. Anna had been tortured, cut, torn—damaged in countless ways that would not heal because the plastic was inside of her. When Sara removed the bags, the stench had filled the room. The woman was starting to rot from the inside. It was a wonder she hadn't gone into toxic shock.

Logically, Sara knew this was not her fault, but in her gut, she felt that she had done something wrong. All morning as she folded clothes and scrubbed dishes, her mind wandered back to two nights ago when Anna was brought in. Sara saw herself fashioning an alternate reality where she was able to do more than hand the woman off to the next doctor. She had to remind herself that even unbending the woman to do X-rays had caused her excruciating pain. Sara's job had been to stabilize the woman for surgery, not do a full gynecological exam.

And yet she still felt guilty.

Sara stopped at the sixth-floor landing, slightly winded. She was probably the most fit she had ever been in her life, but the treadmill and elliptical machine at her gym were hardly good preparation for real life. Back in January, she had vowed that she would run outside at least once a week. The gym near her building, with its televisions and treadmills and temperature-controlled atmosphere, negated one of the key benefits of running: time alone with yourself. Of course, it was easy to say you wanted time alone with yourself and quite another thing to actually do it. January had passed into February, and now they were already in April, yet this morning was the first time Sara had taken an outside run since she'd made the promise.

She grabbed the railing and heaved herself up the next flight. By the tenth floor, her thighs were burning. By the sixteenth, she had to stop and bend over to catch her breath so the ICU nurses didn't think a madwoman was in their midst.

She tucked her hand in her pocket for some ChapStick, then stopped herself. A flash of panic filled her chest as she checked her other pockets. The letter was not there. She had been carrying it forever, a talisman that she touched every time she thought about Jeffrey. It always brought a reminder of the hateful

woman who had written it, the person who had been responsible for his murder, and now it was gone.

Sara's mind raced as she tried to remember where she had left it. Had she washed it with the rest of the laundry? Her heart leapt into her throat at the thought. She scanned her memory, finally recalling that she'd put the letter down on the kitchen counter yesterday when she'd gotten home from Jacquelyn Zabel's autopsy.

Her mouth opened, a sharp huff of air coming out. The letter was at home. She'd moved it this morning to the mantel, which seemed an odd place to put it. Jeffrey's wedding ring was there, the urn with some of his ashes beside it. The two things should not be together. What had she been thinking?

The door opened and a nurse came out with a pack of cigarettes in her hand. Sara recognized Jill Marino, the ICU nurse who had been taking care of Anna the morning before.

Jill asked, "Isn't today your day off?"

Sara shrugged. "Can't get enough of this place. How is she?"

"Infection's responding to antibiotics. Good catch on that. If you hadn't taken out those bags, she'd be dead by now."

Sara nodded off the compliment, thinking if she'd seen them in the first place, Anna would have had much more of a fighting chance.

"They took out the breathing tube around five." Jill held open the door for Sara to pass through. "Brain scan results came back. Everything looked good except for the damage to the optic nerve. That's permanent. Ears are fine, so at least she can still hear. Everything else is fine. No reason she's not waking up." She seemed to realize the woman had plenty of reasons not to wake up, and added, "Well, you know what I mean."

"Are you off?"

Jill guiltily indicated the cigarettes. "Up to the roof to ruin the fresh air."

"Should I waste my breath and tell you those things will kill you?"

"Working here will kill me first," the nurse countered, and with that, she began a slow trudge up the stairs.

Two cops still guarded Anna's room. Not the same as the day before, but they still both tipped their hats to Sara. One even pulled back the curtain for her. She smiled her thanks as she went into the room. There was a beautiful arrangement of flowers on the table by the wall. Sara checked them and found no card.

She sat in the chair and wondered about the flowers. Probably someone had checked out of the hospital and given the flowers to the nurses to distribute as they saw fit. They looked fresh, though, as if they'd just been plucked this morning from someone's backyard garden. Maybe Faith had sent them. Sara quickly dismissed the thought. Faith Mitchell didn't strike her as particularly sentimental. Nor was she very smart—at least not about her health. Sara had called Delia Wallace's office that morning. Faith had yet to make an appointment. She would be running out of insulin soon. She'd either have to risk another fainting spell or come back to Sara.

She leaned her arms on Anna's bed, staring at the woman's face. Without the tube down her throat, it was easier to see what she had looked like before all of this had happened. The bruises on her face were starting to heal, which meant they looked worse than the day before. Her skin was a healthier shade now, but

it was swollen from all the fluids they were giving her. The malnourishment was so pronounced that it would take several weeks before her bones receded under a healthy layer of flesh.

Sara took the woman's hand, feeling her skin. It was still dry. She found a bottle of lotion in a zippered bag by the flowers. It was the usual kit they gave out at the hospital, filled with the things some administrative committee thought patients might need—slip-proof socks, lip balm, and lotion that smelled faintly of antiseptic.

Sara squirted some into her palm and rubbed her hands together to warm the lotion before taking Anna's frail hand in her own. She could feel each bone of the finger, the knuckles like marbles. Anna's skin was so dry that the lotion disappeared almost as soon as Sara put it on, and she was squirting more into her palms when Anna stirred.

"Anna?" Sara touched the side of the woman's face with a firm, reassuring pressure.

Her head moved just slightly. People in comas did not just magically wake up. It was a process, usually a drawn-out one. One day, they might open their eyes. They might speak without making sense, picking up on some conversation started long ago.

"Anna?" Sara repeated, trying to keep her voice calm. "I need you to wake up now."

Her head moved again, a distinct tilt toward Sara.

Sara made her voice firm. "I know it's hard, sweetie, but I need you to wake up." Anna's eyes slit open, and Sara stood, putting herself directly in her line of vision even though she knew that the woman could not see her. "Wake up, Anna. You're safe now. No one is going to hurt you."

Her mouth moved, the lips so dry and chapped that the skin broke.

"I'm here," Sara said. "I can hear you, sweetie. Try to wake up for me."

Anna's breath quickened in fear. What had happened was starting to dawn on the woman—the agony she had endured, the fact that she could not see.

"You're in the hospital. I know you can't see, but you can hear me. You're safe. Two police officers are right outside your door. No one is going to hurt you."

Anna's hand trembled as it reached up, fingers brushing against Sara's arm. Sara grabbed her hand, held on to it as firmly as she could without causing more pain. "You're safe now," Sara promised her. "No one else is going to hurt you."

Suddenly, Anna's grip tightened, squeezing Sara's hand so tightly that it brought a sharp, shooting pain as the bones crunched together.

The woman was fully alert, wide-awake. "Where is my son?"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

When you pulled the trigger on a taser, two hooked probes were propelled by an inert nitrogen gas, shooting them out at about 160 feet per second. In civilian units, fifteen feet of insulated, conductive wire facilitated fifty thousand volts being delivered to whomever the probes latched onto. The electrical pulses interrupted sensory and motor function as well as the central nervous system. Will had been shot with a Taser during a training session. He still could not remember the time frame immediately before or after the charge hit him, only that Amanda had been the one to pull the trigger and she had been sporting an incredibly pleased grin when he had finally been able to stand up.

Like bullets in a gun, the Taser devices required cartridges that were preloaded with the wires and probes. Because the Constitutional framers were unable to predict the existence of such a device, there was no inalienable right attached to owning a Taser. Some bright thinker had managed to insert one codicil into their manufacture: All Taser cartridges had to be loaded with AFIDS, or Anti-Felon Identification Dots, which scattered out by the hundreds each time a cartridge was fired. At first glance, these small dots looked like confetti. The design was on purpose; the tiny pieces were so vast in number that it was impossible for a perpetrator to pick them all up to cover his trail. The beauty was that, under magnification, the confetti revealed a serial number that identified which cartridge they came from. Because Taser International wanted to keep the legal community on their side, they had enacted their own tracing program. All you had to do was call them up with the serial number from one of the dots and they would give you the name and address of the person who had purchased the cartridge.

Faith was on hold for less than three minutes when the company came back with a name.

"Shit," she whispered, then, realizing she was still on the phone, she added, "No. Thank you. That's all I need." She closed her cell phone as she reached down to crank the key in the Mini's ignition. "The Taser cartridge was purchased by Pauline Seward. The address listed is the vacant house behind Olivia Tanner's place."

"How were the cartridges paid for?"

"With an American Express gift card. No name on the card. It's untraceable." She gave him a meaningful glance. "The cartridges were purchased two months ago, which means he's been watching Olivia Tanner for at least that long. And since he used Pauline's name, we have to assume that he was planning on taking her, too."

"The vacant house is owned by the bank—not the one where Olivia works." Will had called the number on the Realtor's sign in the front yard while Faith was dealing with Taser. "It's been empty almost a year. No one's looked at it in six months."

Faith turned, backing out of the driveway. Will raised his hand at Michael Tanner, who was sitting in his Ford Escape, hands gripping the wheel.

Will said, "I didn't recognize the Taser dots on Felix's book bag."

"Why would you? It was confetti on a kid's satchel. You need a magnifying glass to read the serial numbers." She added, "If you want to blame someone, blame the Atlanta police for not picking up on it at the scene. Their forensic guys were there. They must have vacuumed the carpets in the car. They just haven't processed it yet because a missing woman isn't a priority."

"The address for the cartridge would have led us to the house behind Olivia Tanner's."

"Olivia Tanner was already missing when you saw Felix's book bag." She repeated, "The Atlanta police processed the scene. They're the ones who screwed up." Faith's phone rang. She checked the caller ID and decided not to answer it. She laid it out for him. "Besides, knowing the Taser dots on Felix's bag are from the same lot as the dots we found in Olivia Tanner's backyard hasn't exactly given us a huge break. All it tells us is that our bag guy has been planning this for a while and that he's good at covering his tracks. We knew that when we got up this morning."

Will thought they knew a lot more than that. They had a link now that tied the women together. "We've got Pauline connected to the other victims—I will not deny myself ties her to Anna and Jackie, and the Taser dots tie her to Olivia." He thought about it for a few seconds, wondering what else he was missing.

Faith was on the same page. "Let's go through this from the beginning. What do we have?"

"Pauline and Olivia were both taken yesterday. Both women were shot with the same Taser cartridge."

"Pauline, Jackie and Olivia all had eating disorders. We're assuming Anna does, too, right?"

Will shrugged. It wasn't a big leap, but it was an unknown. "Yeah, let's assume."

"None of the women had friends who would miss them. Jackie had the neighbor, Candy, but Candy wasn't exactly a confidante. All three are attractive, thin, with dark hair, dark eyes. All three worked in well-paid jobs."

"All of them lived in Atlanta except for Jackie," Will said, throwing out a flag. "So, how did Jackie get targeted? She'd only been in Atlanta a week, tops, just to clean out her mother's house."

"She must have come up before then to help move her mother to the nursing home in Florida," Faith guessed. "And we're forgetting the chat room. They could've all met there."

"Olivia didn't have a computer at home."

"She could've had a laptop that was stolen."

Will scratched his arm, thinking about that first night in the cave, all the maddening non-clues they had followed up on since, all the brick walls they kept hitting. "This feels like it all starts with Pauline."

"She was the fourth victim." Faith considered the situation. "He could've been saving the best for last."

"Pauline wasn't taken from her home like we assume the other women were.

She was taken in broad daylight. Her kid was in the car. She was missed at work because she had an important meeting. The other women weren't missed by anyone except for Olivia, and there was no way to know that Olivia made that phone call every day to her brother unless our bad guy tapped her phone, which he obviously didn't."

"What about Pauline's brother?" Faith asked. "I keep coming back to the fact that she was scared enough about him to mention him to her son. We can't find a record of him anywhere. He could have changed his name like Pauline did when she was seventeen."

Will listed all the men who had come up during the investigation. "Henry Coldfield is too old and has a heart problem. Rick Sigler has lived in Georgia all his life. Jake Berman—who knows?"

Faith tapped her fingers on the steering wheel, deep in thought. Finally she came up with, "Tom Coldfield."

"He's around your age. He would've been barely pubescent when Pauline ran away."

"You're right," she conceded. "Besides, the Air Force psych evaluation would have flagged him up big-time."

"Michael Tanner," Will suggested. "He's the right age."

"I've got a background check running on him. They would've called if something hit."

"Morgan Hollister."

"They're running him, too," Faith said. "He didn't seem really cut up about Pauline being gone."

"Felix said that the man who took his mother was dressed in a suit like Morgan from work."

"Surely, Felix would've recognized Morgan?"

"In a fake mustache?" Will shook his head. "I don't know. Let's keep Morgan on the list. We can talk to him at the end of the day if nothing else has come up."

"He's old enough to be her brother, but why would she work with him if he was?"

"People do stupid things when they're being abused," Will reminded her. "We need to check with Leo and see what he's come up with. He was working the Michigan police, trying to track down Pauline's parents. She ran away from home. Who did she run away from?"

"The brother," Faith said, bringing them back full circle. Her phone rang again. She let it go into voice mail before opening it and dialing in a number. "I'll see where Leo is. He's probably out in the field."

Will offered, "I'll call Amanda and tell her we need to formally take over the Pauline McGhee case." He opened his phone just as the stutter of a ring came out. Since the phone had been broken, it had been doing unusual things. Will pressed his ear to the device, saying, "Hello?"

"Hey." Her voice was cool, casual, like warm honey in his ear. His mind flashed on the image of the mole on her calf, the way he could feel it under his palm when he ran his hand up her leg. "You there?"

Will glanced at Faith, feeling a cold sweat break out over his body. "Yeah."

"Long time."

He glanced at Faith again. "Yeah," he repeated. About eight months had passed since he had come home from work to find Angie's toothbrush missing from the cup in the bathroom.

She asked, "What're you up to?"

Will swallowed, trying to generate some spit. "Working a case."

"That's good. I figured you were busy."

Faith had finished her call. She was looking at the road ahead, but if she had been a cat, her ear would've been cocked in his direction.

He told Angie, "I guess this is about your friend?"

"Lola's got some good intel."

"That's not really my side of the job," he told her. The GBI didn't start cases. They finished them.

"Some pimp's turned a penthouse into a drug pad. They've got all kinds of shit lying around like candy. Talk to Amanda about it. She'll look good on the six o'clock news standing in front of all that dope."

Will tried to concentrate on what she was saying. There was just the whir of the Mini's engine and Faith's ever-listening ear.

"You there, baby?"

He said, "Not interested."

"Just pass it on for me. It's the penthouse in an apartment building called Twenty-one Beeston Place. The name is the same as the address. Twenty-one Beeston."

"I can't help you with that."

"Repeat it back to me so I know you'll remember it."

Will's hands were sweating so much that he worried the phone might slip from his grasp. "Twenty-one Beeston Place."

"I'll owe you one."

He couldn't resist. "You owe me a million." But it was too late. She had already hung up the phone. Will kept it to his ear, then said, "All right. Bye," like he was having a normal conversation with a normal person. To make matters worse, the phone slipped as he tried to close it, the string finally ripping out from under the duct tape. Wires he had never seen before jutted out of the back of the phone.

He heard Faith's mouth open, the smacking of her lips. He told her, "Leave it be."

She closed her mouth, kept her hands tight on the wheel as she made a turn against the light. "I called central dispatch. Leo's on North Avenue. Double homicide."

The car sped up as Faith blew through a light. Will loosened his tie, thinking it was warm in the car. His arms were starting to itch again. He felt light-headed.

"I'll try to get Amanda to—"

"Angie was calling in a tip." The words flooded out before he could stop them. His mind raced to think of a way to get out of saying more, but his mouth hadn't gotten the memo to shut up. "Some Buckhead penthouse has been turned into a drug den."

"Oh" was all Faith offered.

"She's got this girl she used to know back when she worked vice. A prostitute. Lola. She wants out of jail. She's willing to flip on the dealers."

"Is it a good tip?"

Will could only shrug. "Probably."

"Are you going to help her?"

He shrugged again.

"Angie's an ex-cop. Doesn't she know somebody in narcotics?"

Will let her figure it out. Angie wasn't exactly good at leaving bridges unburned. She tended to light them with glee, then throw gasoline on the flames.

Faith obviously reached the same conclusion. She offered, "I can make some calls for you. No one will know you're involved."

He tried to swallow, but his mouth was still too dry. He hated that Angie had this effect on him. He hated it even more that Faith was getting a front-row seat to his misery. He asked, "What did Leo say?"

"He's not answering his phone, probably because he knows it's me calling." As if on cue, her phone rang again. Faith checked the ID and again didn't answer it. Will figured he didn't have a right to ask her what that was about, considering he'd put a moratorium on discussions of his own phone calls.

He cleared his throat a few times so he could speak without sounding like a pubescent boy. "A Taser gun means distance. He would've used a stun gun on them if he was able to get close enough."

Faith returned to their original conversation. "What else have we got?" she asked. "We're waiting for DNA results from Jacquelyn Zabel. We're waiting to hear back from the tech department on Zabel's laptop and the computer from Pauline's office. We're waiting to hear back on any forensic evidence from the vacant house behind Olivia's."

Will heard a distinct buzzing, and Faith pulled out her Black-Berry. She drove with one hand as she read the screen. "Phone dump on Olivia Tanner's line." She scrolled through. "One number every morning around seven o'clock to Houston, Texas."

"Seven our time is six Houston time," Will said. "That's the only number she called?"

Faith nodded. "Going back for months. She probably used her cell for most of her calls." She tucked the BlackBerry back in her pocket. "Amanda's working on a warrant for the bank. They were nice enough to cross-reference their accounts for our missing women's names—no matches—but they're not going to give us access to Olivia's computer, phone or email without a fight. Something about federal banking law. We have to get into that chat room."

"I have to think if she was using an online group, she'd have access at home."

"Her brother says she's at work all the time."

"Maybe they all met in person. Like AA or a knitting group."

"It's hardly something you can pin up on the community bulletin board. 'Like starving yourself to death? Come join us!' "

"How else would they all meet?"

"Jackie is a Realtor, Olivia is a banker who doesn't write mortgages, Pauline is an interior designer, and Anna does whatever she does—probably something equally as lucrative." She gave a heavy sigh. "It has to be the chat room, Will. How else would they all know each other?"

"Why do they have to know each other?" he countered. "The only person they

have to know is the abductor. Who would have contact with women working in all those different fields?"

"Janitor, cable guy, trash man, exterminator ..."

"Amanda's had information processing going through all those things. If there was a connection, it would be evident by now."

"Forgive me for not holding out hope. They've had two days and they can't even find Jake Berman." She cut the wheel, turning onto North Avenue. Two Atlanta police cruisers blocked the scene. They could see Leo in the distance, his hands waving wildly as he screamed at some poor kid in uniform.

Faith's phone rang again. She dropped it into her pocket as she got out of the car. "I'm not on Leo's favorite list right now. Maybe you should do the talking."

Will agreed that was best, especially considering the fact that Leo already looked a couple of notches beyond furious. He was still yelling at the cop when they approached him. Every other word was "fuck" and his face was so red Will wondered if he might be having a heart attack.

Overhead, a police helicopter hovered, what the locals called a ghetto bird. The chopper was so close to the ground that Will could feel his eardrums pulsing. Leo waited for it to move on before demanding, "What the fuck are you doing here?"

Will said, "That missing persons case you gave us—Olivia Tanner. There were Taser dots at the scene that trace back to a cartridge purchased by Pauline Seward."

Leo muttered another "Fuck."

"We also found some evidence at Pauline McGhee's office that connects her back to the cave."

Leo's curiosity got the better of him. "You think Pauline's your doer?"

Will hadn't even considered the thought. "No, we think she's been taken by the same man who took the other women. We need to know as much as we can —"

"Not much to tell," he interrupted. "I talked to Michigan this morning. I was sitting on it, since your partner's such a ray of fucking sunshine lately."

Faith opened her mouth but Will held out his hand to stop her. "What did you find out?"

Leo said, "I talked to an old-timer they got on the desk. Name's Dick Winters. Been on the job thirty years and they got him straddling the phones. You believe that shit?"

"Did he remember Pauline?"

"Yeah, he remembered her. She was a good-looking kid. Sounded like the old guy had a boner for her."

Will could not possibly care less right now about some skuzzy old cop bird dogging a teenager. "What happened?"

"He picked her up a couple of times for shoplifting, drinking too much and gettin' loud about it. He never ran her in—just took her back home, told her to straighten up. She was underage, but when she hit seventeen, it was harder to sweep it under the rug. Some store owner got a bee up his ass and pressed charges for the shoplifting. The old cop visits the family to help them out, sees something ain't right. He tucks his dick back in his pants, realizes it's time for him to do his job. The girl's got problems at school, problems at home. She tells

the cop that she's being abused."

"Was social services called in?"

"Yeah, but little Pauline disappeared before they could talk to her."

"Did the cop remember the names? The parents? Anything?"

Leo shook his head. "Nothing. Just Pauline Seward." He snapped his fingers. "He did say there was a brother kind of touched in the head, if you know what I mean. Just a strange little fucker."

"Strange how?"

"Weird. You know how it is. You get a vibe."

Will had to ask again, "But the cop doesn't remember his name?"

"All the records are sealed because she was a juvenile. Throw in family court, and that's another obstacle," Leo said. "You're gonna need a warrant in Michigan to get them open. This was twenty years ago. There was some kind of fire in records ten years back, the old guy says. Might not even be a file to look up."

"Exactly twenty years?" Faith asked.

Leo gave her a sideways look. "Twenty years come Easter."

Will wanted to get this straight. "Pauline McGhee, or Seward, went missing twenty years from this Sunday, Easter Sunday?"

"No," Leo said. "Easter was in March twenty years ago."

Faith asked, "Did you look it up?"

He shrugged. "It's always the Sunday following the first full moon that occurs after the spring equinox."

Will took a minute to realize he was speaking English. It was like a cat barking. "Are you sure?"

"Do you really think I'm that stupid?" he asked. "Shit, don't answer that. The old guy was sure of it. Pauline bunked on March twenty-sixth. Easter Sunday."

Will tried to do the math, but Faith beat him to it. "Two weeks ago. That could fit around the time Sara said Anna was probably abducted." Her phone rang again. "Jesus," she hissed, checking the caller ID. She flipped open the phone. "What do you want?"

Faith's expression changed from extreme annoyance to shock, then disbelief. "Oh, my God." Her hand went to her chest.

Will could only think of Jeremy, Faith's son.

"What's the address?" Her mouth dropped open in surprise. "Beeston Place."

Will said, "That's where Angie—"

"We'll be right there." Faith closed her phone. "That was Sara. Anna woke up. She's talking."

"What did she say about Beeston Place?"

"That's where she lives—they live. Anna has a six-month-old baby, Will. The last time she saw him was at her penthouse at Twenty-one Beeston Place."

Will had jumped behind the wheel, slamming back the seat, taking off before Faith had even shut her door. He'd raked the gears, pushing the Mini into every turn, bouncing across metal plates covering road construction. On Piedmont, he'd bumped across the median, using the oncoming lane to swerve around traffic at the light. Faith had sat quietly beside him, holding on to the handle over the door, but he could see her teeth gritted with each bump and turn.

Faith said, "Tell me again what she said."

Will didn't want to think about Angie right now, didn't want to consider that she might know there was a kid involved, a baby whose mother had been stolen, a child who had been left alone in a penthouse apartment that had been turned into a crack den.

"Drugs," he told Faith. "That's all she said—they were using it as a drug pad."

She was silent as he downshifted, making a wide turn onto Peachtree Street. Traffic was light for this time of day, which meant that there was a line of cars backed up a quarter of a mile. Will used the oncoming lane again, finally jumping onto the narrow shoulder to avoid a dump truck. Faith's hands slammed palm-down on the dashboard as he banked into a turn, sliding to a stop in front of Beeston Place Apartments.

The car rocked as Will got out. He ran to the entrance. He could hear the sirens of distant cruisers, an ambulance. The doorman was behind a tall counter reading a newspaper. He was plump, his uniform too small for his large gut.

Will pulled out his ID and flashed it in the man's face. "I need to get into the penthouse."

The doorman gave one of the surliest smiles in Will's recent memory. "You do, do you?" He spoke with an accent, Russian or Ukrainian.

Faith joined them, out of breath. She squinted at his nametag. "Mr. Simkov, this is important. We think a child might be in jeopardy."

He gave a helpless shrug. "No one gets in unless they're on the list, and since you're not on the—"

Will felt something inside of him break. Before he knew what was happening, his hand shot out, grabbing Simkov by the back of his neck and slamming his head into the marble countertop.

"Will!" Faith gasped, her voice going up in surprise.

"Give me the key," Will demanded, pressing harder against the man's skull.

"Pocket," Simkov managed, his mouth pressed so hard against the counter that his teeth scraped the surface.

Will jerked him closer, checked his front pockets and found a ring of keys. He tossed them to Faith, then walked into the open elevator car, fists clenched at his sides.

Faith pressed the button for the penthouse. "Christ," she whispered. "You've proven your point, all right? You can be a tough guy. Now back off it."

"He watches the door." Will was so furious he could barely form the words. "He knows everything going on in this building. He's got the keys to every apartment, including Anna's."

She seemed to get that he wasn't putting on a show. "All right. You're right. Let's just take things down a notch, okay? We don't know what we're going to find up there."

Will could feel the tendons in his arms vibrating. The elevator doors opened onto the penthouse floor. He stalked into the hall and waited for Faith to find the correctly labeled key to open the door. She found it, and he put his hand over hers, taking over.

Will didn't go gently. He took out his gun and slammed the door open.

"Ugh," Faith gagged, holding her hand to her nose.

Will smelled it, too—that sickly sweet mixture of burning plastic and cotton

candy.

“Crack,” she said, waving her hand in front of her face.

“Look.” He pointed to the foyer just inside the door. Curled pieces of confetti had dried in a yellow liquid on the floor. Taser dots.

There was a long hallway in front of him, two doors on one side, both closed. Ahead, he could see the living room. Couches were overturned, their stuffing torn out. Trash was everywhere. A large man lay facedown in the hall, his arms splayed, head turned to the wall. His shirtsleeve was rolled up. A tourniquet was tied around his biceps. A syringe was jutting out of his arm.

Will pointed his Glock in front of him as he went down the hall. Faith took out her own weapon, but he signaled for her to wait. Will could already smell the body decaying, but he checked for a pulse just in case. There was a gun by the man’s foot, a Smith & Wesson revolver with a custom gold grip that made it look like the kind of thing you used to find in the toy section of a dime store. Will kicked the gun away, even though the man was never going to reach for it.

Will motioned in Faith, then went back to the first closed door in the hallway. He waited until she was ready, then threw open the door. It was a closet, all the coats piled onto the floor in a heap. Will kicked the pile with his foot, checking under the coats before going to the next closed door. He waited for Faith again, then kicked open the door.

They both gagged at the stench. The toilet was overflowing. Feces was smeared on the dark onyx walls. A dark brown liquid had puddled in the sink. Will felt his skin crawl. The smell of the room reminded him of the cave where Anna and Jackie had been kept.

He pulled the door closed and indicated that Faith should follow him down the hall toward the main room. They had to step over broken glass, needles, condoms. A white T-shirt was wadded into a ball, blood smeared on the outside. A sneaker was upended beside it, the laces still tied.

The kitchen was off the living room. Will checked behind the island, making sure no one was there, while Faith picked her way around upended furniture and more broken glass.

She said, “Clear.”

“Me too.” Will opened the cabinet under the sink, looking for the trashcan. The bag was white, just like the ones they had found inside the women. The can was empty, the only clean thing in the whole apartment.

“Coke,” Faith guessed, indicating a couple of white bricks on the coffee table. Pipes were scattered around. Needles, rolled-up bills, razor blades. “What a mess. I can’t believe people were living in this.”

Will was never surprised by the depths to which a junkie would stoop, or by the destruction that followed them. He had seen nice suburban houses turned into dilapidated meth dens over the course of a few days. “Where’d everybody go?”

She shrugged. “A dead body wouldn’t scare them enough to leave this much coke behind.” She glanced back at the dead man. “Maybe he’s supposed to be security.”

They searched the rest of the place together. Three bedrooms, one of them a nursery decorated in shades of blue, and two more bathrooms. All of the toilets and sinks were backed up. The sheets were balled up on the beds, the mattresses

were overturned. Clothes were ripped out of the closets. All the televisions were gone. There was a keyboard and mouse on the desk in one of the spare rooms, but no computer. Obviously, whoever had taken over the place had stripped it bare.

Will holstered his gun as he stood at the end of the hallway. Two paramedics and a uniformed patrolman were waiting at the front door. He motioned them in.

"Dead as a doornail," one of the paramedics pronounced, doing only a cursory check for vitals on the junkie by the coat closet.

The cop said, "My partner's talking to the doorman." He used a measured tone, directing his words toward Will. "Looks like he fell. Hit his eye."

Faith shoved her gun into its holster. "Those floors are pretty slippery downstairs."

The cop nodded his complicity. "Looked slippery."

Will returned to the nursery. He rifled through the baby clothes on tiny hangers in the closet. He went back to the crib and lifted the mattress.

"Be careful," Faith warned. "There could be needles."

"He doesn't take the kids," he said, more to himself than Faith. "He takes the women, but he leaves the kids."

"Pauline wasn't abducted from her house."

"Pauline is different." He reminded her, "Olivia was taken in her backyard. Anna was taken at her front door. You saw the Taser dots. I bet Jackie Zabel was taken at her mother's house."

"Maybe a friend has Anna's baby."

Will stopped searching, surprised by the desperation in Faith's tone. "Anna doesn't have friends. None of these women have friends. That's why he takes them."

"It's been at least a week, Will." Faith's voice shook. "Look around you. This place is a mess."

"You want to turn the apartment over to crime scene?" he asked, leaving the rest of the question unspoken: *You want someone else to find the body?*

Faith tried another tack. "Sara said that Anna told her that her last name is Lindsey. She's a corporate lawyer. We can call her office and see—"

Gently, Will lifted the plastic liner of the diaper pail beside the changing table. The diapers were old, certainly not the source of the more pungent smells in the apartment.

"Will—"

He went to the attached bathroom and checked the trash there. "I want to talk to the doorman."

"Why don't you let—"

Will left the room before she had finished. He walked into the living room again, checking under the couches, pulling the stuffing out of some of the chairs to see if anything—anyone—was hidden inside.

The cop was testing the coke, pleased with what he found. "This is a righteous bust. I need to call this in."

"Give me a minute," Will told him.

One of the paramedics asked, "You want us to stick around?"

Faith said "No" just as Will said "Yes."

He made himself clear. "Don't go anywhere."

Faith asked the man, "Do you know an EMT named Rick Sigler?"

"Rick? Yeah," the guy said, like he was surprised she'd asked.

Will blocked out their conversation. He went back to the front powder room, breathing through his mouth so the shit and piss wouldn't make him throw up. He closed the door, then went back to the front entrance, the confetti dots. He stooped down to study them. He was pretty sure they were in dried urine.

Will stood, going out into the hall and looking back in at the apartment. Anna's penthouse took up the entire top floor of the building. There were no other units, no neighbors. No one who could hear her scream or see her attacker.

The killer would've stood outside her door where Will stood now. He glanced down the hall, thinking the man might've come up the stairs—or maybe down. There was a fire exit. He could've been on the roof. Or maybe the worthless doorman would've let him in through the front entrance, even pressed the button for him on the elevator. There was a peephole in Anna's penthouse door. She would've checked it first. All of these women were cautious. Who would she let in? A delivery person. Maintenance. Maybe the doorman.

Faith was coming toward him. Her face was unreadable, but he knew her well enough to know what she was thinking: *It's time to go.*

Will looked down the hall again. There was another door halfway down on the wall opposite the apartment.

Faith said, "Will—" but he was already heading for the closed door. He opened it. There was a small metal door inside for the trash chute. Boxes were piled in a stack, recyclables. There was a basket for glass, one for cans. A baby rested in the bin for plastics. His eyes were closed to a slit, his lips slightly parted. His skin was white, waxy.

Faith came up behind Will. She grabbed his arm. Will could not move. The world had stopped spinning. He held on to the doorknob so his knees would not give out on him. A noise came from Faith's mouth that sounded like a low keening.

The baby turned his head toward the sound, his eyes slowly opening.

"Oh, my God," Faith breathed. She pushed Will out of the way, dropping to her knees as she reached for the child. "Get help! Will, get help!"

Will felt the world return to normal. "Out here!" he called to the paramedics. "Bring your kit!"

Faith held the baby close as she checked for cuts and bruises. "Little lamb," she whispered. "You're okay. I've got you now. You're okay."

Will watched her with the child, the way she smoothed back his hair and pressed her lips to his forehead. The baby's eyes were barely open, his lips white. Will wanted to say something, but his words kept getting caught in his throat. He felt hot and cold at the same time, like he might start sobbing right there in front of the world.

"I've got you, sweetheart," Faith murmured, her voice choked with anguish. Tears streamed down her face. Will had never seen her being a mother, at least not with an infant. It broke his heart to see this gentle side of Faith, the part of her that cared so deeply about another human being that her hands shook as she held the child close to her chest.

She whispered, "He's not crying. Why is he not crying?"

Will finally managed to speak. "He knows no one will come." He leaned down, cupping his hand around the boy's head as it rested on Faith's shoulder, trying not to think about the hours the child had spent alone up here, crying himself out, waiting for someone to come.

The paramedic gasped in surprise. He called to his partner as he took the baby from Faith. The diaper was full. The boy's belly was distended; his head lolled to the side.

"He's dehydrated." The medic checked his pupils for a reaction, lifting his chapped lips to check his gums. "Malnourished."

Will asked, "Is he going to be okay?"

The man shook his head. "I don't know. He's bad off."

"How long—" Faith's voice caught. "How long has he been in here?"

"I don't know," the man repeated. "A day. Maybe two."

"Two days?" Will asked, sure he was wrong. "The mom's been gone at least a week, maybe more."

"More than a week and he'd be dead." Gently, the medic turned the child over. "He's got sores from lying in one place for too long." He cursed under his breath. "I don't know how long it takes for this to happen, but someone's been giving him water, at least. You can't survive without it."

Faith said, "Maybe the prostitute ..."

She didn't finish, but Will knew what she was saying. Lola had probably been keeping an eye on Anna's baby after Anna had been abducted. Then she'd gotten locked up and the kid was left alone. "If Lola was taking care of him," Will said, "she would need to get in and out of the building."

The elevator doors slid open. Will saw a second cop standing with Simkov, the doorman. There was a darkening bruise underneath his eye and his eyebrow was split where it had been slammed against the hard marble counter.

"That one." The doorman pointed triumphantly at Will. "He's the one who jumped me."

Will's fists tightened. His jaw was so clenched he thought his teeth might break. "Did you know this baby was up here?"

The doorman's sneer was back. "What do I know about a baby? Maybe the night guy was—" He stopped, looking into the open door of the penthouse. "Jesus, Mary and Joseph," he mumbled, then said something in his foreign tongue. "What did they do up here?"

"Who?" Will asked. "Who was up here?"

"Is that man dead?" Simkov asked, still staring into the trashed penthouse. "Holy Christ, look at this place. The smell!" He tried to go into the apartment, but the cop jerked him back.

Will gave the doorman another chance, carefully enunciating each word of his question. "Did you know this baby was up here?"

Simkov shrugged, his shoulders going up high to his ears. "What the fuck do I know what goes on up here with the rich people? I make eight dollars an hour and you want me to keep up with their lives?"

"There's a baby," Will said, so furious that he could barely speak. "A little baby who was dying."

"So there's a baby. What the fuck do I care?"

Rage came in a black, blinding intensity, so that it wasn't until Will was on top of the man, his fist slamming back and forth like a jackhammer, that Will realized what he was doing. And he didn't stop himself. He didn't want to stop. He was thinking about that baby lying in his own shit, the killer shoving him into the trash room so he'd starve to death, the prostitute wanting to trade information about him to get her own ass out of the sling and Angie ... there was Angie on top of this steaming pile of excrement, pulling Will's strings like she always did, fucking with his head so that he felt like he belonged in the trash heap with all the rest of them.

"Will!" Faith screamed. She was reaching her hands out in front of her the way you do when you're talking to a crazy person. Will felt a deep pain in his shoulders as both cops pinned his arms behind his back. He was panting like a rabid dog. Sweat dripped down his face.

"All right," Faith said, her hands still out as she came closer. "Let's calm down. Just calm down." She put her hands on Will, something he realized she had never done before. Her palms were on his face, forcing him to look at her instead of Simkov, who was writhing on the floor. "Look at me," she ordered, her voice low, like her words were something only they could hear. "Will, look at me."

He forced himself to meet her gaze. Her eyes were intensely blue, wide open in panic. "It's all right," Faith told him. "The baby's gonna be all right. Okay? All right?"

Will nodded, feeling the cops loosen their grip on his arms. Faith was still standing in front of him, still had her hands on his face.

"You're all right," she told him, talking to him in the same tone she had used with the baby. "You're going to be fine."

Will took a step back so that Faith would have to let him go. He could tell she was almost as terrified as the doorman. Will was scared, too—scared that he still wanted to beat the man, that if the cops hadn't been there, if it had just been him and Simkov alone, Will would have beaten him to death with his bare hands.

Faith kept her gaze locked with Will's just a moment longer. Then she turned her attention to the bloodied pulp on the floor. "Get up, asshole."

Simkov groaned, curling into a ball. "I can't move."

"Shut up." She jerked Simkov's arm.

"My nose!" he yelled, so dizzy that the only thing that kept him up was his shoulder slamming into the wall. "He broke my nose!"

"You're fine." Faith glanced up and down the hall. She was looking for security cameras.

Will did the same, relieved to find none.

"Police brutality!" the man screamed. "You saw it. You're all my witnesses."

One of the cops behind Will said, "You fell, buddy. Don't you remember?"

"I didn't fall," the man insisted. Blood was pooling out of his nose, squeezing through his fingers like water from a sponge.

The other paramedic was starting an IV on the baby. He didn't look up, but said, "Better be careful where you walk next time."

And just like that, Will was the kind of cop he had never wanted to be.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Faith's hands were still shaking as she stood in front of Anna Lindsey's ICU room. The two cops who had been on guard outside the woman's door were chatting with the nurses behind the desk, but they kept glancing up, as if they knew what had happened outside Anna Lindsey's penthouse apartment and weren't quite sure what to think about it. For his part, Will stood across from her, hands in his pockets, eyes staring blankly down the hallway. She wondered if he was in shock. Hell, she wondered if *she* was in shock.

In both her personal and her private life, Faith had been the focus of a lot of angry men, but she had never witnessed anything like the violence Will had shown. There had been a moment in that hallway outside the Beeston Place penthouse when Faith had been afraid that Will would kill the doorman. It was his face that had shocked her—cold, merciless, driven toward nothing but keeping his fist slamming into the other man's face. Like everyone else's mother in the world, Faith's had always told her to be careful what she wished for. Faith had wished that Will would be a little more aggressive. Now she would give anything to have him back the way he was before.

"They won't say anything," Faith told him. "The cops, the paramedics."

"It doesn't matter."

"You found that baby," she reminded him. "Who knows how long it would've taken before somebody—"

"Stop."

There was a loud *ding* as the elevator doors opened. Amanda hit the ground at a trot. She scanned the hall, taking in who was around, probably trying to neutralize witnesses. Faith braced herself for crushing recriminations, lightning-fast suspensions, maybe the loss of their badges. Instead, Amanda asked them, "Are you both all right?"

Faith nodded. Will just stared at the floor.

"Glad to see you finally grow a pair," Amanda told Will. "You're suspended without pay for the rest of the week, but don't think for a goddamn minute that means you're going to stop working your ass off for me."

Will's voice sounded thick in his throat. "Yes, ma'am."

Amanda strode toward the stairwell. They followed, and Faith noticed her boss had none of her usual grace, none of her control. She seemed just as shocked as they were.

"Shut the door."

Faith saw that her hands were still shaking as she pulled it closed.

"Charlie's processing Anna Lindsey's apartment," Amanda told them, her voice echoing up the stairs. She adjusted her tone. "He'll call if he finds anything. Obviously, the doorman is off-limits to you." She meant Will. "Forensics should be back tomorrow morning, but don't get your hopes up, considering the state of the apartment. Tech hasn't been able to break into the computers the women

were using. They're running all the password programs they have. It could take weeks or months to crack it. The anorexia website is hosted through a shell company in Friesland, wherever the hell that is. It's overseas. They won't give us registration information, but tech was able to pull up the stats for the site on the web. They get around two hundred unique users a month. That's all we know."

Will didn't speak, so Faith asked, "What about the vacant house behind Olivia Tanner's?"

"The shoe prints are for a men's size eleven Nike sold in twelve hundred outlets across the country. We found some cigarette butts in the Coke can behind the bar. We'll try to pull DNA, but there's no telling who they belong to."

Faith asked, "What about Jake Berman?"

"What the hell do you think?" Amanda took a breath as if to calm herself. "We've released a sketch and his booking photo through the state network. I'm sure the press will pick up on it, but we've asked them to hold off at least twenty-four hours."

Faith's mind was jumbled with questions, but nothing would come out. She had been standing in Olivia Tanner's kitchen less than an hour ago and she could not for the life of her remember one detail about the house.

Will finally spoke. His voice sounded as defeated as he looked. "You should fire me."

"You're not getting off that easy."

"I'm not kidding, Amanda. You should fire me."

"I'm not kidding either, you ignorant jackass." Amanda tucked her hands into her hips, looking more like the usual, annoyed Amanda that Faith was familiar with. "Anna Lindsey's baby is safe because of you. I think that's a win for the team."

He scratched at his arm. Faith could see that the skin on his knuckles was broken and bleeding. She was reminded of that moment in the hallway when she had her hands on his face, the way she had willed him to be okay because Faith didn't know how she could handle being in the world if Will Trent stopped being the man she had shared her life with almost every day for the past year.

Amanda caught Faith's eye. "Give us a minute."

Faith pushed the door open and walked back into the hall. There was a low hum of activity in the ICU, but nothing like downstairs in the emergency room. The cops were back at their station in front of Anna's door, and their eyes followed Faith as she passed.

One of the nurses told her, "They're in exam three."

Faith didn't know why she was being given this information, but she went to exam three anyway. She found Sara Linton inside. The doctor was standing by a plastic bassinet. She was holding the baby in her arms—Anna's baby.

"He's bouncing back," Sara told Faith. "It'll take a couple of days, but he'll be fine. Mostly, I think being back with his mom again will help them both."

Faith couldn't be a human being right now, so she made herself be a cop. "Did Anna say anything else?"

"Not much. She's in a lot of pain. They upped the morphine now that she's awake."

Faith ran her hand down the baby's back, feeling the soft give of his skin, the tiny bones of his spine. "How long do you think he was left alone?"

"The EMT was right. I'd say two days, tops. Otherwise, we'd be in a very different situation." Sara moved the baby to her other shoulder. "Someone was giving him water. He's dehydrated, but not as bad as some I've seen."

"What are you doing here?" Faith asked. The question came out without any forethought. She heard it sound in her ears, and thought it was a good one—good enough to repeat. "Why are you here? Why were you with Anna in the first place?"

Sara gently returned the baby to the bassinet. "She's my patient. I was checking on her." She tucked a blanket around the infant. "Just like I checked on you this morning. Delia Wallace's office said you haven't called."

"I've been a little busy rescuing babies off of trash piles."

"Faith, I'm not the enemy here." Sara's tone took on the annoying tenor of someone trying to be reasonable. "This isn't just about you anymore. You have a child inside of you—another life you're responsible for."

"That's *my* decision."

"Your decision clock is running out. Don't let your body make it for you, because if it's between the diabetes and the baby, the diabetes will always win out."

Faith took a deep breath, but that didn't do anything to help matters. She let loose. "You know, you may be trying to force yourself onto my case, but I'll be damned if I'll let you force yourself into my private life."

"Excuse me?" Sara had the gall to sound surprised.

"You're not a coroner anymore, Sara. You're not married to a police chief. He's dead. You saw him blown to pieces with your own two eyes. You're not going to get him back by hanging out at the morgue and shoving your way onto an investigation."

Sara stood there with her mouth open, seemingly incapable of responding.

Shockingly, Faith burst into tears. "Oh, my God, I'm so sorry! That was so awful." She put her hand to her mouth. "I can't believe I said—"

Sara shook her head, looking down at the floor.

"I'm so sorry. God, I'm sorry. Please forgive me."

Sara took her time speaking. "I guess Amanda caught you up on the details."

"I looked it up on the computer. I didn't—"

"Agent Trent read it, too?"

"No." Faith made her voice firm. "No. He said it was none of his business, and he's right. It's none of my business, either. I shouldn't have looked. I'm sorry. I am just an awful, awful person, Sara. I can't believe I said that to you."

Sara bent down to the baby, put her hand to his face. "It's okay."

Faith floundered for something to say, rattling off all the horrible things she could think about herself. "Look, I lied to you about my weight. I've gained fifteen pounds, not ten. I eat Pop-Tarts for breakfast, sometimes for dinner but usually with a Diet Coke. I never exercise. Ever. The only time I run is when I'm trying to make it to the bathroom before the commercial's over, and honest to God, since I got TiVo, I don't even do that anymore."

Sara was still silent.

"I'm so sorry."

She kept fiddling with the blanket, tucking it in tighter, making sure the baby was in a tight little cocoon.

"I'm sorry," Faith repeated, feeling so awful she thought she might throw up.

Sara kept her thoughts to herself. Faith was trying to figure out how to gracefully leave the room when the doctor said, "I knew it was fifteen pounds."

Faith felt some of the tension start to dissipate. She knew better than to ruin it by opening her mouth.

Sara said, "No one ever talks to me about him. I mean, in the beginning, of course, but now no one even says his name. It's like they don't want to upset me, like saying his name might send me back to ..." She shook her head. "Jeffrey. I can't remember the last time I said that out loud. His name is—was—Jeffrey."

"It's a nice name."

Sara nodded. Her throat worked as she swallowed.

"I saw pictures," Faith admitted. "He was good-looking."

A smile curved Sara's lips. "He was."

"And a good cop. You could tell by the way they wrote the reports."

"He was a good man."

Faith floundered, trying to think of something else to say.

Sara beat her to it, asking, "What about you?"

"Me?"

"The father."

In her mortification, Faith had forgotten about Victor. She put her hand to her stomach. "You mean my baby's daddy?"

Sara allowed a smile.

"He was looking for a mother, not a girlfriend."

"Well, that was never Jeffrey's problem. He was very good at taking care of himself." Her eyes took on a faraway look. "He was the best thing that ever happened to me."

"Sara—"

She went through the desk drawers and found a glucose monitor. "Let's test your blood sugar."

This time, Faith was too contrite to protest. She held out her hand, waited for the lancet to pierce her skin.

Sara talked as she went through the procedure. "I'm not trying to get back my husband. Believe me, if it was as simple as walking onto a case, I would sign up at the police academy tomorrow."

Faith winced as the needle pierced her skin.

"I want to feel useful again," Sara said, her voice taking on a confessional tone. "I want to feel like I'm doing more to help people than prescribing ointments for rashes that would probably go away on their own and patching up thugs so they can go back on the street and shoot each other again."

Faith hadn't considered that Sara's motivations might be so altruistic. She supposed it reflected badly on herself that she always assumed everyone approached life with selfish intentions. She told Sara, "Your husband sounded ... perfect."

Sara laughed as she filled the test strip. "He left his jockstrap hanging on the bathroom doorknob, he slept around the first time we were married—which I found out for myself when I came home from work early one day—and he had an illegitimate son he never knew about until he was forty." She read the machine, then showed it to Faith. "What do you think? Juice or insulin?"

"Insulin." She confessed, "I ran out at lunch."

"I gathered." Sara picked up the phone and called one of the nurses. "You need to get this under control."

"This case is—"

"This case is ongoing, just like all the other cases you've worked and all the ones you'll work in the future. I'm sure Agent Trent can spare you for a couple of hours while you get this squared away."

Faith wasn't sure Agent Trent could spare anything at the moment.

Sara checked on the baby again. "His name is Balthazar," she said.

"Here I was thinking we had saved him."

She was kind enough to laugh, but her words were serious. "I'm board certified in pediatric medicine, Faith. I graduated at the top of my class at Emory University and I've devoted nearly two decades of my life to helping people, whether they're living or dead. You can question my personal motivations all you like, but don't question my medical abilities."

"You're right." Faith felt even more contrite. "I'm sorry. It's been a really hard day."

"It doesn't help when your blood sugar is out of whack." There was a rap on the door, and Sara walked over, taking a handful of insulin pens from the nurse. She shut the door and told Faith, "You have to take this seriously."

"I know I do."

"Postponing dealing with it isn't going to work. Take two hours out of your day to see Delia so that you can get yourself right and focus on your work."

"I will."

"Mood swings, sudden tempers—these are all symptoms of your disease."

Faith felt like her mother had just scolded her, but maybe that's exactly what she needed right now. "Thank you."

Sara put her hands on the bassinet. "I'll leave you to it."

"Wait," Faith said. "You deal with young girls, right?"

Sara shrugged. "I used to a lot more when I had my private practice. Why?"

"What do you know about thinspo?"

"Not a lot," the doctor admitted. "I know it's a word for pro-anorexia propaganda, usually on the Internet."

"Three of our victims have a connection to it."

"Anna's still very thin," Sara observed. "Her liver and kidney functions are off, but I thought that was because of what she'd been through, not anything she'd done to herself."

"Could she be anorexic?"

"It's possible. I really didn't consider the disorder because of her age. Anorexia is generally a teenage issue." Sara recalled, "Pete flagged up something similar during Jacquelyn Zabel's autopsy. She was very thin, but then again, she was starved and denied water for at least two weeks. I just assumed she had started out slightly underweight. Her frame was small." She leaned down to Balthazar and stroked the side of his cheek. "Anna couldn't have had a baby if she was starving herself. Not without serious complications."

"Maybe she got it under control long enough to have him," Faith guessed. "I'm never quite sure which is which—is anorexia where they throw up?"

"That's bulimia. Anorexia denotes starvation. Sometimes anorexics use

laxatives, but they don't purge. There's growing evidence about genetic determinism—chromosomal blips that predispose them to the disorder. Usually, there's some kind of environmental trigger that sets it off."

"Like child abuse?"

"Could be. Sometimes it's bullying. Sometimes it's body dysmorphia. Some people blame magazines and movie stars, but it's far more complicated than just one thing. Boys are starting to get it more, too. It's extremely difficult to treat because of the psychological component."

Faith thought about their victims. "Is there a certain type of personality that's drawn to it?"

Sara considered the question before replying. "I can only tell you that the handful of patients I dealt with who suffered from the disease got extreme pleasure from starving themselves. It takes a huge amount of willpower to fight the body's physiological imperative for food. They might feel like everything else in their life is out of whack, and the only thing they can manipulate is whether or not they put food in their mouths. There's also a physical response to starvation—light-headedness, euphoria, sometimes hallucinations. It can duplicate the same type of high you get from opiates, and the feeling can be incredibly addictive."

Faith tried to remember how many times she'd made jokes about wishing she had the willpower to be anorexic for a week.

Sara added, "The biggest problem with treatment is that it's much more socially acceptable for a woman to be too thin than it is for a woman to be overweight."

"I have yet to meet a woman who is happy with her weight."

Sara gave a rueful laugh. "My sister is, actually."

"Is she some kind of saint?"

Faith had been joking, but Sara surprised her, answering, "Close. She's a missionary. She married a preacher a few years ago. They're helping AIDS babies in Africa."

"Good God, I hate her and I've never even met her."

"Trust me, she has her faults," Sara confided. "You said three victims. Does that mean another woman has been taken?"

Faith realized that Olivia Tanner's status hadn't yet hit the news. "Yes. Keep that under wraps if you can."

"Of course."

"Two of them seemed to take a lot of aspirin. The new one we found out about today had six jumbo bottles in her house. Jacquelyn Zabel had a large bottle by her bed."

Sara nodded, like something was starting to make sense. "It's an emetic in high doses. That would explain why Zabel's stomach was so ulcerated." She added, "And it would explain why she was still bleeding when Will found her. You should tell him that. He was upset about not getting there in time."

Will had a hell of a lot more than that to be upset about right now. Still, Faith remembered, "He needs your apartment number."

"Why?" Sara answered her own question. "Oh, his wife's dog."

"Right," Faith said, thinking the lie was the least she could do for Will.

"Twelve. It's on the directory." She put her hands back on the edge of the

bassinet. "I should take this boy to his mother."

Faith held open the door and Sara rolled out the bassinet. The hum of the hallway buzzed in her ears until Faith shut the door. She sat on the stool by the counter and lifted her skirt, looking for a spot that wasn't already black and blue from the needles. The diabetes pamphlet had said to move the injection sites around, so Faith checked her stomach, where she found a pristine roll of white fat that she pinched between her thumb and forefinger.

She held the insulin pen a few inches from her belly but didn't inject herself. Somewhere behind all those Pop-Tarts was a tiny baby with tiny hands and feet and a mouth and eyes—breathing every breath she took, peeing every ten minutes when she ran to the bathroom. Sara's words had brought things home for Faith, but holding Balthazar Lindsey had awakened something in Faith that she had never felt in her life. As much as she had loved Jeremy, his birth was hardly a celebration. Fifteen was not an appropriate age for baby showers, and even the nurses at the hospital had looked at her with pity.

This time would be different, though. Faith was old enough so that it was acceptable for her to be a mother. She could walk through the mall with her baby on her hip without worrying people would assume she was her own child's older sister. She could take him to the pediatrician and sign all his forms without getting her mother to cosign. She could tell his teachers to go screw themselves during PTA meetings without worrying about being sent to the principal's office herself. Hell, she could drive now.

She could do it right this time. She could be a good mother from start to finish. Well, maybe not *start*. Faith catalogued all the things she had done to her baby just this week: ignored him, denied his existence, passed out in a garage, contemplated abortion, exposed him to whatever Sam Lawson was carrying, fallen off a porch step and risked both their lives trying to stop Will from pounding a Yugoslavian doorman's head into the fine looped carpet lining the penthouse hallway at Beeston Place.

And here they were now, mother and child in the Grady ICU, and she was about to poke a needle somewhere near his head.

The door opened.

"What the hell are you doing?" Amanda demanded. She figured it out for herself quickly enough. "Oh, for the love of God. When were you going to tell me about this?"

Faith rolled her shirt back down, thinking it was a little late for modesty. "Right after I told you I'm pregnant."

Amanda tried to slam the door but the hydraulic hinge wouldn't let her. "Goddamn it, Faith. You're never going to get ahead with a baby."

Her hackles rose. "I got this far with one."

"You were a kid in uniform making sixteen thousand dollars a year. You're thirty-three now."

Faith tried, "I guess this means you won't be throwing me a baby shower."

Her look would have cut glass. "Does your mother know?"

"I thought I'd let her enjoy her vacation."

Amanda slapped her palm to her forehead, which would've been comical if not for the fact that she held Faith's life in her hands. "A dyslexic half-wit with a temper problem and a fertile, fat diabetic who lacks a rudimentary

understanding of birth control.” She jabbed her finger in Faith’s face. “I hope you like that pairing, young lady, because you’re going to be stuck with Will Trent forever now.”

Faith tried to ignore the “fat” part, which, honestly, hurt the most. “I can think of worse things than being partnered with Will Trent for the rest of my life.”

“You’d just better be damned glad the security cameras didn’t catch his little tantrum.”

“Will’s a good cop, Amanda. He wouldn’t still be working for you if you didn’t believe that.”

“Well—” She cut herself off. “Maybe when he’s not putting his abandonment issues on full display.”

“Is he all right?”

“He’ll live,” Amanda replied, not sounding too convinced. “I sent him to track down that prostitute. Lola.”

“She’s not in jail?”

“There was a pretty big score in the apartment—heroin, meth, coke. Angie Polaski managed to get Lola kicked for being an informant.” Amanda shrugged. She couldn’t always control the Atlanta police department.

“Do you think it’s a good idea to have Will looking for Lola, considering how angry he was about that baby being left alone?”

The old Amanda was back—the one who couldn’t be questioned. “We’ve got two missing women and a serial killer who knows what to do with them. There has to be some movement on this case before it gets away from us. The clock is ticking, Faith. He could be watching his next victim right now.”

“I was supposed to meet with Rick Sigler today—the paramedic who worked on Anna.”

“I sent someone around to Sigler’s house an hour ago. His wife was there with him. He adamantly denied knowing anyone named Jake Berman. He barely admitted he was on the road that night.”

Faith could not think of a worse way to question the man. “He’s gay. The wife doesn’t know.”

“They never do,” Amanda countered. “At any rate, he wasn’t interested in talking, and we don’t have enough right now to drag him down to the station.”

“I’m not sure he’s a suspect.”

“Everyone is a suspect as far as I’m concerned. I read the autopsy report. I’ve seen what was done to Anna. Our bad guy likes to experiment. He’s going to keep doing this until we stop him.”

Faith had been running on adrenaline for the past few hours, and she felt it spark up again at Amanda’s words. “Do you want me to watch Sigler?”

“I’ve got Leo Donnelly parked outside his house right now. Something tells me you don’t want to be trapped in a car with him all night.”

“No, ma’am,” Faith answered, and not just because Leo was a chain smoker. He would probably blame Faith for putting him on Amanda’s shit list. He would be right.

“Someone needs to go to Michigan to find the files on Pauline Seward’s family. The warrant’s being expedited, but apparently nothing past fifteen years is on the computers. We need to find someone from her past and we need to find

them fast—the parents, hopefully the brother, if it's not our mysterious Mr. Berman. For obvious reasons, I can't send Will to read through the files."

Faith put the insulin pen down on the counter. "I'll do it."

"Do you have this diabetes thing under control?" Faith's expression must've been answer enough. "I'll send one of my agents who can actually do their job." She waved her hand, dismissing any objections Faith might have. "Let's just move on from that until it bites us in the ass again, shall we?"

"I'm sorry about this." Faith had apologized more in the last fifteen minutes than she had in her entire life.

Amanda shook her head, indicating she wasn't willing to discuss the stupidity of the situation. "The doorman's asked for a lawyer. We're scheduled to talk to them first thing in the morning."

"You arrested him?"

"Detained. He's obviously foreign-born. The Patriot Act gives us twenty-four hours to hold him while we check his immigration status. Hopefully, we can turn his apartment upside down and find something more concrete to hammer him with."

Faith wasn't one to argue with the true course of justice.

Amanda asked, "What about Anna's neighbors?"

"It's a quiet building. The apartment below the penthouse has been vacant for months. They could've set off an atom bomb up there and no one would've known."

"The dead guy?"

"Drug dealer. Heroin overdose."

"Anna's employer didn't miss her?"

Faith told her what little she'd managed to find out. "She works for a law firm—Bandle and Brinks."

"Good Christ, this just keeps getting worse. Do you know about the firm?"

Amanda didn't give Faith time to answer. "They specialize in bringing lawsuits against municipalities—bad policing, bad social services, anything they can catch you on, they pounce and sue your budget to hell and back. They've sued the state and won more times than I can count."

"They weren't open to questioning. They won't turn over any of her files without a warrant."

"In other words, they're being lawyers." Amanda paced the room. "You and I will talk with Anna now, then we'll go back over to her building and turn it upside down before that law firm of hers realizes what we're doing."

"When's the interview with the doorman?"

"Eight sharp tomorrow morning. You think you can fit that into your busy schedule?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Amanda looked like a parent as she shook her head at Faith again; frustrated, mildly disgusted. "I don't suppose the father's in the picture this time, either."

"I'm a little too old to be trying something new."

"Congratulations," she said, opening the door. It would've been nice except for the "idiot" she muttered as she walked into the hall.

Faith hadn't realized she had been holding her breath until Amanda left the room. Her lips parted in a heavy sigh, and for the first time since this whole

diabetes thing started, she jabbed the needle into her skin on the first try. It didn't hurt as much, or maybe she was in such shock that she couldn't feel anything.

She stared at the wall in front of her, trying to get her head back into the investigation. Faith closed her eyes, visualizing the autopsy photos of Jacquelyn Zabel, the cave where Jacquelyn and Anna Lindsey had been kept. Faith catalogued the horrible things that must have happened to the women—the torture, the pain. She put her hand to her stomach again. Was the child that was growing inside of her a girl? What sort of world was Faith bringing her into—a place where young girls were molested by their fathers, where magazines told them they would never be perfect enough, where sadists could take you away from your life, your own child, in the blink of an eye and thrust you into a living hell for the rest of your life?

A shudder racked her body. She stood and left the room.

The cops in front of Anna's door stepped aside. Faith crossed her arms over her chest, feeling a sudden coldness as she entered. Anna was lying in bed, Balthazar in the crook of her bony arm. Her shoulder was pronounced, the bone hard against the skin, the same as the girls Faith had seen in the videos on Pauline McGhee's computer.

"Agent Mitchell has just entered the room," Amanda told the woman. "She's been trying to find out who did this to you."

The whites of Anna's eyes were clouded, as if she had cataracts. She stared unseeingly toward the door. Faith knew there was no etiquette for this kind of situation. She had handled rape and abuse cases before, but nothing like this. She had to think the skills translated. You didn't make small talk. You didn't ask them how they were doing, because the answer was obvious.

Faith said, "I know this is a difficult time. We just have a few questions for you."

Amanda told Faith, "Ms. Lindsey was just telling me she finished a big case and took off work for a few weeks to spend time with her child."

Faith asked, "Did anyone else know you were taking time off?"

"I left a note with the doorman. People at work knew—my secretary, my partners. I don't talk to the people in my building."

Faith felt like a large wall had been erected around Anna Lindsey. There was something so cold about the woman that establishing a connection seemed impossible. She stuck to the questions they needed answered. "Can you tell us what happened when you were taken?"

Anna licked her dry lips, closed her eyes. When she spoke, her voice was little more than a whisper. "I was in my apartment getting Balthazar ready for a walk in the park. That's the last thing I remember."

Faith knew there could be some memory loss with Taser attacks. "What did you see when you woke up?"

"Nothing. I never saw anything again after that."

"Any sounds or sensations you can recall?"

"No."

"Did you recognize your attacker?"

Anna shook her head. "No. I can't remember anything."

Faith let a few seconds pass, trying to get hold of her frustration. "I'm going to

give you a list of names. I need you to tell me if any of them sound familiar.”

Anna nodded, her hand sliding across the sheets to find her son’s mouth. He suckled her finger, tiny gulping noises coming from his throat.

“Pauline McGhee.”

Anna shook her head.

“Olivia Tanner.”

Again she shook her head.

“Jacquelyn, or Jackie, Zabel.”

She shook her head.

Faith had saved Jackie for last. The two women had been in the cave together. This was the only thing they knew for certain. “We found your fingerprint on Jackie Zabel’s driver’s license.”

Anna’s dry lips parted again. “No,” she said firmly. “I don’t know her.”

Amanda glanced Faith’s way, eyebrows raised. Was this traumatic amnesia? Or something else?

Faith asked, “What about something called thinspo?”

Anna stiffened. “No,” she said, more quickly this time, her voice louder.

Faith gave it another few seconds, letting the woman think. “We found some notebooks where you were kept. They had the same words over and over again—‘I will not deny myself.’ Does that mean anything to you?”

She shook her head again.

Faith worked to keep the pleading out of her voice. “Can you tell us anything about your attacker? Did you smell something, like oil or gas on him? Cologne? Did you feel any facial hair or any physical—”

“No,” Anna whispered, pressing her fingers along her child’s body, finding his hand and taking it in hers. “I can’t tell you anything. I don’t remember any details. Nothing.”

Faith opened her mouth to speak, but Amanda beat her to the punch, saying, “You’re safe here, Ms. Lindsey. We’ve had two armed guards outside your door since you were brought in. No one can hurt you anymore.”

Anna turned her head toward her baby, making shushing sounds to soothe him. “I am not afraid of anything.”

Faith was taken aback at how certain the woman sounded. Maybe if you survived what Anna had been through, you believed you could endure anything.

Amanda said, “We think he has two more women right now. That he’s doing the same thing to them that he’s done to you.” She tried again, “One of the women has a child, Ms. Lindsey. His name is Felix. He’s six years old and he wants to be with his mother. I’m sure wherever she is, she’s thinking of him right now, wanting to hold him again.”

“I hope she’s strong,” Anna mumbled. Then, louder, she told them, “As I have said many times now, I don’t remember anything. I don’t know who did it, or where they took me or why they did it. I just know that it’s over now, and I’m putting it behind me.”

Faith could feel Amanda’s frustration matching her own.

Anna said, “I need to rest now.”

“We can wait,” Faith told her. “Maybe come back in a few hours.”

“No.” The woman’s expression turned hard. “I know my legal obligations. I’ll sign a statement, or make my mark, or whatever it is blind people do, but if you

want to talk to me again, you can make an appointment with my secretary when I'm back at work."

Faith tried, "But, Anna—"

She turned her head toward the baby. Anna's blindness had blocked them from her vision, but her actions seemed to block them from her mind.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Sara had finally managed to clean her apartment. She could not think of the last time it had looked this good—maybe when she had first seen it with her real estate agent before she had even moved in. The Milk Lofts had once been a dairy, serviced by the vast farmland that used to cover the eastern part of the city. There were six floors in the building, two apartments on each floor separated by a long hallway with large windows at either end. The main living area of Sara's place was what was called an open plan, the kitchen looking onto the enormous living room. Floor-to-ceiling windows that were a bitch to keep clean lined an entire wall, giving her a nice view of downtown when the shades were open. There were three bedrooms in the back, each with its own bathroom. Sara, of course, slept in the master, but no one had ever slept in the guest room. The third room she used as an office and for storage.

She had never thought of herself as a loft person, but when Sara had moved to Atlanta, she had wanted her new life to be as different from her old as was humanly possible. Instead of choosing a cute bungalow on one of the city's old, tree-lined streets, she had opted for a space that was little more than an empty box. Atlanta's real estate market was just hitting rock bottom, and Sara had a ridiculous amount of money to spend. Everything was new when she'd moved in, but she had renovated the entire place from top to bottom anyway. The price of the kitchen alone would have fed a family of three for a year. Add in the palatial bathrooms and it was downright embarrassing that Sara had been so free with her checkbook.

In her previous life, she had always been careful with her money, never splurging on anything except a new BMW every four years. After Jeffrey's death, there had been his life insurance policy, his pension, his own savings and the proceeds from the sale of his house. Sara had left all of it in the bank, feeling like spending his money would be admitting he was gone. She had even considered refusing the tax exemption she got from the state for being a widow of a slain police officer, but her accountant had balked and it wasn't worth the fight.

Subsequently, the money she sent to Sylacauga, Alabama, every month to help Jeffrey's mother came out of her own pocket while Jeffrey's money compounded meager interest at the local bank. Sara often thought about giving it to his son, but that would have been too complicated. Jeffrey's son had never been told that Jeffrey was his real father. She couldn't ruin the boy's life and then hand over a sum that amounted to a small fortune to a kid who was still in college.

So, Jeffrey's money sat there in the bank, just like the letter sat on Sara's mantel. She stood by the fireplace, fingering the edge of the envelope, wondering why she hadn't put it back into her purse or jammed it into her pocket again. Instead, during her rabid fit of cleaning, she had only picked it up to dust under the envelope as she made her way down the mantel.

Sara saw Jeffrey's wedding ring on the opposite end. She still wore her wedding ring—a matching white-gold band—but his college ring, a hunk of gold with the Auburn University insignia carved into the top, was more important to her. The blue stone was scratched and it was too big for her finger, so she wore it on a long chain around her neck the way a soldier wears his dog tags. She didn't wear it for anyone to see. It was always tucked into her shirt, close to her heart, so she could feel it at all times.

Still, she took Jeffrey's wedding band and kissed it before putting it back on the mantel. Over the last few days, her mind had somehow put Jeffrey in a different place. It was as if she was going through mourning again, but this time, at a remove. Instead of waking up feeling devastated, as she had for the last three and a half years, she felt enormously sad. Sad to turn over in bed and not have him there. Sad that she would never see him smile again. Sad that she would never hold him or feel him inside of her again. But not utterly devastated. Not like every move or thought was an effort. Not like she wanted to die. Not like there was no light at the end of all of this.

There was something else, too. Faith Mitchell had been so horrible today, and Sara had survived. She hadn't broken down or fallen to pieces. She had not come undone. She had kept herself together. The funny thing was, in some ways Sara felt closer to Jeffrey because of it. She felt stronger, more like the woman he had fallen in love with than the woman who had fallen apart without him. She closed her eyes, and she could almost feel his breath on the back of her neck, his lips brushing so softly that a tingle went down her spine. She imagined his hand wrapping around her waist, and was surprised when she put her hand there to feel nothing but her own hot skin.

The buzzer rang and the dogs stirred along with Sara. She shushed them as she walked to the intercom and buzzed in the pizza delivery guy. Betty, Will Trent's dog, had been adopted quickly by Billy and Bob, her two greyhounds. When she was cleaning earlier, all three dogs had settled onto the couch in a pile, glancing up occasionally when Sara walked into the room, sometimes giving her a sharp look if she made too much noise. Even the vacuum cleaner had not dislodged them.

Sara opened the door to wait for Armando, who delivered pizza to her apartment at least twice a week. The fact that they were on a first-name basis was something she pretended was normal, and she routinely overtipped the deliveryman so that he wouldn't make a big deal about seeing her more than he saw his own children.

"Doin' all right?" he asked as pizza and money changed hands.

"Doing great," she told him, but her mind was back in the apartment, on what she was doing before the buzzer had sounded. It had been so long since she'd been able to remember what it felt like to be with Jeffrey. She wanted to dwell on it, to crawl into bed and let her mind wander back to that sweet place.

"Have a good one, Sara." Armando turned to leave, then stopped. "Hey, there's some strange guy hanging around downstairs."

She lived in the middle of a large city, so this was hardly unusual. "Regular strange or call-the-cops strange?"

"I think he *is* a cop. Doesn't look it, but I saw his badge."

"Thanks," she said. He gave her a nod as he headed toward the elevator. Sara

put the pizza box on the kitchen counter and walked to the far side of the living room. She pushed open the window and leaned out. Sure enough, six stories down, she spotted a speck looking suspiciously like Will Trent.

"Hey!" she called. He didn't respond, and she watched him for a moment as he paced back and forth, wondering if he'd heard her. She tried again, raising her voice like a soccer mom at a NASCAR race. "Hey!"

Will finally looked up, and she told him, "Sixth floor."

She watched him go into the building, passing Armando on the way out, who tossed Sara a wave and said something about seeing her soon. Sara shut the window, praying Will had not heard the exchange, or at least had the decency to pretend. She checked the apartment, making sure nothing was too horrendously out of place. There were two couches in the middle of the living room, one packed with dogs, the other with pillows. Sara fluffed these up, tossing them back onto the couch in what she hoped was an artful arrangement.

Thanks to two hours of elbow grease, the kitchen was sparkling clean, even the copper backsplash behind the stove, which was gorgeous until you realized it took two different kinds of cleaners. She passed the flat-screen television on the wall and stopped cold. She'd forgotten to dust the screen. Sara tugged down the sleeve of her shirt over her hand and did the best she could.

By the time she opened her door, Will was getting off the elevator. Sara had only met the man a few times, but he looked awful, like he hadn't slept in weeks. She saw his left hand, noticed the skin on his knuckles was split apart in a way that might suggest his fist had smashed repeatedly into someone's mouth.

Occasionally, Jeffrey had come home with the same kinds of cuts. Sara always asked about them, and he always lied. For her part, she made herself believe the lies because she wasn't comfortable with the idea of his walking outside the law. She wanted to believe that her husband was a good man in every way. Part of her wanted to think that Will Trent was a good man, too, so she was prepared to believe whatever story he came up with when she asked, "Is your hand all right?"

"I hit someone. The doorman at Anna's building."

Sara was caught off guard by his honesty. She took a second to form a response. "Why?"

Again, he seemed to give her the truth. "I just snapped."

"Are you in trouble with your boss?"

"Not really."

She realized she was keeping him in the hall and stepped aside so he could come in. "That baby is lucky you found him. I don't know that he could've gone another day."

"That's a convenient excuse." He looked around the room, absently scratching his arm. "I've never hit a suspect before. I've scared them into thinking I might, but I've never actually done it."

"My mother always told me there's a fine line between never and always." He looked confused, and Sara explained, "Once you do something bad, it's easier to do it again the next time, then the next time, and before you know it, you're doing it all the time and it doesn't bother your conscience."

He stared at her for what felt like a full minute.

She shrugged. "It's up to you. If you don't like crossing that line, then don't do

it again. Don't ever make it easy."

There was a mixture of surprise in his face, then something like relief. Instead of acknowledging what had just happened, he told her, "I hope Betty wasn't too much trouble."

"She was fine. She's not yippy at all."

"Yeah," he agreed. "I didn't intend to dump her on you like that."

"It was no problem," Sara assured him, though she had to admit that Faith Mitchell was right about Sara's motivations this morning. Sara had offered to watch the dog because she wanted details about the case. She wanted to contribute something to the investigation. She wanted to be useful again.

Will was just standing there in the middle of the room, his three-piece suit wrinkled, the vest loose around his stomach as if he'd lost weight recently. She had never seen anyone look so lost in her life.

She told him, "Have a seat."

He seemed undecided, but finally took the couch across from the dogs. He didn't sit the way men usually sit—legs apart, arms spread along the back of the couch. He was a big guy, but he appeared to work very hard not to take up a lot of space.

Sara asked, "Have you had supper?"

He shook his head and she put the pizza box on the coffee table. The dogs were very interested in this development, so Sara sat on the couch with them in order to keep them in line. She waited for Will to take a slice, but he just sat there opposite, hands resting on his knees.

He asked, "Is that your husband's ring?"

Startled, she turned to the ring, which was flat on the polished mahogany. The letter was on the other end of the mantel, and Sara had a flash of concern that Will would figure out what was inside.

"Sorry," he apologized. "I shouldn't pry."

"It's his," she told him, realizing that she'd been pressing her thumb into the matching ring on her finger, spinning it around in a nervous habit.

"What about ..." He touched his hand to his chest.

Sara mimicked the movement, feeling exposed as she found Jeffrey's college ring beneath her thin shirt. "Something else," she answered, not going into detail.

He nodded, still looking around the room. "I was found in a kitchen trashcan." His words were abrupt, surprising. He explained, "At least that's what my file says."

Sara didn't know how to respond, especially when he laughed, as if he'd made an off-color joke at a church social.

"Sorry. I don't know why I said that." He pulled a piece of pizza out of the box, catching the dripping cheese in his hand.

"It's all right," she told him, putting her hand on Bob's head as the greyhound's snout slid toward the coffee table. She couldn't even comprehend what Will was saying. He might as well have told her he had been born on the moon.

She asked, "How old were you?"

He waited until he'd swallowed, then told her, "Five months." He took another bite of pizza and she watched his jaw work as he chewed. Sara's mind

conjured up an image of Will Trent at five months old. He would've just started trying to sit up on his own and recognizing sounds.

He took another bite and chewed thoughtfully. "My mother put me there."

"In the trashcan?"

He nodded. "Someone broke into the house—a man. She knew he was going to kill her, and probably me, too. She hid me in the trashcan under the sink, and he didn't find me. I guess I must've known to be quiet." He gave a crooked half-grin. "I was in Anna's apartment today, and I looked in every trashcan. All the time, I was thinking about what you said this morning, about how the killer put the trash bags inside of the women to send a message, because he wanted to tell the world that they were trash, meaningless."

"Obviously, your mother was trying to protect you. She wasn't sending a message."

"Yeah," he said. "I know."

"Did they ...?" Her mind wasn't working well enough to ask questions.

"Did they catch the guy who killed her?" Will asked, finishing her sentence. He glanced around the room again. "Did they catch the person who killed your husband?"

He had asked a question, but he wasn't looking for an answer. He was making the point that it didn't matter, something Sara had felt from the moment she'd been told the man who'd orchestrated Jeffrey's death was dead. She said, "Every cop who knows, that's all they care about. Did they catch the guy?"

"Eye for an eye." He pointed to the pizza. "Mind if I—"

He had finished half the pie. "Go ahead."

"It's been a long day."

Sara laughed at the understatement. He laughed, too.

She pointed to his hand. "Do you want me to take care of that?"

He glanced at the wounds as if he'd just realized something was wrong. "What can you do?"

"You've waited too long for stitches." She stood up to get her first aid kit from the kitchen. "I can clean it. You need to start some antibiotics so it doesn't get infected."

"What about rabies?"

"Rabies?" She tied up her hair with a band she found in the kitchen drawer, then hooked her reading glasses on her shirt collar. "The human mouth is pretty dirty, but it's very rare—"

"I mean from rats," Will said. "There were some rats in the cave where Anna and Jackie were kept." He scratched his right arm again, and she realized now why he had been doing it. "You can get rabies from rats, right?"

Sara froze, her hand reaching up to take a stainless steel bowl from the cabinet. "Did they bite you?"

"No, they ran up my arms."

"Rats ran up your arms?"

"Just two. Maybe three."

"Two or three *rats* ran up your arms?"

"It's really calming the way you keep repeating everything I say, but in a louder voice."

She laughed at the comment, but still asked, "Were they acting erratic? Did

they try to attack you?"

"Not really. They just wanted to get out. I think they were as scared of me as I was of them." He shrugged. "Well, one of them stayed down. He was eyeballing me, you know, kind of watching what I was doing. He never came near me, though."

She put on her reading glasses and sat beside him. "Roll up your sleeves."

He took off his jacket and rolled up the shirtsleeve on his left arm, though he had been scratching his right. Sara didn't argue. She looked at the scratches on his forearm. They weren't even deep enough to bleed. He was probably remembering it a lot worse than it actually was. "I think you'll be fine."

"You're sure? Maybe that's why I went a little crazy today."

She could tell he was only half kidding. "Tell Faith to call me if you start foaming at the mouth."

"Don't be surprised if you hear from her tomorrow."

She rested the stainless steel bowl in her lap, then put his left hand in the bowl. "This might sting," she warned, pouring peroxide over the open wounds. Will didn't flinch, and she took his lack of reaction as an opportunity to do a more thorough job.

She tried to take his mind off what she was doing, and, frankly, her own curiosity was raised. "What about your father?"

"There were extenuating circumstances," was all he offered. "Don't worry. Orphanages aren't as bad as Dickens would lead you to believe." He changed the subject, asking, "Do you come from a big family?"

"Just me and my younger sister."

"Pete said your dad's a plumber."

"He is. My sister worked in the business with him for a while, but now she's a missionary."

"That's nice. You both take care of people."

Sara tried to think of another question, something to say that would make him open up, but nothing would come to mind. She had no idea how to talk to someone who didn't have a family. What stories of sibling tyranny or parental angst could you share?

Will seemed equally at a loss for words, or maybe he was just choosing to be silent. Either way, he didn't speak until she was doing her best to cover the broken skin by crisscrossing several Band-Aids over his knuckles.

He said, "You're a good doctor."

"You should see me with splinters."

He looked at his hand. Flexed his fingers.

She said, "You're left-handed."

He asked, "Is that a bad thing?"

"I hope not." She held up her left hand, which she'd been using to clean his wounds. "My mother says it means you're smarter than everybody else." She started cleaning up the mess. "Speaking of my mother, I called her about the question you had—the apostle who replaced Judas? His name was Matthias." She laughed, joking, "I'm pretty sure if you meet anyone by that name, you've probably found your killer."

He laughed, too. "I'll put out an APB."

"Last seen wearing a robe and sandals."

He shook his head, still smiling. "Don't make light of it. That's the best lead I've heard all day."

"Anna's not talking?"

"I haven't talked to Faith since ..." He waved his injured hand. "She would've called if anything came up."

"She's not what I thought," Sara told him. "Anna. I know this is odd to say, but she's very dispassionate. Unemotional."

"She's been through a lot."

"I know what you mean, but it's beyond that." Sara shook her head. "Or maybe it's my ego. Doctors aren't used to being talked to as if they're servants."

"What did she say to you?"

"When I brought her baby to her—Balthazar—I don't know, it was weird. I wasn't expecting a medal by any means, but I thought she would at least thank me. She just told me that I could go away."

Will rolled down his shirtsleeve. "None of these women have been particularly likable."

"Faith said there might be an anorexia connection."

"There might be. I don't know a lot about it. Are anorexics generally horrible people?"

"No, of course not. Everyone is different. Faith asked me about the same thing this afternoon. I told her that it takes a very driven personality to starve yourself like that, but it doesn't follow that they're unkind." Sara thought about it. "Your killer probably didn't choose these women because they're anorexic. He chooses them because they're awful people."

"If they're awful people, then he'd have to know them. He'd have to have contact with them."

"Are you finding any connections other than the anorexia?"

"All of them are unmarried. Two of them have kids. One of them hates kids. One of them wanted a kid, but maybe not." He added, "Banker, lawyer, real estate broker and interior designer."

"What kind of lawyer?"

"Corporate attorney."

"Not real estate closings?"

He shook his head. "The banker didn't work mortgages, either. She was in charge of community relations—doing fundraisers, making sure the president of the bank had his picture in the paper beside kids with cancer. That sort of thing."

"They're not in a support group?"

"There's a chat room, but we can't get into it without a password." He rubbed his eyes with his hands. "It just goes in circles."

"You look tired. Maybe a good night's sleep will help you figure it out."

"Yeah, I should go." But he didn't. He just sat there looking at her.

Sara felt the noise drain from the room, and the air got stuffy, almost hard to breathe. She was acutely aware of the pressure against her skin from the gold band around her fourth finger, and she realized that her thigh was brushing his.

Will was the first to break the spell, turning, reaching for his jacket off the back of the couch. "I really should go," he told her, standing up to put on his jacket. "I need to find a prostitute."

She was certain she had heard wrong. "I'm sorry?"

He chuckled. "A witness named Lola. She was the one who was taking care of the baby and she tipped us off about Anna's apartment. I've been looking for her all afternoon. I think now that it's nighttime, she's probably emerged from her lair."

Sara stayed on the couch, thinking it was probably best to keep some distance between them so Will didn't get the wrong message. "I'll wrap up some pizza for you."

"That's okay." He went to the other couch and extracted Betty from the dog pile. He tucked her close to his chest. "Thanks for the conversation." He paused. "About what I said ..." He paused again. "Maybe best just to forget about it, okay?"

Her mind reeled with something to say that wasn't flip or—worse—an invitation. "Of course. No problem."

He smiled at her again, then let himself out of her apartment.

Sara sat back on the couch, hissing out a breath of air, wondering what the hell had just happened. She traced back through their conversation, wondering if she had given Will a sign, an unintentional signal. Or maybe there wasn't anything there. Maybe she was reading too much into the look he gave her as they both sat on the couch. Surely, it didn't help matters that three minutes before Will had arrived, Sara was thinking lewd thoughts about her husband. Still, she went back through it again, trying to figure out what had brought them to that uncomfortable moment, or if, in fact, there had been an uncomfortable moment at all.

It wasn't until she remembered holding his hand over the bowl, cleaning out the wounds on his knuckles, that she realized that Will Trent was no longer wearing his wedding ring.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Will wondered how many men in the world were trolling for prostitutes in their cars right now. Maybe hundreds of thousands, if not millions. He glanced at Betty, thinking he was probably the only one doing it with a Chihuahua in his passenger seat.

At least he hoped so.

Will looked at his hands on the steering wheel, the Band-Aids that covered the broken skin. He couldn't remember the last time he'd gotten into a serious fight. It must have been when he was back at the children's home. There was a bully there who had made his life miserable. Will had taken it and taken it, and then he had snapped, and Tony Campano had ended up with his front teeth broken out like a Halloween pumpkin.

Will flexed his fingers again. Sara had tried to do her best with the Band-Aids, but there was no way to keep them from falling off. Will tried to catalog the many times he had been to a doctor as a child. There was a scar on his body for just about each visit, and he used the marks to jog his memory, naming the foster parent or group home leader who had been courteous enough to break a bone or burn him or rip open his skin.

He lost count, or maybe he just couldn't keep a thought in his head because all he kept coming back to was the way Sara Linton had looked when he first saw her in the doorway to her apartment. He knew she had long hair, but she'd always kept it up. This time, it was down—soft curls cascading past her shoulders. She was wearing jeans and a long-sleeved cotton shirt that did a very good job of showing everything she had to great advantage. She was in socks, her shoes kicked off by the door. She smelled nice, too—not like perfume, but just clean and warm and beautiful. While she was fixing his hand, it had taken everything in him not to lean down and smell her hair.

Will was reminded of a Peeping Tom he'd caught in Butts County a few years ago. The man had followed women out to the parking lot of the local shopping mall, then offered them money to smell their hair. Will could still remember the news report, the local sheriff's deputy visibly nervous in front of the news camera. The only thing the cop could come up with to tell the reporter was, "He's got a problem. A problem with hair."

Will had a problem with Sara Linton.

He scratched Betty's chin as he waited for a red light to change. The Chihuahua had done a good job of ingratiating herself with Sara's dogs, but Will was not foolish enough to think he had a snowball's chance. No one had to tell him he wasn't the sort of man Sara Linton would go for. For one, she lived in a palace. Will had remodeled his house a few years ago, so he knew the cost of all the nice things he could not afford. Just the appliances in her kitchen had run around fifty thousand dollars, twice the amount he had spent on his whole house.

Two, she was smart. She wasn't obvious about it, but she was a doctor. You didn't go to medical school if you were stupid, or Will would've been a doctor, too. It would take Sara no time at all to figure out he was illiterate, which made him glad that he wasn't going to be spending any more time around her.

Anna was getting better. She would be out of the hospital soon. The baby was fine. There was no reason on earth for Will to ever see Sara Linton again unless he happened to be at Grady Hospital when she was on shift.

He supposed he could hope he got shot. He'd thought Amanda was going to do exactly that when she'd taken him into the stairwell this afternoon. Instead, she had merely said, "I've waited a long time for your short hairs to grow in." Not exactly the words you expect from your superior after you've beaten a man nearly senseless. Everyone was making excuses for him, everyone was covering for him, and Will was the only one who seemed to think that what he had done was wrong.

He pulled away from the light, heading into one of the seedier parts of town. He was running out of places to check for Lola, a revelation which troubled him, and not just because Amanda had told him not to bother coming in to work tomorrow unless he tracked the whore down. Lola had to have known about the baby. She had certainly known about the drugs and what was going on in Anna Lindsey's penthouse apartment. Maybe she had seen something else—something she wasn't willing to trade because it might put her life in danger. Or maybe she was just one of those cold, unfeeling people who didn't care if a child was slowly dying. Word must have gotten around by now that Will was the kind of cop who beat people. Maybe Lola was afraid of him. Hell, there had been a moment in that hallway when Will was afraid of himself.

He had felt numb when he got to Sara's apartment, like his heart wasn't even beating in his chest. He was thinking of all the men who had raised their fists to him when he was a child. All the violence he had seen. All the pain he had endured. And he was just as bad as the rest of them for beating that doorman into the ground.

Part of him had told Sara Linton about the incident because he had wanted to see the disappointment in her eyes, to know with just one look that she would never approve of him. What he got instead was ... understanding. She acknowledged that he had made a mistake, but she hadn't assumed that it defined his character. What kind of person did that? Not the kind of person Will had ever met. Not the kind of woman Will could ever understand.

Sara was right about how it was easier to do something bad the second time. Will saw it all the time at work: repeat offenders who had gotten away with it once and decided they might as well roll the dice and try it again. Maybe it was human nature to push those boundaries. A third of all DUI offenders ended up being arrested for drunk driving a second time. Over half of all the violent felons captured were already released convicts. Rapists had one of the highest recidivist rates in the prison system.

Will had learned a long time ago that the only thing he could control in any given situation was himself. He wasn't a victim. He wasn't prisoner to his temper. He could choose to be a good person. Sara had said as much. She had made it seem so easy.

And then he had forced that weird moment when they were together on the

couch, staring at her like he was an ax murderer.

"Idiot." He rubbed his eyes, wishing he could rub away the memory. There was no use thinking about Sara Linton. In the end, it would lead to nothing.

Will saw a group of women loitering on the sidewalk ahead. They were all dressed in various shades of fantasy: schoolgirls, strippers, a transsexual who looked a lot like the mother from *Leave It to Beaver*. Will rolled down his window and they all did a silent negotiation, deciding who to send over. He drove a Porsche 911 he had rebuilt from the ground up. The car had taken him almost a decade to restore. It seemed to take a decade for the prostitutes to decide who to send.

Finally, one of the schoolgirls sauntered over. She leaned into the car, then backed out just as quickly. "Nuh-uh," she said. "No way. I ain't fuckin' no dog."

Will held out a twenty-dollar bill. "I'm looking for Lola."

Her lip twisted, and she snatched away the cash so quickly Will felt the paper burn his fingertips. "Yeah, that bitch'll fuck your dog. She on Eighteenth. Strolling by the old post office."

"Thank you."

The girl was already sashaying back to her group.

Will rolled up the window and took a U-turn. He saw the girls in his rearview mirror. The schoolgirl had passed the twenty on to her minder, who would in turn pass it on to the pimp. Will knew from Angie that the girls seldom got to keep any cash. The pimps took care of their living quarters, their food, their clothes. All the girls had to do was risk their lives and health every night by tricking whatever john pulled up with the right amount of cash. It was modern slavery, which was ironic, considering most if not all of the pimps were black.

Will turned onto Eighteenth Street and slowed the car to a crawl, coming up on a parked sedan under a streetlight. The driver was behind the wheel, his head back. Will gave it a few minutes and a head popped up from the man's lap. The door opened and the woman tried to get out, but the man reached over and grabbed her by the hair.

"Crap," Will mumbled, jumping out of his car. He locked the door with the remote on his keys as he jogged toward the sedan and yanked open the door.

"What the fuck?" the man yelled, still holding the woman by the hair.

"Hey, baby," Lola said, reaching her hand out to Will. He grabbed it without thinking, and she got out of the car, her wig staying in the man's hand. He cursed and threw it onto the street, pulling away from the curb so fast that the car door slammed shut.

Will told Lola, "We need to talk."

She bent over to get her wig, and courtesy of the streetlight, he saw straight up to her tonsils. "I'm running a business here."

Will tried, "Next time you need help—"

"Angie helped me, not you." She tugged at her skirt. "You watch the news? Cops found enough coke in that penthouse to teach the world to sing. I'm a fucking hero."

"Balthazar's going to be okay. The baby."

"Baltha-what?" She wrinkled her face. "Christ, kid barely had a chance."

"You took care of him. He meant something to you."

"Yeah, well." She put the wig on her head, trying to get it straight. "I got two

kids, you know? Had them while I was locked up. Got to spend some time with them before the state took them away.” Her arms were bone-thin, and Will was again reminded of the thinspo videos they had found on Pauline’s computer. Those girls were starving themselves because they wanted to be thin. Lola was starving because she couldn’t afford food.

“Here,” he said, tugging the wig straight for her.

“Thanks.” She started walking down the street back toward her group. There was the usual mixture of schoolgirls and tramps, but they were older, harder women. The streets usually got tougher the higher the numbers. Pretty soon, Lola and her gang would be on Twenty-first, a street so hopeless that dispatch at the local police station routinely sent out ambulances to pick up women who had died during the night.

He tried, “I could arrest you for obstructing a crime.”

She kept walking. “Might be nice in jail. Getting kind of cold out here tonight.”

“Did Angie know about the baby?”

She stopped.

“Just tell me, Lola.”

Slowly, she turned around. Her eyes searched his, not looking for the right answer, but looking for the answer that he wanted to hear. “No.”

“You’re lying.”

Her face remained emotionless. “He really okay? The baby, I mean.”

“He’s with his mom now. I think he’ll be okay.”

She dug around in her purse, finding a pack of cigarettes and some matches. He waited for her to light up, take a drag. “I was at a party. This guy I know, he said there was this pad in some fancy apartment building. The doorman’s easy. Lets people in and out. Mostly, it was high-class stuff. You know, people who needed a nice place for a couple of hours, no questions asked. They come in and party, the maid comes the next day. The rich people who own the different apartments get back from Palm Beach or wherever and have no idea.” She picked a stray piece of tobacco off her tongue. “Something happened this time, though. Simkov, the doorman, pissed off somebody in the building. They gave him a two-week notice. He started letting in the lower clientele.”

“Like you?”

She lifted her chin.

“What’d he charge?”

“Have to talk to the boys about that. I just show up and fuck.”

“What boys?”

She exhaled a long plume of smoke.

Will let it go, knowing not to push her too hard. “Did you know the woman whose apartment you were in?”

“Never met her, never seen her, never heard of her.”

“So, you get there, Simkov lets you up, and then what?”

“At first it’s nice. Usually, we’ve been in one of the lower apartments. This was the penthouse. Lots of your better consumers. Good stash. Coke, some H. The crack showed up a couple of days later. Then the meth. Went downhill from there.”

Will remembered the trashed state of the apartment. “That happened fast.”

"Yeah, well. Drug addicts aren't exactly known for their restraint." She chuckled at a memory. "Couple of fights broke out. Some bitches got into it. Then the trannies went to town and—" She shrugged, like *What do you expect?*

"What about the baby?"

"Kid was in the nursery first time I got there. You got kids?"

He shook his head.

"Smart choice. Angie's not exactly the mothering type."

Will didn't bother to agree with her, because they both knew that was the God's honest truth. He asked, "What did you do when you found the baby?"

"The apartment wasn't a good place for him. I could see what was coming. The wrong kind of people were showing up. Simkov was letting anybody in. I moved the kid down the hall."

"To the trash room."

She grinned. "Ain't nobody worried about throwing away the trash at that party."

"Did you feed him?"

"Yeah," she said. "I fed him what was in the cabinets, changed his diaper. I did that with my own kids, you know? Like I said, they let you keep them for a while before they're turned over. I learned all about feeding and that kind of shit. I took pretty good care of him."

"Why did you leave him?" Will asked. "You were arrested on the street."

"My pimp didn't know about this—I was off the books, just having a good time. He tracked me down and told me to get back to work, so I did."

"How did you get back upstairs to take care of the baby?"

She jerked her hand up and down. "I tossed off Simkov. He's all right."

"Why didn't you tell me when you called that first night that there was a baby involved?"

"I figured I'd take care of him when I got out," she admitted. "I was doing a good job, right? I mean, I was doing good by him, keeping him fed and changing his little diapers. He's a sweet little boy. You seen him, right? You know he's sweet."

That sweet little boy was dehydrated and hours from dying when Will had seen him. "How did you know Simkov?"

She shrugged. "Otik's a longtime customer, you know?" She gestured toward the street. "Met him here on Millionaire's Row."

"I wouldn't exactly call him a stand-up guy."

"He did me a favor letting me go up there. I made some good cash. I kept the kid safe. What else you want from me?"

"Did Angie know about the baby?"

She coughed, the sound coming from deep in her chest. When she spit onto the sidewalk, Will felt his stomach roll. "You're gonna have to ask her about that."

Lola swung her purse over her shoulder and headed back toward her group.

Will took out his cell phone as he walked toward his car. The thing was on its last legs, but it still managed to make the call.

"Hello?" Faith said.

Will didn't want to talk about what had happened this afternoon, so he didn't give her an opening. "I talked to Lola." He ran down what the prostitute had

told him. "Simkov called her in to help her make some extra cash. I'm sure he took his share off the top."

"Maybe that's something we can use," Faith answered. "Amanda wants me to talk to Simkov tomorrow. We'll see if his story matches up."

"What did you find on him?"

"Not much. He lives in the apartment building on the bottom floor. He's supposed to be on the desk from eight until six, but there's been problems with that lately."

"I guess that's why they gave him his two-week notice."

"His criminal report came up clean. His bank account's all right, considering he gets free rent." Faith paused, and he could hear her turning the pages in her notebook. "We found some porn in his apartment, but nothing young or kinky. His phone's clean."

"Sounded to me like he'd let anybody into the building for the right amount of cash. Did Anna Lindsey give you anything?"

She told him about her fruitless conversation with the woman. "I don't know why she won't talk. Maybe she's scared."

"Maybe she thinks if she puts it out of her mind, doesn't talk about it, then it'll go away."

"I suppose that works if you've got the emotional maturity of a six-year-old."

Will tried not to take her words personally.

Faith told him, "We looked at the front-door logs from the apartment building. There was a cable guy and a couple of delivery people. I talked to all of them as well as the building maintenance guy. They're checking out. Clean records, solid alibis."

Will got into his car. "What about neighbors?"

"No one seems to know anything, and these people are too rich to talk to the police."

Will had met the type before. They didn't want to get involved and they didn't want their names in the papers. "Did any of them know Anna?"

"Same as with the others—anyone who knew her didn't like her."

"What about forensics?"

"Should be back in the morning."

"What about the computers?"

"Nothing, and the warrants aren't in for the bank yet, so we don't have access to Olivia Tanner's cell phone, BlackBerry, or her computer at work."

"Our bad guy is smarter at this than we are."

"I know," she admitted. "Everything is starting to feel like a dead end."

There was a lull in the conversation. Will searched for something to fill it, but Faith beat him to the punch.

"So, Amanda and I are going to interview the doorman at eight in the morning, then I've got an appointment I need to go to. It's out in Snellville."

Will couldn't think what anyone would be doing in Snellville.

"I figure it'll take an hour or so. Hopefully, we'll have an ID on Jake Berman by then. We need to talk to Rick Sigler, too. I keep letting him slip through the cracks."

"He's white, early forties."

"Amanda made the same point. She sent someone around to talk to Sigler

earlier today. He was at home with his wife.”

Will groaned. “Did he deny even being at the scene?”

“Apparently, he tried to. He wouldn’t even acknowledge he was with Jake Berman, which makes it seem more and more like a hookup.” Faith sighed. “Amanda’s got a tail on Sigler, but his background is clean. No aliases, no multiple addresses, born and raised in Georgia. He’s got K-through-twelve school records in Conyers. There’s no indication that he’s ever been to Michigan, let alone lived there.”

“We’re only stuck on this brother thing because Pauline McGhee told her son to watch out for his uncle.”

“True, but what else do we have to follow? If we hit any more brick walls, we’re both going to start getting concussions.”

Will waited a few seconds. “What kind of appointment?”

“It’s a personal thing.”

“All right.”

Neither of them seemed to have anything to say after that. Why was it so easy for Will to spill his guts to Sara Linton, but he could barely manage to have a normal conversation with any other women in his life—especially his partner?

Faith offered, “I’ll talk about my thing if you’ll talk about yours.”

He laughed. “I think we need to start from the beginning. With the case, I mean.”

She agreed. “The best way to see if you’ve missed something is to retrace your steps.”

“When you get back from your appointment. We’ll go to the Coldfields’, talk to Rick Sigler at his work so he’s not freaking out in front of his wife, then go over all the witnesses—anybody who’s even remotely connected to this thing. Fellow employees, maintenance men who’ve been to the house, tech support, anybody they’ve had contact with.”

“Couldn’t hurt,” she agreed. There was another lull. Again she filled it. “Are you all right?”

Will had pulled up in front of his house. He put the car in park, wishing that a bolt of lightning would just come down from the sky and kill him dead.

Angie’s car was blocking the driveway.

“Will?”

“Yeah,” he managed. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

He ended the call and tucked the phone into his pocket. The lights were on in the front room, but Angie hadn’t bothered to turn on the porch light. He had cash in his pocket, credit cards. He could stay in a hotel tonight. There had to be a place that wouldn’t mind dogs, or maybe he could sneak Betty in under his jacket.

Betty stood and stretched on the seat. The front porch light came on.

Will mumbled under his breath as he scooped up the dog. He got out of his car and locked it, then headed up the driveway. He opened the gate to the backyard and set Betty on the grass, then he stood outside his own house a few minutes, debating, then decided he was being stupid and made himself go in.

Angie was on the couch with her feet curled up under her. Her long dark hair was down the way he liked it, and she was wearing a tight black dress that hugged every curve. Sara had looked beautiful, but Angie looked sexy. Her

makeup was dark, her lips a blood red. He wondered if she had made an effort. Probably. She always sensed when Will was pulling away. She was like a shark smelling blood in the water.

She greeted him the same way the prostitute did. "Hey, baby."
"Hey."

Angie stood up from the couch, stretching like a cat as she walked over to him. "Good day?" she asked, putting her arms around his neck. Will turned his head, and she turned it back, kissing him on the lips.

He said, "Don't do that."

She kissed him again because she had never liked being told what to do.

Will kept himself as impassive as he could, and she finally dropped her arms.

"What happened to your hand?"

"I beat someone."

She laughed, like he was joking. "Really?"

"Yeah." He leaned his hand on the back of the couch. One of the Band-Aids was peeling up.

"You beat someone." She was taking him seriously now. "Any witnesses?"

"None that are talking."

"Good for you, baby." She was close to him, right behind him. "I bet Faith wet her pants." Her hand traced down his arm, rested on the back of his wrist. Her tone changed. "Where's your ring?"

"In my pocket." Will had taken it off before he'd gone up to Sara's apartment. At the time, he'd fooled himself into thinking he'd done it because his fingers were swelling and the ring was getting tight.

Angie's hand went to his pants pocket. Will closed his eyes, feeling the day catch up with him. Not just the day, but the last eight months. Angie was the only woman he had ever been with, and his body had been lonely, almost aching for the feel of her.

Her fingers touched him through the thin material of his pocket. His reaction was immediate, and when she breathed into his ear, he gripped the couch so that he could still stand.

She took his ear between her teeth. "You miss me?"

He swallowed, unable to speak as she pressed her breasts, her body, into his back. He leaned his head back and she kissed his neck, but it wasn't Angie he was thinking about when her fingers wrapped around him. It was Sara, her long, thin fingers working on his hand as they both sat on the couch. The way her hair had smelled, because he had let himself bend down just for a moment and inhaled as quietly as he could. She smelled of goodness and mercy and kindness. She smelled of everything that he had ever wanted—everything that he could never have.

"Hey." Angie had stopped. "Where'd you go?"

With effort, Will managed to zip up his pants. He shouldered Angie out of the way as he walked across the room.

She asked, "Is it your time of the month again?"

"Did you know about the baby?"

She cocked her hand on her hip. "What baby?"

"I don't care what the answer is, but I want the truth. I need to know the truth."

"You gonna beat me if I don't tell you?"

"I'm gonna hate you," he answered, and they both knew what he was saying was true. "That baby could've been you or me. Hell, that baby *was me*."

Her tone was sharp, defensive. "Mommy leave him in the trash-can?"

"It was that or whore him out for speed."

She pressed her lips together, but would not look away. "Touché," she finally said, because Diedre Polaski had done just that very thing to her baby girl.

Will repeated his question, the only question that mattered anymore. "Did you know that there was a baby in that penthouse?"

"Lola was taking care of it."

"What?"

"She's not bad. She was making sure it was okay. If she hadn't got popped—"

"Wait a minute." He put out his hands to stop her. "You think that whore was taking care of that baby?"

"He's fine, right? I made some calls to Grady. Mother and son are united again."

"You made some calls?" He couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Jesus Christ, Angie. He's a tiny baby. He would've been dead if we'd waited any longer."

"But you didn't and he's not."

"Angie—"

"People always take care of babies, Will. Who looks out for people like Lola?"

"You're worried about some crack whore when there's a baby in a trash heap starving to death?" He didn't let her answer. "That's it. That's it for me."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"It means I'm finished. It means the string on our yo-yo has broken."

"Fuck you."

"No more back and forth. No more screwing around on me, running out on me in the middle of the night, then running back in a month or a year later pretending like you can lick my wounds all better."

"You make it sound so romantic."

He opened the front door. "I want you out of my house and out of my life." She didn't move, so he walked over to her, started pushing her toward the door.

"What are you doing?" She pushed back, and when he wouldn't budge, she slapped him. "Get the fuck away from me."

He lifted her from behind, and she used her foot to kick the door closed.

"Get out," he said, trying to reach the doorknob even as he held on to her.

Angie had been a beat cop before she'd been a detective, and she knew how to take him down. Her foot kicked out, popping him in the back of the knee, dropping him to the floor. Will held on, pulling her down with him so they were struggling on the floor like a couple of angry dogs.

"Stop it," she screamed, kicking him, punching him, using every part of her body to cause pain.

Will rolled her onto her stomach, pushing her flat against the wood floor. He grabbed both her hands in one of his, squeezing them together so she couldn't fight him. Without even thinking, he reached down and ripped away her underwear. Her nails dug into the back of his hand as he slid his fingers inside her.

"Asshole," she hissed, but she was so wet Will could barely feel his fingers moving in and out. He found the right spot, and she cursed again, pressing her face into the floor. She never came with him. It was part of her power play. She always squeezed every last bit of soul out of Will, but she would never let him do the same to her.

"Stop it," she demanded, but she was moving against his hand, tensing with each stroke. He unzipped his pants and pushed himself inside her. She tried to tighten against him, but he pushed harder, forcing her to open up. She groaned and there was a sweet release as she took him in deeper, then even more. He pulled her up to her knees, fucking her as fast as he could while his fingers worked to bring her to the edge. She started to moan, a deep, guttural sound he had never heard before. Will rammed himself into her, not caring if he left marks up and down her body, not caring if he broke her. When she finally came, she gripped him so hard that it almost hurt to be inside of her. His own release was so savage that he ended up collapsed on top of her, panting, every part of him sore.

Will rolled onto his back. Angie's hair was tangled around her face. Her makeup was smeared. She was breathing as hard as he was.

"Jesus Christ," she mumbled. "Jesus Christ." She tried to reach out and touch his face, but he slapped her hand away.

They lay there like that, both panting on the floor, for what seemed like hours. Will tried to feel remorse, or anger, but all he felt was exhaustion. He was so sick of this, so sick of the way Angie drove him to extremes. He thought again about what Sara had said: *Learn from your mistakes*.

Angie Polaski was looking like the biggest mistake Will had ever made in his miserable life.

"Christ." She was still breathing hard. She rolled over on her side, slid her hand up under his shirt. Her hands were hot, sweaty against his skin. Angie said, "Whoever she is, tell her I said thanks."

He stared up at the ceiling, not trusting himself to look at her.

"I've been screwing you for twenty-three years, baby, and you've never fucked me like that before." Her fingers found the ridge at the bottom of his rib, the place where the skin puckered from a cigarette burn. "What's her name?"

Will still didn't answer.

Angie whispered, "Tell me her name."

Will's throat hurt when he tried to swallow. "Nobody."

She gave a deep, knowing laugh. "Is she a nurse or a cop?" She laughed again. "Hooker?"

Will didn't say anything. He tried to block Sara out of his mind, didn't want her in his thoughts right now because he knew what was coming. Will had scored one point, so Angie had to score ten.

He flinched as Angie found a sensitive nerve on his damaged skin.

She asked, "Is she normal?"

Normal. They had used that word in the children's home to describe people not like them—people with families, people with lives, people whose parents didn't beat them or pimp them out or treat them like trash.

Angie kept tracing the tip of her finger around the burn. "She know about your problem?"

Will tried to swallow again. His throat scratched. He felt sick.

"She know you're stupid?"

He felt trapped under her finger, the way it was pressing into the round scar where the burning cigarette had melted his flesh. Just when he thought he couldn't take it anymore, she stopped, putting her mouth close to his ear, sliding her fingers up the sleeve of his shirt. She found the long scar running up his arm where the razor had opened his flesh.

"I remember the blood," she said. "The way your hand shook, the way the razor blade opened up your skin. Do you remember that?"

He closed his eyes, tears leaking out. Of course he remembered. If he thought about it hard enough, he could still feel the tip of the sharp metal scraping across his bone because he had known that he should send the razor deep—deep enough to open the vein, deep enough to make sure it was done right.

"Remember how I held you?" she asked, and he could feel her arms around him even though she wasn't holding him now. The way she had wrapped her whole body around him like a blanket. "There was so much blood."

It had dripped down her own arms, onto her legs, her feet.

She had held on to him so tight that he couldn't breathe, and he had loved her so much, because he knew she understood why he was doing it, why he had to stop the madness that was going on around him. Every scar on his body, every burn, every break—Angie knew about it the same way she knew everything about herself. Every secret Will had, Angie held somewhere deep inside her. She held on to it with her life.

She was his life.

He gulped, his mouth still spitless. "How long?"

She rested her hand on his stomach. She knew she had him back, knew it was just a matter of snapping her fingers. "How long what, baby?"

"How long do you want me to love you?"

She didn't answer him immediately, and he was about to ask the question again when she said, "Isn't that a country music song?"

He turned to look at her, searching her eyes for some sign of kindness that he had never seen before. "Just tell me how long so I can count the days, so I know when this is finally going to be over."

Angie traced her hand down the side of his face.

"Five years? Ten years?" His throat was closing, like someone had fed him glass. "Just tell me, Angie. How long until I can stop loving you?"

She leaned in, put her mouth to his ear again. "Never."

She pushed herself up from the floor, smoothing down her skirt, finding her shoes and underwear. Will lay there as she opened the door, then left without bothering to look back. He didn't blame her. Angie never looked back. She knew what was behind her, just like she always knew what was ahead.

Will didn't get up when he heard her shoes on the porch stairs or her car starting up in the driveway. He didn't get up when he heard Betty scratching at the dog door, which he'd forgotten to open for her. Will did not move for anything. He lay on the floor all night, until the sun coming in through the windows told him it was time to go back to work.

DAY FOUR



CHAPTER TWENTY

Pauline was hungry, but she could handle that. She understood the pains in her stomach and lower intestines, the way the spasms reverberated through her gut as they grasped for any type of nourishment. She knew it well, and she could handle it. The thirst was different, though. There was no way around the thirst. She had never gone without water for this long before. She was desperate, willing to do anything. She'd even peed on the floor and tried to drink it, but it just made her thirst even wilder so that she'd ended up sitting on her knees, baying like a wolf.

No more. She couldn't be in that dark place for long. She couldn't let it get to her again, envelop her so that all she wanted to do was curl into a ball and pine for Felix.

Felix. He was the only reason to get out of here, to fight, to stop the fuckers from taking Pauline away from her baby boy.

She lay on her side, arms pinned to her waist, feet sticking straight out, and lifted her upper body, straining her neck so that she could line herself up right. She held herself like that, muscles tight, sweating, the blindfold rubbing her skin, as she took aim. The chains around her wrists rattled from exertion, and before she could stop herself, she reared back her head and pounded it into the wall.

Pain streaked through her neck. She saw stars—literal stars—swimming through her vision. She fell onto her back, panting, trying not to hyperventilate, willing herself not to pass out.

"What are you doing?" the other woman asked.

The bitch had been lying on her back like a corpse for the last twelve hours, unresponsive, uncaring, and now she was asking questions?

"Shut up," Pauline snarled. She didn't have time for this shit. She rolled over onto her side again, lining up her body with the wall, moving down a few more inches. She held her breath, squeezed her eyes shut and pounded her head into the wall again.

"Fuck!" she screamed, her head exploding with pain. She fell onto her back again. There was blood on her forehead, sliding underneath the blindfold, getting into her eyes. She couldn't blink it away, couldn't wipe it. She felt like a spider was crawling across her eyelids, seeping into her eyeballs.

"No," Pauline said, and she found herself wrapped in a full-on hallucination, spiders crawling across her face, digging into her skin, laying eggs in her eyes. "No!"

She jerked up to sitting, head spinning from the sudden motion. She was panting again, and she bent her head to her knees, touched her chest to her thighs. She had to get hold of herself. She couldn't give in to the thirst. She couldn't let the dementia settle into her brain again so that she lost where she was.

"What are you doing?" the stranger whispered, terrified.

"Leave me alone."

"He'll hear you. He'll come down."

"He's not coming down," Pauline snapped. Then, to prove it, she screamed, "Come down here, you motherfucker!" Her throat was so raw that she started coughing from the exertion, but she still screamed, "I'm trying to escape! Come stop me, you limp-dicked motherfucker!"

They waited and waited. Pauline ticked off the seconds. There were no footsteps on the stairs. No lights turned on. No doors opened.

"How do you know?" the stranger said. "How do you know what he's doing?"

"He's waiting for one of us to break," Pauline told her. "And it's not going to be me."

The woman asked another question, but Pauline ignored her, lining herself up with the wall again. She braced herself to pound her head into the wall again, but she couldn't do it. She couldn't hurt herself again. Not right now. Later. She would rest a few minutes and then do it later.

She rolled onto her back, tears streaming down her face. She didn't open her mouth, because she didn't want the woman to know she was crying. The stranger had heard the sobbing, heard Pauline sliding around in her own piss. That show was over. No more tickets would be sold.

"What's your name?" the stranger asked.

"None of your goddamn business!" Pauline barked. She didn't want to make friends. She wanted to get out of here any way she could, and if that meant walking over the stranger's dead body to freedom, Pauline would do it. "Just shut up."

"Tell me what you're doing and maybe I can help you."

"You can't help me. You got that?" Pauline twisted to face the stranger, even though they were in total darkness. "Listen up, bitch. Only one person is going to make it out of here alive and it's not going to be you. You understand me? Shit rolls downhill, and I'm not going to be the one smelling like a sewer when this is over with. All right?"

The stranger was silent. Pauline fell onto her back, looking up at darkness, trying to brace herself for the wall again.

The woman's voice was barely a whisper. "You're Atlanta Thin, aren't you?"

Pauline's throat tightened like a noose had been put around it. "What?"

" 'Shit rolls downhill, and I'm not going to be the one smelling like a sewer,' " she repeated. "You say that a lot."

Pauline chewed her lip.

"I'm Mia-Three."

Mia—slang for "bulimia." Pauline recognized the screen name, but still insisted, "I don't know what you're talking about."

Mia asked, "Did you show them that email at work?"

Pauline opened her mouth, just tried to breathe a while. She tried to think of the other things she had told the Pro-Anna Internet group, the desperate thoughts that raced through her mind and somehow ended up being typed onto the keyboard. It was almost like purging, but instead of emptying your stomach, you were emptying your brain. Telling somebody those awful thoughts you had, knowing they had them, too, somehow made it easier to get up every morning.

And now the stranger wasn't a stranger anymore.

Mia repeated, "Did you show them the email?"

Pauline swallowed, even though there was only dust in her throat. She couldn't believe she was tied up like a fucking hog and this woman wanted to talk about work. Work didn't matter anymore. Nothing mattered anymore. The email was from another life, a life where Pauline had a job she wanted to keep, a mortgage, a car payment. They were waiting down here to be raped, tortured, murdered, and this woman was worried about a fucking email?

Mia said, "I didn't get to call Michael, my brother. Maybe he's looking for me."

"He won't find you," Pauline told her. "Not out here."

"Where are we?"

"I don't know," she answered—the truth. "I woke up in the trunk of a car. I was chained. I'm not sure how long I was in there. The trunk opened. I started to scream, then he Tased me again." She closed her eyes. "Then I woke up here."

"I was in my backyard," Mia told her. "I heard something. I thought maybe a cat ..." She let her words trail off. "I was in a trunk when I came to. I'm not sure how long he kept me in there. It felt like days. I tried to count away the hours, but ..." She went into a long silence that Pauline didn't know how to interpret. Finally she said, "Do you think that's how he found us—on the chat board?"

"Probably," she lied. Pauline knew how he had found them, and it wasn't that damn chat room. It was Pauline who had led them here—Pauline's big mouth that had gotten them into trouble. She wasn't going to tell Mia what she knew. There would be more questions, and with the questions would come accusations that Pauline knew she wouldn't be able to handle.

Not now. Not when her brain felt like it was stuffed with cotton and the blood dripping down her eyes felt like the tiny, hairy legs of a million spiders.

Pauline gasped for breath, trying to keep herself from freaking out again. She thought about Felix and the way he smelled when she bathed him with the new soap she picked up at Colony Square during her lunch break.

Mia asked, "It's still in the safe, right? They'll find the email in the safe and they'll know you told the upholsterer to measure the elevator."

"Bitch, what does it matter? Do you not understand where we are, what's going to happen to us? So what if they find the email? Some fucking consolation. 'She's dead, but she was right all along.' "

"More than you got in life."

They shared a moment of commiseration. Pauline tried to remember what little she knew about Mia. The woman didn't post much on the board, but when she did, she was pretty on point. Like Pauline and a few other posters, Mia didn't like whiners and she didn't take much bullshit.

"They can't starve us," Mia said. "I can go nineteen days before I start to shut down."

Pauline was impressed. "I can go about the same," she lied. Her max had been twelve, and then they'd put her in the hospital and plumped her up like a Thanksgiving turkey.

Mia said, "Water is the issue."

"Yeah," Pauline agreed. "How long can you—"

"I've never tried to go without water," Mia interrupted, finishing the sentence.

"It doesn't have any calories."

"Four days," Pauline told her. "I read somewhere that you can only last about four days."

"We can last longer." It wasn't wishful thinking. If Mia could last nineteen days without eating, she sure as hell could last longer than Pauline without water.

That was the problem. She could outlast Pauline. No one had outlasted Pauline before.

Mia asked the obvious question. "Why hasn't he fucked us?"

Pauline pressed her head to the cool concrete floor, tried to keep the panic from building up inside of her. The fucking wasn't the problem. It was the other stuff—the games, the taunting, the tricks ... the trash bags.

"He wants us weak," Mia guessed. "He wants to make sure we can't fight back." Mia's chains rattled as she moved. Her voice sounded closer, and Pauline guessed she'd turned onto her side. "What were you doing? Before, I mean. Why were you hitting the wall with your head?"

"If I can punch through the sheetrock, maybe I can get out. It's standard building code that the two-by-fours have to be sixteen inches apart."

Mia's tone filled with awe. "You have a sixteen-inch waist?"

"No, you dumbass. I can turn sideways and slide out."

Mia laughed at her own stupidity, but then she pointed out something that made Pauline feel equally as idiotic. "Why aren't you using your feet?"

They were both quiet, but Pauline felt something welling up inside her. Her stomach twinged, and she heard laughter in her ears, honest-to-God, all-out laughter, as she thought about how fucking stupid she was.

"Oh, God," Mia sighed. She was laughing, too. "You are such an idiot."

Pauline twisted her body around, trying to spin on her shoulder. She lined up her feet, bracing them together so that the chains wouldn't throw her off, and kicked. The sheetrock caved on the first try.

"Dumbass," she muttered, this time at herself. She slid back around to face the opening, using her teeth to bite off the broken chunks of sheetrock. There was poison in the dust, but she didn't care. She would rather die with her head poking six inches out of this room than be trapped here while she waited for that fucker to come for her.

"Did you get it?" Mia asked. "Did you break—"

"Shut up," Pauline told her, biting into foam padding. He had soundproofed the walls. That was to be expected. No big deal. She just grabbed it with her teeth, taking chunk after chunk out, aching for the feel of fresh air on her face.

"Fuck!" Pauline screamed. She inched around so that her waist was lined up with the hole. She reached out with her fingers, which barely went past the broken sheetrock. She tore out the foam, then her fingers brushed something that felt like a screen. She arched her back, reaching her hands out as far as they would go. Her fingers traced along crisscrossed wire. "Goddamn it!"

"What is it?"

"Chicken wire." He had lined the walls with chicken wire so they couldn't break out.

Pauline angled herself around again and jammed her feet against the wire. The soles of her shoes met solid resistance. Instead of the screen giving, the

counterforce moved her several inches across the floor. She inched back to try again, rolling over onto her stomach and placing her sweaty palms to the cement. Pauline reared her feet back and kicked with all her strength. Again she met solid resistance, her body sliding away from the wall.

"Oh, Jesus," she gasped, falling onto her back. The tears came, the tiny spider legs encroaching on her vision. "What am I going to do?"

"Can your hands reach?"

"No," Pauline cried. Hope drained out of her with every breath. Her hands were too tight to the belt. The chicken wire was attached to the back of the two-by-four. There was no way she could reach it.

Pauline's body shook with sobs. She had not seen him in years, but she still knew how his mind worked. The basement was his staging ground, a carefully prepared prison where he would starve them into submission. But this was not the worst of it. There would be a cave somewhere, a dark place in the earth that he had lovingly dug out by hand. The basement would break them. The cave would destroy them. The bastard had thought of everything.

Again.

Mia had managed to inch her way over. Her voice was close, almost on top of Pauline. "Shut up," Mia ordered, pushing Pauline out of the way. "We'll use our mouths."

"What?"

"It's thin metal, right? Chicken wire?"

"Yeah, but—"

"You bend it back and forth and it breaks."

Pauline shook her head. This was crazy.

"All we need is for one piece to give," Mia said, as if the logic was clear. "Just grab it in your mouth and pull back and forth, back and forth. It'll break eventually, then we can kick it. Or we can just break every single piece off with our mouths."

"We can't—"

"Don't tell me can't, you fucking bitch." Mia's foot was chained, but she managed to kick Pauline in the shin.

"Ouch! Jesus—"

"Start counting," Mia ordered, inching toward the hole in the wall. "When you get to two hundred, it'll be your turn."

Pauline wasn't going to do it because she would be damned if she let this bitch tell her what to do. She heard something then—teeth on metal. Grinding, twisting. Two hundred seconds. Their skin would rip open. Their gums would be in shreds. There was no telling if it would even work.

Pauline rolled over, sat up on her knees.

She started counting.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Faith had never thought of herself as a morning person, but she had gotten into the habit of going in to work early when Jeremy was a child. You couldn't *not* be a morning person when there was a hungry boy to feed, dress, scrutinize and send off to the bus stop by 7:13 at the latest. If not for Jeremy, she might have been one of those late-night people, the sort who rolls into bed well after midnight, but Faith's usual bedtime ran closer to ten, even after Jeremy was a teenager and his waking hours were few and far between.

For his own reasons, Will was always at work early, too. Faith saw his Porsche parked in its usual space as she pulled the Mini into the lot under City Hall East. She put the car in park, then sat there trying to get the driver's seat back where she could reach the pedals and the steering wheel at the same time without being impaled by one while having to stretch to reach the other. After several minutes, she finally found the right combination and briefly thought about having the seat bolted into place. If Will wanted to drive her car again, he'd have to do it with his knees around his ears.

There was a tap at her window, and Faith looked up, startled. Sam Lawson stood there, a cup of coffee in his hand.

Faith opened the car door and wedged herself out, feeling like she'd put on twenty pounds overnight. Finding something to wear this morning had been a nearly impossible task. She was carrying enough water weight to fill a tank at SeaWorld. Thankfully, her giddiness over Sam Lawson had been a twenty-four-hour virus. She did not relish having a conversation with him now, especially since her mind needed to be focused on the day ahead of her.

"Hey, babe," Sam said, looking her up and down in his usual predatory way.

Faith got her purse out of the back seat. "Long time no see."

He gave a half-shrug that implied he was merely the victim of circumstance. "Here," he said, offering her the coffee. "Decaf."

Faith had tried to drink some coffee this morning. The smell had sent her rushing to the bathroom. "Sorry." She ignored the cup, walking away from him, trying not to get sick again.

Sam tossed the cup into the trashcan as he caught up with her. "Morning sickness?"

Faith glanced around, afraid they'd be heard. "I haven't told anyone but my boss." She tried to remember when you were supposed to tell people. There had to be a certain number of weeks before you were sure it took. Faith must be coming up on that mark. She should start telling people soon. Should she get them all together, invite her mother and Jeremy to dinner, get her brother on speakerphone, or was there a way to send a bulk anonymous email and perhaps jump on a flight to the Caribbean for a few weeks to avoid the fallout?

Sam's fingers snapped in front of her face. "You in there?"

"Barely." Faith reached for the door to the building just as he did. She let him

open it for her. "I've got a lot on my mind."

"About last night—"

"It was two nights ago, actually."

He grinned. "Yeah, but I wasn't really thinking about it until last night."

Faith sighed as she pressed the elevator button.

"Come here." He pulled her toward the alcove on the other side of the elevator. There was a vending machine with three rows of sticky buns, which Faith knew without having to look.

Sam stroked her hair behind her ear. Faith pulled back. She wasn't ready for intimacy this early in the morning. She wasn't sure she was ever ready for it. Without thinking, she glanced up to make sure there wasn't a security camera watching them.

He said, "I was an ass the other night. I'm sorry."

She heard the elevator doors open, then close. "It's all right."

"No, it's not." He leaned in to kiss her, but she pulled back again.

"Sam, I'm at work." She didn't add the rest of what she was thinking, which was that she was in the middle of a case where one woman had died, another woman had been tortured and two more were missing. "This isn't the time."

"It's never the time," he said, something he'd often told her years ago when they were seeing each other. "I want to try this again with you."

"What about Gretchen?"

He shrugged. "Hedging my bets."

Faith groaned, pushing him away. She went back to the elevator and pressed the button. Sam didn't leave, so she told him, "I'm pregnant."

"I remember."

"I don't want to break your heart, but the baby's not yours."

"Doesn't matter."

She turned to face him. "Are you trying to work out some ghosts because your wife had an abortion?"

"I'm trying to get back into your life, Faith. I know it has to be on your terms."

Faith balked at the backhanded compliment. "I seem to recall one of the problems between us, other than you being a drunk, me being a cop and my mother thinking you were the Antichrist, was you didn't like the fact that I had a son."

"I was jealous of the attention you gave him."

At the time, she had accused him of this very thing. To hear him admit to it now left her nearly breathless.

"I've grown up," he said.

The elevator opened. Faith made sure the car was empty, then held the door open with her hand. "I can't have this conversation now. I've got work to do." She got into the elevator and let the doors go.

"Jake Berman lives in Coweta County."

Faith nearly lost her hand stopping the doors. "What?"

He took his notebook out of his pocket and wrote as he talked. "I tracked him down through his church. He's a deacon and a Sunday School teacher. They've got a great website with his picture on it. Lambs and rainbows. Evangelical."

Faith's brain couldn't process the information. "Why did you find him?"

"I wanted to see if I could beat you to the punch."

Faith didn't like where this was going. She tried to neutralize the situation. "Listen, Sam, we don't know that he's a bad guy."

"I guess you've never been in the men's room at the Mall of Georgia."

"Sam—"

"I haven't talked to him," he interrupted. "I just wanted to see if I could track him down when no one else could. I'm tired of Rockdale squeezing my balls. I much prefer it when you do."

Faith let that comment go, too. "Give me the morning to talk to him."

"I told you, I'm not looking for a story." He grinned, showing all his teeth. "It was an exercise in *faith*."

She narrowed her eyes at him.

"I wanted to see if I could do your job." He tore off the piece of paper, giving her a wink. "Pretty easy stuff."

Faith grabbed the address before he changed his mind. He held her gaze as the doors closed, then Faith found herself staring at her reflection on the backs of the doors. She was sweating already, though she supposed in a pinch that could pass for a pregnant glow. Her hair was starting to frizz because, even though it was only April, the temperature was inching up the thermometer.

She looked at the address Sam had given her. There was a heart around the entire thing, which she found annoying and endearing in equal parts. She didn't quite trust that he wasn't looking for a story in Jake Berman. Maybe the *Atlanta Beacon* was doing a down-low exclusive, outing married churchgoers who were trolling glory holes and finding raped and tortured women in the middle of the road.

Could Berman be Pauline's brother? Now that she had an address, Faith wasn't so sure. What were the odds that Jake Berman had hooked up with Rick Sigler, and both men just happened to be on the road at the same time the Coldfields' car hit Anna Lindsey?

The doors opened and Faith walked out onto her floor. None of the hall lights were on, and she flipped the switches as she walked toward Will's office. No light seeped from under his door, but she knocked anyway, knowing from his car that he was in the building.

"Yes?"

She opened the door. He was sitting at his desk with his hands clasped in front of his stomach. The lights were off.

She asked, "Everything okay?"

He didn't answer her question. "What's up?"

Faith shut the door and opened the folding chair. She saw the back of Will's hand, and that some new scratches had been added to the cuts he'd received while beating Simkov's face. She didn't mention this, instead going to the case. "I got Jake Berman's address. He's in Coweta. That's about forty-five minutes from here, right?"

"If the traffic's good." He held out his hand for the address.

She read it off to him. "Nineteen-thirty-five Lester Street."

He still had his hand out. For some reason, all Faith could do was stare at his fingers.

Will snapped, "I'm not a fucking idiot, Faith. I can read an address."

His tone was sharp enough to make the hair on the back of her neck rise. Will seldom cursed, and she had never heard him say “fuck” before. She asked, “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong. I just need the address. I can’t do the interview with Simkov. I’ll go find Berman and we’ll meet back here after your appointment.” He shook his hand. “Now give me the address.”

She crossed her arms. She would die before she gave him the piece of paper. “I don’t know what the hell is wrong with you, but you need to get your head out of your ass and talk to me about this before we’ve got a real problem.”

“Faith, I’ve only got two testicles. If you want one, you’re going to have to talk to Amanda or Angie.”

Angie. With that one word, all the fight seemed to go out of him.

Faith sat back in the chair, her arms still crossed, studying him. Will looked out the window, and she could see the faint line of the scar going down the side of his face. She wanted to know how it had happened, how his skin had been gouged from his jaw, but as with everything else, the scar was just another thing they did not talk about.

Faith put the paper on his desk and slid the address across to him.

Will gave it a cursory glance. “There’s a heart around it.”

“Sam drew it.”

Will folded the paper and put it in his vest pocket. “Are you seeing him?”

Faith was loath to use the words “booty call,” so she just shrugged. “It’s complicated.”

He nodded—the same nod they always used when there was something personal that wasn’t going to be discussed.

She was sick of this. What was going to happen in a month when she started showing more? What was going to happen in a year when she collapsed on the job because she had miscalculated her insulin? She could easily see Will making excuses for her weight gain or simply helping her up and telling her she should be careful where she stepped. He was so damn good at pretending the house wasn’t on fire even as he ran around looking for water to put it out.

She threw up her hands in surrender. “I’m pregnant.”

His eyebrows shot up.

“Victor’s the father. I’m also diabetic. That’s why I passed out in the garage.”

He seemed too shocked to speak.

“I should’ve told you before. That’s what my secret appointment is in Snellville. I’m going to the doctor so she can help me with this diabetes thing.”

“Sara can’t be your doctor?”

“She referred me to a specialist.”

“A specialist means it’s serious.”

“It’s a challenge. The diabetes makes it more difficult. It’s manageable, though.” She had to add, “At least that’s what Sara said.”

“Do you need me to go to your appointment with you?”

Faith had a glimpse of Will sitting in the waiting room of Delia Wallace’s office with her purse in his lap. “No. Thank you. I need to do this on my own.”

“Does Victor—”

“Victor doesn’t know. No one knows except you and Amanda, and I only told her because she caught me shooting up with insulin.”

"You have to give yourself shots?"

"Yeah."

She could almost see his mind working, the questions he wanted to ask her but didn't know how to frame.

Faith said, "If you want another partner—"

"Why would I want another partner?"

"Because it's a problem, Will. I don't know how much of a problem, but my blood sugar drops or goes up, and I get emotional, and I either bite your head off or feel like I'm going to burst into tears, and I don't know how I'm going to do my job with this thing."

"You'll work it out," he said, always reasonable. "I worked it out. My problem, I mean."

He was so adaptive. Anything bad that happened, no matter how horrible, he just nodded and moved on. She supposed that was something he'd learned at the orphanage. Or maybe Angie Polaski had drilled it into him. As a survival skill, it was commendable. As the basis of a relationship, it was irritating as hell.

And there was absolutely nothing Faith could do about it.

Will sat up in his chair. He did his usual trick, making a joke to ease the tension. "If I get a vote, I would rather you bite my head off than start crying."

"Back at you."

"I need to apologize." Suddenly, he was serious again. "For what I did to Simkov. I've never laid hands on anyone like that before. Not ever." He looked her directly in the eye. "I promise it won't happen again."

All Faith could say was, "Thank you." Of course she didn't agree with what Will had done, but it was hard to shout out recriminations when he was so obviously already doing a good job of hating himself.

It was Faith's turn to lighten things up. "Let's stay away from good cop/bad cop for a while."

"Yeah, stupid cop/bitchy cop works a lot better for us." He reached into his vest pocket and handed her back Jake Berman's details. "We should call Coweta and have them put eyes on Berman to make sure he's the right guy."

The wheels in Faith's brain took their time moving in a new direction. She looked at Sam's block handwriting, the stupid heart around the address. "I don't know why Sam thinks he can track down the guy in five minutes when our entire data processing division can't find him in two days."

Faith took out her cell phone. She didn't want to bother with the proper channels, so she called Caroline, Amanda's assistant. The woman practically lived in the building, and she picked up the phone on the first ring. Faith relayed Berman's address and asked her to have the Coweta County field agent verify that this was the Jake Berman they had been looking for.

"Do you want him to bring the guy in?" Caroline asked.

Faith thought about it, then decided she didn't want to make the decision on her own. She asked Will, "Do you want them to bring in Berman?"

He shrugged, but answered, "Do we want to tip him off?"

"A cop knocking on his door is a tip-off no matter what."

Will shrugged again. "Tell him to try to verify Berman's identity from a distance. If it's the right guy, then we'll go down there and snatch him up. Give the agent my cell number. We'll go after you finish talking to Simkov."

Faith passed this on to Caroline. She ended the call, and Will turned his computer monitor toward her, saying, "I got this email from Amanda."

Faith slid over the mouse and keyboard. She changed the color settings so her retinas didn't spontaneously combust, then double-clicked on the file. She summarized for Will as she read. "Tech hasn't been able to break into any of the computers. They say the anorexia chat room is impossible to open without a password—it's got some kind of fancy encryption. The warrants for Olivia Tanner's bank should be in this afternoon so we can get into her phone and files." She scrolled down. "Hmm." She read silently, then told Will, "Okay, well, this might be something to take to the doorman. The fire exit door on the penthouse floor had a partial on the handle—right thumb."

Will knew Faith had spent most of yesterday afternoon combing through Anna Lindsey's building. "How are the stairs accessed?"

"Either the lobby or the roof," she said, reading the next passage. "The fire escape ladder that runs down the back of the building had another print that matched the one from the door. They're sending it to the Michigan State Police to run comparables. If Pauline's brother has a record, it should come up. If we can get a name, then we're halfway there."

"We should check for parking tickets in the area. You can't just park anywhere in Buckhead. They're pretty good about catching you."

"Good idea," Faith said, opening up her email account to send out the request. "I'll open it up to parking tickets in or around the area of all the last known locations of our victims."

"Son of Sam was caught by a parking ticket."

Faith tapped the keys. "You've got to stop watching so much television."

"Not much else to do at night."

She glanced at his hands, the new scratches.

He asked, "How did he get Anna Lindsey out of the building? He couldn't have thrown her over his shoulder and taken her down the fire escape ladder."

Faith sent off the email before answering. "The exit door for the stairs was wired. An alarm would have gone off if anyone had opened the door." She asked, "Did he take her down the elevator and into the lobby?"

"That's something to ask Simkov."

"The doorman isn't there twenty-four hours," Faith reminded him. "The killer could've waited for Simkov to clock out, then used the elevator to bring her body down. Simkov was supposed to keep an eye on things after hours, but he was hardly dedicated to his job."

"There wasn't another doorman to relieve him?"

"They've been trying to find someone to fill the position for six months," she told him. "Apparently, it's hard to find someone who wants to sit on their ass behind a desk for eight hours a day—which is why they put up with so much bullshit from Simkov. He was willing to double up his shifts, such as they were."

"What about security tapes?"

"They tape over them every forty-eight hours." She had to add, "Except for the ones from yesterday, which seem to be missing." Amanda had made sure the tape of Will slamming Simkov's face into the counter had been destroyed.

Will's face flooded with guilt, but still he asked, "Anything in Simkov's apartment?"

"We tossed it upside down. He drives an old Monte Carlo that leaks like a sieve and there aren't any receipts for storage units."

"There's no way he could be Pauline's brother."

"We've been so focused on that that we haven't seen anything else."

"All right, so let's take the brother out of the equation. What about Simkov?"

"He's not smart. I mean, he's not stupid, but our killer is choosing women he wants to conquer. I'm not saying our bad guy is a genius, but he's a hunter. Simkov is a pathetic schmuck who keeps porn under his mattress and takes blowjobs to let whores into empty apartments."

"You've never believed in profiles before."

"You're right, but we're spinning our wheels everywhere else. Let's talk about our guy," Faith said, something Will usually suggested. "Who's our killer?"

"Smart," Will admitted. "He probably works for an overbearing woman, or has overbearing women in his life."

"That's pretty much every man on the planet these days."

"Tell me about it."

Faith smiled, taking his words as a joke. "What kind of job does he have?"

"Something that lets him exist under the radar. He has flexible hours. Watching these women, learning about their habits, takes a lot of time. He's got to have a job that lets him come and go as he pleases."

"Let's ask the same boring, stupid question one more time: What about the women? What do they have in common?"

"The anorexia/bulimia thing."

"The chat room." She shot that one down on her own: "Of course, even the FBI can't find out who the site is registered to. No one has been able to break Pauline's password. How could our guy find it?"

"Maybe he started the site himself in order to troll for victims?"

"How would he find out their true identities? Everyone's tall, thin and blonde on the Internet. And usually twelve and horny."

He was twisting his wedding ring again, staring out the window. Faith couldn't stop looking at the scratches on the back of his hand. In forensic parlance, they would have called the marks defensive wounds. Will had been behind someone who had gouged her fingernails deep into his skin.

She asked, "How did it go with Sara last night?"

Will shrugged. "I just picked up Betty. I think she likes Sara's dogs. She's got two greyhounds."

"I saw them yesterday morning."

"Oh, that's right."

"Sara's nice," Faith told him. "I really like her."

Will nodded.

"You should ask her out."

He laughed, shaking his head at the same time. "I don't think so."

"Because of Angie?"

He stopped twisting the ring. "Women like Sara Linton ..." She saw a flash of something in his eyes that she couldn't quite read. Faith expected him to shrug it off, but he kept talking. "Faith, there's no part of me that's not damaged." His voice sounded thick in his throat. "I don't mean just the things you can see. There's other stuff. Bad stuff." He shook his head again, a tight gesture, more for

his own benefit than Faith's. He finally told her, "Angie knows who I am. Somebody like Sara ..." Again his voice trailed off. "If you really like Sara Linton, then you don't want her to know me."

All Faith could think to say was his name. "Will."

He gave a forced laugh. "We gotta stop talking about this stuff before one of us starts lactating." He took out his cell phone. "It's almost eight. Amanda will be waiting for you in the interrogation room."

"Are you going to watch?"

"I'm going to make some calls up to Michigan and annoy the crap out of them until they run those fingerprints we found on Anna's fire escape. Why don't you call me when you're out of your doctor's appointment? If Sam found the right Jake Berman, we can go talk to him together."

Faith had forgotten about her doctor's appointment. "If he's the right Jake Berman, then we should scoop him up immediately."

"I'll call you if that's the case. Otherwise, go to your doctor's appointment, then we'll start from scratch like we'd planned."

She listed it off. "The Coldfields, Rick Sigler, Olivia Tanner's brother."

"That should keep us busy."

"You know what's bugging me?" Will shook his head, and she told him, "We haven't gotten the reports from Rockdale County yet." She held up her hands, knowing Rockdale was a sore point. "If we're going to start from the beginning, we need to do just that—get the initial crime-scene report from the first responding cop and go over every detail point by point. I know Galloway said the guy's fishing in Montana, but if his notes are good, then we don't need to talk to him."

"What are you looking for?"

"I don't know. But it bothers me that Galloway hasn't faxed it over."

"He's not exactly on top of things."

"No, but everything he's held back until now has been for a reason. You said it yourself. People don't do stupid things without a logical explanation."

"I'll put a call in to his office and see if the secretary can handle it without getting Galloway involved."

"You should get those scratches on the back of your hand looked at, too."

He glanced down at his hand. "I think you've looked at them plenty."

Except for talking to Anna Lindsey in the hospital the day before, Faith had never worked directly with Amanda on a case. The extent of their interaction tended to be with a desk between them, Amanda on one side with her hands steeped in front of her like a disapproving schoolmarm and Faith fidgeting in her chair as she gave her report. Because of this, Faith tended to forget that Amanda had clawed her way up the ranks back during a time when women in uniform were relegated to fetching coffee and typing reports. They weren't even allowed to carry guns, because the brass thought that, given the choice between shooting a bad guy and breaking a nail, the latter would win out.

Amanda had been the first female officer to disabuse them of this theory. She had been at the bank cashing her paycheck when a robber decided to take an early withdrawal. One of the tellers had panicked, and the robber had started to

pistol-whip her. Amanda shot him once in the heart, what was called a K-5 for the circle it corresponded to on the shooting range target. She'd told Faith once that she had gotten her nails done afterward.

Otik Simkov, the doorman from Anna Lindsey's building, would have benefited from knowing this story. Or maybe not. The little troll had an air of arrogance about him, despite being stuffed into a too-small Day-Glo orange prison uniform and open-toed sandals that had been worn by a thousand prisoners before him. His face was bruised and battered, but he still held himself upright, shoulders squared. As Faith entered the interrogation room, he gave her the same look of appraisal a farmer might give a cow.

Cal Finney, Simkov's lawyer, made a show of looking at his watch. Faith had seen him on television many times; Finney's commercials had their own annoying jingle. He was as handsome in person as he was on the set. The watch on his arm could've put Jeremy through college.

"Sorry I'm late." Faith directed the apology toward Amanda, knowing she was the only one who mattered. She sat in the chair opposite Finney, catching the look of distaste on Simkov's face as he openly stared at her. This was not a man who had learned to respect women. Maybe Amanda would change that.

"Thank you for speaking with us, Mr. Simkov," Amanda began. She was still using her pleasant voice, but Faith had been in enough meetings with her boss to know that Simkov was in trouble. She had her hands resting lightly on a file folder. If experience was anything to go by, she would open the folder at some point, unleashing the gates of hell.

She said, "We just have a few questions to ask you regarding—"

"Screw you, lady," Simkov barked. "Talk to my lawyer."

"Dr. Wagner," Finney said. "I'm sure you're aware that we filed a lawsuit against the city this morning for police brutality." He snapped open his briefcase and pulled out a stack of papers, which he dropped with a thunk on the table.

Faith felt her face flush, but Amanda didn't seem fazed. "I understand that, Mr. Finney, but your client is looking at a charge of obstructing justice in a particularly heinous case. Under his watch, one of the tenants in his building was abducted. She was raped and tortured. She barely managed to escape with her life. I'm sure you saw it on the news. Her child was left to die, again under Mr. Simkov's watch. The victim will never regain her vision. You can see why we are somewhat frustrated that your client has been less than forthcoming about what, exactly, was going on in his building."

"I know nothing," Simkov insisted, his accent so thick Faith expected him at any moment to start talking about capturing Moose and Squirrel. He told the lawyer, "Get me out of here. Why am I a prisoner? I am soon a wealthy man."

Finney ignored his client, asking Amanda, "How long will this take?"

"Not long." Her smile indicated otherwise.

Finney wasn't fooled. "You've got ten minutes. Keep all your questions to the Anna Lindsey case." He advised Simkov, "Your cooperation now will reflect well during your civil suit."

Unsurprisingly, he was swayed by the prospect of money. "Yeah. Okay. What are your questions?"

"Tell me, Mr. Simkov," Amanda continued. "How long have you been in our country?"

Simkov glanced at his lawyer, who nodded that he should answer.

"Twenty-seven years."

"You speak English very well. Would you describe yourself as fluent, or should I get a translator here to make you more comfortable?"

"I am perfect with my English." His chest puffed out. "I read American books and newspapers all the time."

"You are from Czechoslovakia," Amanda said. "Is that correct?"

"I am Czech," he told her, probably because his country no longer existed.

"Why do you ask me questions? I am suing you. *You* should be answering my questions."

"You have to be a United States citizen in order to sue the government."

Finney piped up, "Mr. Simkov is a legal resident."

"You took my green card," Simkov added. "It was in my wallet. I saw you see it."

"You certainly did." Amanda opened the folder, and Faith felt her heart leap.

"Thank you for that. It saved me some time." She slipped on her glasses and read from a page in the folder. "'Green Cards issued between 1979 and 1989, containing no expiration date, must be replaced within 120 days of this notice. Affected lawful permanent residents must file an Application to Replace Lawful Permanent Residence Card, form I-90, in order to replace their current green card or their permanent lawful resident status will be terminated.'" She put the page down. "Does that sound familiar to you, Mr. Simkov?"

Finney held out his hand. "Let me see that."

Amanda passed him the notice. "Mr. Simkov, I'm afraid Immigration and Naturalization Services has no record of you filing form I-90 to renew your legal status as a resident in this country."

"Bullshit," Simkov countered, but his eyes went nervously to his lawyer.

Amanda passed Finney another sheet of paper. "This is a photocopy of Mr. Simkov's green card. You'll note there's no expiration date. He's in violation of his terms of status. I'm afraid we'll have to turn him over to the INS." She smiled sweetly. "I also got a call from Homeland Security this morning. I had no idea Czech-made weapons were falling into the hands of terrorists. Mr. Simkov, I believe you were a metalworker before you came to America?"

"I was a farrier," he shot back. "I put shoes on horses."

"Still, you have a specialized knowledge of metal tooling."

Finney muttered a curse. "You people are unbelievable. You know that?"

Amanda was leaning back in her chair. "I don't recall from your commercials, Mr. Finney—do you have a subspecialty in immigration law?" She gave a cheery whistle, a pitch-perfect imitation of the jingle on Finney's television commercials.

"You think you're going to get away with a beat-down on a technicality? Look at this man." Finney pointed to his client, and Faith had to concede the lawyer's point. Simkov's nose was twisted to the side where the cartilage had been shattered. His right eye was so swollen the lid wouldn't open more than a slit. Even his ear was damaged; an angry row of stitches bisected the lobe where Will's fist had split the skin in two.

Finney said, "Your officer beat the shit out of him, and you think that's okay?" He didn't expect an answer. "Otik Simkov fled a communist regime and came to

this country to start his life all over again from scratch. You think what you're doing to him now is what the Constitution is all about?"

Amanda had an answer for everything. "The Constitution is for innocent people."

Finney snapped his briefcase closed. "I'm calling a press conference."

"I'd be more than happy to tell them how Mr. Simkov made a whore suck him off before he'd let her go up to feed a dying six-month-old baby." She leaned over the table. "Tell me, Mr. Simkov:

Did you give her a few extra minutes with the child if she swallowed?"

Finney took a second to regroup. "I'm not denying this man is an asshole, but even assholes have rights."

Amanda gave Simkov an icy smile. "Only if they're United States citizens."

"Unbelievable, Amanda." Finney seemed genuinely disgusted. "This is going to catch up with you one day. You know that, don't you?"

Amanda was having some kind of staring contest with Simkov, blocking out everything else in the room.

Finney turned his attention to Faith. "Are you all right with this, Officer? Are you okay with your partner beating up a witness?"

Faith wasn't at all okay with it, but now was not the time to equivocate. "It's Special Agent, actually. 'Officer' is generally what you call patrolmen."

"This is great. Atlanta's the new Guantánamo Bay." He turned back to Simkov. "Otik, don't let them push you around. You have rights."

Simkov was still staring at Amanda, as if he thought he could break her somehow. His eyes moved back and forth, reading her resistance. Finally, he gave a tight nod. "Okay. I drop my lawsuit. You make this other stuff go away."

Finney didn't want to hear it. "As your lawyer, I am advising you to—"

"You're not his lawyer anymore," Amanda interrupted. "Isn't that right, Mr. Simkov?"

"Correct," he agreed. He crossed his arms, staring straight ahead.

Finney muttered another curse. "This isn't over."

"I think it is," Amanda told him. She picked up the stack of pages detailing the suit against the city.

Finney cursed her again, adding Faith for good measure, then left the room.

Amanda tossed the lawsuit into the trashcan. Faith listened to the noise the pages made as they fluttered through the air. She was glad that Will was not here, because as much as Faith's conscience was bothering her over this, Will's was nearly killing him. Finney was right. Will was getting away with a beat-down thanks to a technicality. If Faith hadn't been in that hallway yesterday, she might be feeling differently right now.

She summoned the image of Balthazar Lindsey lying in the recycling bin a few feet from his mother's penthouse apartment and all that came to mind were excuses for Will's behavior.

"So," Amanda said. "Shall we assume there's honor among criminals, Mr. Simkov?"

Simkov nodded appreciatively. "You are a very hard woman."

Amanda seemed pleased with the assessment, and Faith could see how thrilled she was to be back in an interrogation room again. It probably bored her to death sitting through organizational meetings and looking at budgets and

flowcharts all day. No wonder terrorizing Will was her only hobby.

She said, "Tell me about the scam you had going on in the apartments."

He gave an open-handed shrug. "These rich people are always traveling. Sometimes I rent out the space to someone. They go in. They do a little—" He made a screwing gesture with his hands. "Otik gets a little money. The maid's in the next day. Everyone is happy."

Amanda nodded, as if this was a perfectly understandable arrangement. "What happened with Anna Lindsey's place?"

"I figure, why not cash out? That asshole Mr. Regus in 9A, he knew something was up. He don't smoke. He come back from one of his business trips and there was a cigarette burn on his carpet. I saw it—barely there. No big deal. But Regus caused some problems."

"And they fired you."

"Two-week notice, good referral." He shrugged again. "I already got another job lined up. Bunch of town houses over near the Phipps Plaza. Twenty-four-hour watch. Very classy place. Me and this other guy, we switch out. He takes days. I take the nights."

"When did you first notice Anna Lindsey was missing?"

"Always at seven o'clock, she comes down with the baby. Then one day she's not there. I check my message box where the tenants leave me things, mostly complaints—can't get a window open, can't figure out the television, stuff that's not my job, right? Anyway, there's a note from Ms. Lindsey saying she's on vacation for two weeks. I figure she must have left. Usually, they tell me where they go, but maybe she thinks since I won't be here when she's back, it don't matter."

That jibed with what Anna Lindsey said. Amanda asked, "Is that how she usually communicated with you, through notes?"

He nodded. "She don't like me. Says I'm sloppy." His lip curled in disgust. "Made the building buy me a uniform so I look like a monkey. Made me say 'yes, ma'am' and 'no, ma'am' to her like I'm a child."

That sounded like the kind of thing their victim profile trended toward.

Faith asked, "How did you know she was gone?"

"I don't see her come downstairs. Usually, she go to the gym, she go to the store, she take the baby for walks. Wants help getting the stroller in and out of the elevator." He shrugged. "I think, 'She must be gone.'"

Amanda said, "So you assumed Ms. Lindsey would be gone for two weeks, which coincided nicely with the date your employment would terminate."

"Easy peasy," he agreed.

"Who did you call?"

"This pimp. The dead guy." For the first time, Simkov seemed to lose a bit of his arrogance. "He's not so bad. They call him Freddy. I don't know his real name, but he was always honest with me. Not like some of the others. I tell him two hours, he stay two hours. He pay for the maid. That's it. Some of the other guys, they get a little pushy—try to negotiate, don't leave when they're supposed to. I push back. I don't call them when an apartment's available. Freddy, he film a music video up there once. I watch for it on the TV, but I don't see. Maybe he couldn't find an agent. Music is a hard business."

"The party at Anna Lindsey's got out of hand." Amanda stated the obvious.

"Yeah, out of hand," he agreed. "Freddy's a good guy. I don't go up there to check on them. Every time I'm in the elevator, someone say, 'Oh, Mr. Simkov, could you look at this in my apartment.' 'Could you water my plants?' 'Could you walk my dog?' Not my job, but they trap you like that, what can you say? 'Fuck off? No, you can't. So I stay at my desk, tell them I can't do anything because my job is to watch the desk, not walk their puppy dogs. Right?'"

Amanda said, "That apartment was a mess. It's hard to believe it got that bad in just a week."

He shrugged. "These people. They got no respect for nothing. They shit in the corner like dogs. Me, I'm not surprised. They're all fucking animals, do anything to get the drug in their arm."

"What about the baby?" Amanda asked.

"The whore—Lola. I thought she was going up there to do some business. Freddy was there. Lola got a soft spot for him. I didn't know he was dead. Or that they had trashed Ms. Lindsey's place. Obviously."

"How often was Lola going up there?"

"I don't keep up with it. Couple times a day. I figure she get a bump every now and then." He rubbed his hand under his nose, sniffing—the universal sign for snorting coke. "She not so bad. A good woman brought down by bad circumstance."

Simkov didn't seem to realize he was one of the bad circumstances. Faith asked, "Did you see anything unusual in the building over the last two weeks?"

He barely gave her a glance, asking Amanda, "Why is this girl asking me questions?"

Faith had been snubbed before, but she knew this guy needed to be on a short leash. "You want me to get my partner back in here to talk to you?"

He snorted, as if the thought of another beat-down was inconsequential, but he answered Faith's question. "What do you mean, unusual? It's Buckhead. Unusual is everywhere."

Anna Lindsey's penthouse had probably set her back three million dollars. The woman hardly lived in the ghetto. "Did you see any strangers loitering around?" Faith persisted.

He waved her off. "Strangers everywhere. This is a big city."

Faith thought about their killer. He had to have access to the building in order to Taser Anna and take her away from the apartment. Simkov obviously wasn't going to make this easy, so she tried to bluff him. "You know what I'm talking about, Otik. Don't bullshit me or I'll have my partner go back to work on your ugly face."

He shrugged again, but there was something different about the gesture. Faith waited him out, and he finally said, "I go for a smoke sometimes behind the building."

The fire escape that led to the roof was behind the building. "What did you see?"

"A car," he said. "Silver, four-door."

Faith tried to keep her reaction calm. Both the Coldfields and the family from Tennessee had seen a white sedan speeding away from the accident. It had been dusk. Maybe they had mistaken the silver car for white. "Did you get a license plate number?"

He shook his head. "I saw the ladder to the fire escape was unlatched. I went up to the roof."

"On the ladder?"

"Elevator. I can't climb that ladder. It's twenty-three floors. I got a bad knee."

"What did you see on the roof?"

"There was a soda can there. Someone used it for an ashtray. Lots of butts inside."

"Where was it?"

"On the ledge of the roof, right by the ladder."

"What did you do with it?"

"I kicked it off," he said, giving another one of his shrugs. "Watched it hit the ground. It exploded like—" He put his hands together, then flung them apart.

"Pretty spectacular."

Faith had been behind that building, had searched it top to bottom. "We didn't find any cigarette butts or a soda can behind the building."

"That's what I'm saying. Next day, it was all gone. Someone cleaned it up."

"And the silver car?"

"Gone, too."

"You're sure you didn't see any suspicious men hanging around the building?"

He blew out a puff of air. "No, lady. I told you. Just the root beer."

"What root beer?"

"The soda can. It was Doc Peterson's Root Beer."

The same as they'd found in the basement of the house behind Olivia Tanner's.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

As Will drove to Jake Berman's house in Coweta County, he debated with himself the level of fury Faith would feel when she found out that he had tricked her. He wasn't sure which would make her angrier: the outright lie he had told her on the phone about Sam finding the wrong Jake Berman or the fact that Will was going down south to talk to the man on his own. There was no way she would've kept her doctor's appointment if Will had told her that the real Jake Berman was alive and well and living on Lester Drive. She would have insisted on coming along, and Will wouldn't have been able to come up with a good excuse for her not to, other than that she was pregnant and diabetic and had enough on her plate without having to put herself at risk by interviewing a witness who could very well be a suspect.

That would have gone over really well with Faith. Like a lead football over the Mississippi.

Will had gotten Caroline, Amanda's assistant, to cross-reference Jake Berman with the address on Lester Drive. With that key piece of information, they had opened up Berman's background fairly easily. The mortgage was in his wife's name, as were all of the credit cards, the cable bill and the utilities. Lydia Berman was a schoolteacher. Jake Berman had drawn his full lot of unemployment and still not found a job. He had declared bankruptcy eighteen months ago. He'd walked away from around half a million dollars in debt. The reason behind his being hard to find might have been as simple as a desire to elude creditors. Considering he'd been arrested a few months ago for public indecency, it made sense that Berman would want to keep a low profile.

Then again, it would also all make sense if Berman was their suspect.

The Porsche wasn't comfortable for long distances, and Will's back was aching by the time he reached Lester Drive. Traffic had been worse than usual, an overturned tractor-trailer jackknifed across the interstate bringing everything to a standstill for almost a full hour. Will hadn't wanted to be alone with his thoughts. He had listened to every station on the dial by the time he crossed into Coweta County.

Will pulled up beside an unmarked Chevy Caprice at the mouth of Lester Drive. A lawnmower was sticking out of the back of the trunk. The man behind the wheel was dressed in overalls, a thick gold chain hanging around his neck. Will recognized Nick Shelton, the regional field agent for District 23.

"How they hangin'?" Nick asked, turning down the bluegrass blaring from the radio. Will had met the agent a few times before. He was so country his neck glowed red, but he was a solid investigator, and he knew how to do his job.

Will asked, "Is Berman still in the house?"

"Unless he sneaked out the back," Nick answered. "Don't worry. He struck me as the lazy type."

"Did you talk to him?"

"Posed as a landscaper looking for work." Nick handed him a business card. "I told him it'd be a hundred bucks a month, and he said he could take care of his own damn lawn, thank you very much." He snorted a laugh. "This from a guy who's still in his pajamas at ten o'clock in the morning."

Will looked at the card, seeing a drawing of a lawnmower and some flowers. He said, "Nice."

"The fake phone number comes in handy with the ladies." Nick chuckled again. "I got a good look at ol' Jakey while he was lecturing me on competitive pricing. He's definitely your guy."

"Did you get into the house?"

"He wasn't that stupid." Nick asked, "You want me to stick around?"

Will thought about the situation, the fact that if he had given her the chance, Faith would have been right: Don't go into an unknown situation without backup. "If you don't mind. Just hang back here and make sure I don't get my head blown off."

They both laughed a little louder than the words called for, probably because Will wasn't really joking.

He rolled up his window and drove down the road. Just to make things easier, Caroline had called Berman before Will had left the office. She had posed as an operator for the local cable television company. Berman had assured her he would be home to let in the technician who was doing a general upgrade so that their service wouldn't be interrupted. There were a lot of tricks you could use to make sure people were home. The cable ruse was the best. People would go without a lot of things, but they would put their lives on hold for days at a time in order to wait for the cable company to show up.

Will checked the numbers on the mailbox, making sure they matched the note Sam Lawson had given Faith. Courtesy of MapQuest, which printed large arrows on their directions, and a couple of stops at some convenience stores, Will had managed to navigate his way through the rural town with only a few wrong turns.

Still, he checked the number with the mailbox a third time before getting out of the car. He saw the heart Sam had drawn around the address, and wondered again why a man who was not the father of Faith's child would do such a thing. Will had only met the reporter once, but he didn't like him. Victor was all right. Will had talked to him on the phone a couple of times and sat by him during an incredibly tedious awards ceremony that Amanda had insisted her team attend, mostly because she wanted to make sure someone clapped when her name was called. Victor had wanted to talk about sports, but not football and baseball, which were the only two sports Will paid attention to. Hockey was for Yankees and soccer was for Europeans. He wasn't quite sure how Victor had gotten interested in both, but it made for pretty dull conversation. Whatever Faith had seen in the guy, Will had been glad a few months ago when he started to notice that Victor's car wasn't in Faith's driveway when he went to pick her up for court days.

Of course, Will was not one to judge about relationships. His whole body was still sore from being with Angie last night. It was not a good sore—it was the kind of sore that made you want to crawl up into bed and sleep for a week. Will knew from experience it wouldn't matter, because as soon as he started putting

one foot in front of the other, rebuilding some semblance of a life, Angie would return and he'd be back in that same place again. It was the pattern of his life. Nothing was ever going to change it.

The Berman home was a one-story ranch spread out over a large lot. The house looked lived-in, but not in a good way. The grass was overgrown and weeds tangled the flowerbeds. The green Camry in the driveway was filthy. Mud caked the tires and there was a sheen of filth on the car that looked like it had been there for quite a while. There were two baby seats in back and the requisite Cheerios stuck to the windshield. Two yellow, diamond-shaped signs were hanging from the side window, probably reading *Baby on Board*. Will pressed his hand to the hood of the car. The engine was cold. He looked at the time on his phone. It was coming up on ten o'clock. Faith would probably be at her doctor's by now.

Will knocked on the door and waited. He thought about Faith again, how furious she would be, especially if Will was about to come face-to-face with the killer. Though it looked as if he wasn't going to come face-to-face with anyone. No one answered the door. He knocked on the door again. When that didn't work, he stepped back from the house and looked up at the windows. All the shades were open. Some lights were on. Maybe Berman was in the shower. Or maybe he was fully aware that the police were trying to talk to him. Nick's hayseed landscaper act was pretty impressive, but he'd been sitting at the end of the road for about an hour. In a neighborhood this small, phones had probably been ringing off the hook.

Will tried the front door, but it was locked. He walked around the house, peering in the windows. There was a light at the end of the hallway. He was going to the next window when he heard a noise inside like a door slamming shut. Will put his hand to the gun on his belt, feeling all the hair on the back of his neck stand up. Something wasn't right, and Will was keenly aware that Nick Shelton was sitting in his car listening to the radio right now.

There was the unmistakable sound of a window banging shut. Will jogged around to the back of the house in time to see a man darting through the backyard. Jake Berman was wearing pajama pants with no shirt, but he'd managed to put on his sneakers. He glanced over his shoulder as he ran past an elaborate swing set, toward the chain-link fence that separated the property from the neighbor on the opposite side.

"Crap," Will mumbled, bolting after him. Will was a good runner, but Berman was fast—his arms pumping, legs moving in a blur.

"Police!" Will yelled, misjudging the height of the fence so badly that his foot caught. He fell to the ground and scrambled up as quickly as he could. He saw Berman go down a side yard, past another house and toward the street. Will did the same, taking advantage of the angle, shortening the distance as he chased Berman across the road.

There was a screech of wheels as Nick Shelton's Caprice pulled up. Berman dodged the car, slamming his hand on the hood as he made his way toward another backyard.

"Dammit," Will cursed. "Police! Stop!"

Berman kept going, but he was a sprinter, not a marathoner. If Will was good at anything, it was endurance. He caught his second wind as Jake Berman

slowed, trying to open the wooden gate to a neighbor's backyard. He glanced over his shoulder, saw Will, then took off again. Berman was too winded, though, and Will could tell from the slow way his legs were moving that the man was about to give up. Still, Will wasn't going to take any chances. When he got close enough, he lunged, bringing Berman down in a heavy tackle that knocked the wind out of both of them.

"Dumbass!" Nick Shelton yelled, kicking Berman in the side.

Considering his run-in with the doorman at Anna's building yesterday, Will would've thought he'd be more gentle in his approach, but his heart was beating so hard in his chest that he felt nauseated. Worse, adrenaline was pumping all kinds of bad thoughts into his head.

Nick kicked Berman again. "Never run from the law, motherfucker."

"I didn't know you were cops—"

"Shut up." Will started to put the cuffs on him, but Berman squirmed, trying to get away. Nick raised his foot again, but Will drove his knee into Berman's back so hard that he could feel the ribs bend. "Stop it."

"I didn't do anything!"

"Is that why you ran?"

"I was going for a run," he screamed. "I always run this time of day."

Nick asked, "In your pj's?"

"Fuck off."

"It's a felony to lie to the police." Will stood, yanking up Berman with him. "Five years in prison. Plenty of men's bathrooms in jail."

Berman's face turned white. Some of his neighbors had congregated. They didn't look happy—or, Will noticed, particularly supportive.

"It's all right," Berman told them. "Just a misunderstanding."

Nick said, "A misunderstanding by this dumbass who thinks he can run away from the police."

Will wasn't worried about appearances. He jerked Berman's hands high, making him bend over as he walked him back across the street.

"My lawyer is going to hear about this."

Nick said, "Be sure to tell him how you ran away like a scared little schoolgirl."

Will pushed Berman into the road. He asked Nick, "Mind calling this in?"

"You want the cavalry?"

"I want a police car screeching up to his house with lights and sirens blaring so everyone in the neighborhood knows it's there."

Nick gave him a salute as he trotted off toward his car.

Berman said, "You're making a mistake."

"Your mistake was fleeing the scene of a crime."

"What?" He turned around, a look of genuine surprise on his face. "What crime?"

"Route 316."

He still looked confused. "That's what this is about?"

Either the man was delivering an Oscar-worthy performance or he was completely clueless. "You witnessed a car accident four days ago on 316. A woman was hit by a car. You talked to my partner."

"I didn't leave that girl alone. The ambulance was there. I told that cop at the

hospital everything I saw.”

“You gave a false phone number and address.”

“I was just—” He glanced around, and Will wondered if he was going to bolt again. “Get me out of here,” Berman pleaded. “Just take me to the police station, okay? Take me to the station, give me my phone call, and we’ll work all of this out.”

Will turned him around, keeping a hand on his shoulder in case the man decided to try his luck again. Every step, Will could feel his temper getting more and more riled up. Berman was looking more and more like a pathetic, weaselly excuse for a human being. They had wasted the last two days looking for the asshole, and then the idiot had made Will chase him across half the neighborhood.

Berman turned around. “Why don’t you take off these cuffs so I can—”

Will spun him back around so hard that he had to catch Berman before he fell flat on his face. The nearest neighbor was standing in her open front doorway, watching them. Like the other women, she didn’t look exactly displeased to see the man being led away in handcuffs.

Will asked, “Do they hate you because you’re gay? Or because you’re sponging off your wife?”

Berman spun around again. “Where the fuck do you get off—”

Will pushed him back around so hard that this time he lost his balance. “It’s ten o’clock and you’re still in your pajamas.” He marched Berman through the tall grass in his yard. “You don’t have a lawn-mower?”

“We can’t afford a gardener.”

“Where are your kids?”

“Day care.” He tried to turn around again. “What business is this of yours?”

Will shoved him again, forcing him go up the driveway. He hated the guy for so many reasons, not least of which because he had a wife and kids who probably cared about him a great deal and he couldn’t even cut the grass or wash the car for them.

Berman demanded, “Where are you taking me? I said take me to the police station.”

Will kept quiet, shoving him up the driveway, yanking up his arms whenever he slowed or tried to turn around.

“If I’m under arrest, then you have to take me to jail.”

They walked to the back of the house, Berman protesting the entire way. He was a man who was used to being listened to, and it seemed to irk him more to be ignored than to be pushed around, so Will kept silent as he shoved him toward the patio.

Will tried the back door, but it was locked. He looked at Berman, whose smug look seemed to indicate he thought he was getting the upper hand. The window the man had sneaked out had guillotined closed. He slid it back open, the cheap springs clanging.

Berman said, “Don’t worry. I’ll wait for you.”

Will wondered where Nick Shelton was. He was probably in front of the house, thinking he was doing Will a favor by giving him time alone with the suspect.

“Right,” Will muttered, loosening one side of the cuffs and clamping Berman

to the barbecue grill. He lifted himself up and angled his body through the open window. Will found himself in the kitchen, which was decorated in a goose theme: geese on the wallpaper border, geese on the towels, geese on the carpet under the kitchen table.

He looked back out the window. Berman was there, smoothing down his pajamas like he was trying them on at Macy's.

Will did a quick check of the house, finding only what he expected: a children's room with bunk beds, a large master and attached bath, a kitchen, a family room and a study with one book on the shelves. Will couldn't read the title, but he recognized Donald Trump's picture on the jacket and assumed it was a get-rich-quick scheme. Obviously, Jake Berman hadn't taken the man's advice. Though, considering Berman had lost his job and declared bankruptcy, maybe he had.

There was no basement, and the garage was empty but for three boxes that seemed to contain the contents of Jake Berman's old office: a stapler, a nice desk set, lots of papers with charts and graphs on them. Will opened the sliding glass door to the patio and found Berman sitting under the grill, his arm dangling over his head.

"You have no right to search my house."

"You were fleeing your residence. That's all the cause I needed."

Berman seemed to buy the explanation, which sounded reasonable even to Will's ears, though he knew it was highly illegal.

Will dragged around a chair from the table set and sat down. The air was still chilly, and the sweat he'd generated from chasing after Berman was drying in the cold.

"This isn't fair," Berman said. "I want your badge number and your name and —"

"You want the real one or you want me to make up something, like you did?"

Berman had the sense not to answer.

"Why did you run, Jake? Where were you going to go in your pajamas?"

"I didn't think that far," he grumbled. "I just don't want to deal with this right now. I've got a lot on my plate."

"You've got two choices here: Either you tell me what happened that night or I take you to jail in your pajamas." To make the threat clear, Will added, "And I don't mean the Coweta Country Club. I'll stroll you straight into the Atlanta Pen, and I won't let you change." He pointed to Berman's chest, which was heaving up and down from panic and anger. The man obviously spent time on his body. He was cut, his abs well defined, his shoulders broad and muscled. "You'll find all those pull-ups at the gym didn't go to waste."

"Is that what this is about? You're some kind of homophobic jerk?"

"I don't care who you're blowing in the toilet." This much was true, though Will kept an edge to his voice to imply the opposite. Everybody had a button, and Berman's was his sexual orientation. At the moment, Will's seemed to be that the cheating prick chained to the Grillmaster 2000 was screwing around on his wife and expecting her to just suck it up and be a good spouse. The *Oprah*-esque irony was not lost on Will.

He said, "The guys down at the pen love it when new meat comes along."

"Fuck you."

"Oh, they will. They'll fuck you in places you didn't know could be fucked."

"Go to hell."

Will let him sulk for a few seconds, trying to get his own emotions under control. He concentrated on how much time they had pissed away looking for this pathetic idiot when they could've been following real clues. Will listed it out for him. "Resisting arrest, lying to the police, wasting police time, obstructing an investigation. You could get ten years for this, Jake, and that's if the judge likes you, which is doubtful considering you've got a record and you present like an arrogant asshole."

Berman seemed to finally realize that he was in trouble. "I've got kids." There was a pleading sound to his voice. "My sons."

"Yeah, I read about them in your arrest report when they picked you up at the Mall of Georgia."

Berman looked down at the concrete patio. "What do you want?"

"I want the truth."

"I don't know what the truth is anymore."

He was obviously feeling sorry for himself again. Will wanted to kick him in the face, but he knew that would accomplish nothing. "You need to understand I'm not your therapist, Jake. I don't care about your crisis of conscience, or that you have kids or that you're cheating on your wife—"

"I love her!" he said, for the first time showing an emotion other than self-pity. "I love my wife."

Will pulled back on the pressure, trying to get his temper under control. He could be mad or he could get information. Only one of them was the reason he was here.

Berman said, "I used to be somebody. I used to have a job. I used to go to work every day." He looked up at the house. "I used to live somewhere nice. I drove a Mercedes."

"You were a builder?" Will asked, though he'd been told as much when Caroline had found Berman's tax returns.

"High-rises," he said. "The bottom dropped out of the market. I was lucky to walk away with the clothes on my back."

"Is that why you put everything in your wife's name?"

He gave a slow nod. "I was ruined. We moved here from Montgomery a year ago. It was supposed to be a fresh start, but ..." He shrugged, as if it was pointless to continue.

Will had thought his accent was a little deeper than most. "Is that where you're originally from—Alabama?"

"Met my wife there. Both of us went to Alabama." He meant the state university. "Lydia was an English major. It was more like a hobby until I lost my job. Now she's teaching at school and I'm with the kids all day." He stared out at the play set, the swings stirring in the wind. "I used to travel a lot," he said. "That's how I got it out of my system. I'd travel around, and I'd do what I needed to do, and then I'd come home and be with my wife and go to church, and that's how it worked for almost ten years."

"You were arrested six months ago."

"I told Lydia it was a mistake. All those queers from Atlanta trolling the mall, trying to pick up straight men. The cops were clamping down. They thought I

was one because ... I don't know what I told her. Because I had a nice haircut. She wanted to believe me, so she did."

Will guessed he'd be forgiven for his sympathies leaning more toward the spouse who was being lied to and cheated on. "Tell me what happened on 316."

"We saw the accident, people in the road. I should've been more helpful. The other man—I don't even know his name. He had medical training. He was trying to help the woman who'd been hit by the car. I was just standing there in the street trying to think of a lie to tell my wife. I don't think she'd believe me if it happened again, no matter what I came up with."

"How did you meet him?"

"I was supposed to be at the bar watching a game. I saw him go into the theater. He was a nice-looking guy, alone. I knew why he was there." He gave a heavy sigh. "I followed him into the bathroom. We decided to go somewhere else for more privacy."

Jake Berman was no neophyte, and Will didn't ask him why he had driven forty minutes away from his home in order to watch a game at a bar. Coweta might have been rural, but Will had passed at least three sports bars as he headed off the interstate, and there were even more downtown.

Will warned him, "You have to know that it was dangerous getting into a car with a stranger like that."

"I guess I've been lonely," the man admitted. "I wanted to be with somebody. You know, be myself with somebody. He said we could go in his car, maybe find a place out in the woods to be together for more than a few minutes in the toilet." He gave a harsh laugh. "The smell of urine is not a big aphrodisiac for me, believe it or not." He looked Will in the eye. "Does it make you sick to hear about this?"

"No," Will answered truthfully. He had listened to countless witnesses tell stories of meaningless hookups and mindless sex. It really didn't matter if it was a man or a woman or both. The emotions were similar, and Will's goal was always the same: get the information he needed to break the case.

Jake obviously knew Will wasn't going to give him much more rope. He said, "We were driving down the road, and the guy I was with—"

"Rick."

"Rick. Right." He looked as if he wished he didn't know the man's name. "Rick was driving. He had his pants unbuttoned." Jake colored again. "He pushed me away. He said there was something on the road ahead. He started to slow down, and I saw what looked like a bad accident." He paused, measuring his words, his culpability. "I told him to keep driving, but he said he was a paramedic, that he couldn't leave the scene of an accident. I guess that's some kind of code or something." He paused again, and Will guessed he was forcing himself to remember what had happened.

Will told him, "Take your time."

Jake nodded, giving it a few seconds. "Rick got out of the car, and I stayed inside. There was this old couple standing in the street. The man was clutching his chest. I kept sitting there in the car, just staring like it was all a movie being played out. The older woman got on the phone—I guess to call an ambulance. It was weird, because she kept her hand to her mouth, like this." He cupped his hand over his mouth the way Judith Coldfield did when she smiled. "It was like

she was telling a secret, but there was no one around to hear, so ..." He shrugged.

"Did you get out of the car?"

"Yeah," he answered. "I finally moved. I could hear the ambulance coming. I went to the old guy. I think his name was Henry?" Will nodded. "Yeah, Henry. He was in bad shape. I think both of them were in shock. Judith's hands were shaking like crazy. The other guy, Rick, he was working on the naked woman. I didn't see much of her. It was hard to see, you know? Hard to look at her, I mean. I remember when their son got there, he just stared at her, like, 'Oh, Jesus.' "

"Wait a minute," Will said. "Judith Coldfield's son was at the scene?"

"Yeah."

Will went back through his interview with the Coldfields, wondering why Tom would leave out such an important detail. There had been plenty of opportunity for the man to speak up, even with his domineering mother in the room. "What time did the son get there?"

"About five minutes before the ambulance."

Will felt ridiculous for repeating everything Berman said, but he had to be clear. "Tom Coldfield got to the scene before the ambulance arrived?"

"He was there before the cops. They didn't even show up until after the ambulances had left. No one was there. It was brutal. We had, like, twenty minutes with that girl just dying in the road, and no one came to help her."

Will felt a piece of the puzzle click into place—not the one they needed for the case, but the one that explained why Max Galloway had been so openly hostile about sharing information. The detective must have known that the ambulance had taken the victim away *before* the police arrived. Faith had been right all along. There was a reason Rockdale wasn't faxing over the initial responder's report, and that reason was because they were covering their asses. Slow police response times were the sort of thing local news stations built their feature stories on. This was the last straw as far as Will was concerned. He would have Galloway's detective shield by the end of the day. There was no telling what other evidence had been hidden or, worse, compromised.

"Hey," Berman said. "You wanna hear this or not?"

Will realized he had been too caught up in his own thoughts. He picked up the narrative. "So, Tom Coldfield showed up," he said. "Then the ambulances came?"

"Just one at first. They put the woman in first, the one who'd been hit by the car. Henry said he would wait because he wanted to go with his wife, and there wasn't room for all of them in one ambulance. There was kind of an argument about it, but Rick said, 'Go, just go,' because he knew the woman was in a bad way. He gave me the keys to his car and got into the ambulance so he could keep working on her."

"How long before the next ambulance arrived?"

"About ten, maybe fifteen minutes later."

Will did the math in his head. Almost forty-five minutes had elapsed in the story, and the police still hadn't shown up. "Then what?"

"They loaded up Henry and Judith. The son followed them, and I was left in the road."

"And the police still weren't there?"

"I heard the sirens right after the last ambulance left. The car was there—the one the Coldfields had been driving. The scene of the crime, right?" He looked back at the play set in the yard, as if he could visualize his children playing in the sun. "I thought about taking Rick's car back to the theater. They wouldn't know me, right? I mean, you wouldn't have any way of identifying me if I hadn't gone to the hospital and given my name."

Will shrugged, but it was true. If not for the fact that Jake Berman had given them his real name, Will wouldn't be sitting here right now.

Jake continued, "So, I got in the car and headed back toward the theater."

"Toward the police cars?"

"They were coming in the opposite direction."

"What changed your mind?"

He shrugged, and tears came into his eyes. "I was tired of running, I guess. Running away from ... everything." He put his free hand to his eyes. "Rick told me they were taking her to Grady, so I got on the interstate and went to Grady."

His courage had apparently run out shortly afterward, but Will did not point this out to the man.

Berman asked, "Is the old man okay?"

"He's fine."

"I heard on the news that the woman's all right."

"She's healing," Will told him. "What happened to her will always be with her, though. She won't be able to run away from it."

He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. "Some kind of lesson for me, right?" His self-pity had returned. "Not that you care, right?"

"You know what I don't like about you?"

"Please enlighten me."

"You're cheating on your wife. I don't care who with—it's cheating. If you want to be with someone else, then be with them, but let your wife go. Let her have a life. Let her have someone who really loves her and understands her and wants to be with her."

The man shook his head sadly. "You don't understand."

Will guessed that Jake Berman was beyond lessons. He stood from the table and uncuffed him from the grill. "Be careful about getting into cars with strangers."

"I'm finished with that. I mean it. Never again."

He sounded so certain of himself that Will almost believed him.

WILL HAD TO WAIT until he was out of Jake Berman's neighborhood before his phone registered enough bars to make a call. Even then, service was spotty, and he had to pull over onto the side of the road just to get a call to go through. He dialed Faith's cell phone and listened to it ring. Her voicemail picked up, and he ended the call. Will checked the clock. 10:15. She was probably still with her doctor in Snellville.

Tom Coldfield hadn't mentioned that he had been at the crime scene—yet another person who had lied to them. Will was getting pretty sick and tired of people lying. He flipped open his phone and dialed information. They connected

him to the tower at Charlie Brown Airport, where yet another operator told Will that Tom was taking a cigarette break. Will was in the process of leaving a message when the operator offered to give him Coldfield's cell phone number. A few minutes later, he was listening to Tom Coldfield yell over the sound of a jet engine.

"I'm glad you called, Agent Trent." His voice was just shy of a shout. "I left a message for your partner earlier, but I haven't heard back."

Will put his finger in his ear, as if that might help drown out the noise of a plane taking off on the other side of town. "Did you remember something?"

"Oh, nothing like that," Tom said. The roar subsided, and his voice went back to normal. "My folks and I were talking last night, wondering how your investigation was going."

There was a deafening rush of jet engine. Will waited it out, thinking this was crazy. "What time do you get off work?"

"About ten minutes, then I've got to pick up the kids from my mom's."

Will figured he would kill two birds with one stone. "Can you meet me at your parents' house?"

Tom waited for more engine noise to pass. "Sure. Shouldn't take me more than forty-five minutes to get there. Is something wrong?"

Will looked at the clock on the dash. "I'll see you in forty-five minutes."

He ended the call before Tom could ask any more questions. Unfortunately, he also ended it before he could get the Coldfields' address. Their retirement community shouldn't be too hard to find. Clairmont Road stretched from one side of DeKalb County to the other, but there was only one area where senior citizens flocked, and that was in the vicinity of the Atlanta Veterans Administration hospital. Will put the car in gear, got back onto the road, and headed toward the interstate.

As Will drove, he debated about whether to call Amanda and tell her that Max Galloway had screwed them over again, but she would ask where Faith was, and Will did not want to remind their boss that Faith was having medical issues. Amanda hated weakness of any kind, and she was relentless where Will's disability was concerned. There was no telling what abuse she would visit on Faith for being diabetic. Will wasn't going to give her more ammunition.

He could, of course, call Caroline, who would in turn feed the information to Amanda. He cradled the phone in his hand, praying it would not come apart as he dialed in the number for Amanda's assistant.

Caroline made much use of her caller ID. "Hi, Will."

"Mind doing me another favor?"

"Sure."

"Judith Coldfield called 9-1-1 and two ambulances got to the scene before the Rockdale police did."

"That ain't right."

"No," Will agreed. It wasn't. The fact that Max Galloway had lied meant that instead of talking to a trained first responder about what he had recorded at the scene, Will was going to have to rely on the Coldfields to reconstruct what they had seen. "I need you to track down the timeline. I'm pretty sure Amanda's going to want to know what took them so long."

Caroline said, "You know Rockdale's where I'll call for the response times."

“Try Judith Coldfield’s cell phone records.” If Will could catch them in a lie, that would be yet another weapon Amanda could use against them. “Do you have her number?”

“Four-oh-four—”

“Hold on,” Will said, thinking it would be useful to have Judith’s number. He drove with his fingertips as he took out the digital recorder he kept in his pocket and turned it on. “Go ahead.”

Caroline gave him Judith Coldfield’s cell number. Will clicked off the recorder and put the phone back to his ear to thank her. He used to have a system for keeping up with witnesses’ and suspects’ personal information, but Faith had gradually taken over everything to do with paperwork, so that Will was lost without her. With the next case, he would have to correct that. He didn’t like the idea of being so dependent on her—especially since she was pregnant. She’d probably be out at least a week when the baby came.

He tried Judith’s cell, which only got him as far as her voicemail. He left a message for her, then called Faith again and told her that he was on his way to the Coldfields’. Hopefully, she would call him back and give him their address on Clairmont Road. He didn’t want to call Caroline again because she would wonder why an agent didn’t have all this written down somewhere. Besides, his cell phone had started making a clicking noise in his ear. He would have to do something to fix it soon. Will gently placed it on the passenger’s seat. There was only one string and a quickly degrading piece of duct tape holding it together now.

Will kept the radio low as he headed into the city. Instead of going through the downtown connector, he jumped on I-85. Traffic on the Clairmont exit was backed up more than usual, so he took the long way, skirting around DeKalb Peachtree Airport, driving through neighborhoods that were so culturally diverse even Faith wouldn’t be able to read some of the signs out in front of the businesses.

After fighting more traffic, he finally found himself in the right area. He turned into the first gated community across from the VA hospital, knowing the best way to go about this would be the methodical one. The guard at the gate was polite, but the Coldfields weren’t on his residents’ list. The next place yielded the same negative result, but when Will got to the third compound, the nicest one of them all, he hit pay dirt.

“Henry and Judith.” The man at the gate smiled, as if they were old friends. “I think Hank’s out on the links, but Judith should be home.”

Will waited while the guard made a phone call to get him buzzed in. He looked around the well-kept grounds, feeling a pang of envy. Will didn’t have children and he had no family to speak of. His retirement was something that worried him, and he had been saving a nest egg since his first paycheck. He wasn’t a risk taker, so he hadn’t lost much in the stock market. T-bills and municipal bonds were where most of his hard-earned cash went. He was terrified of ending up some lonely old guy in a sad, state-run nursing home. The Coldfields were living the sort of retirement Will was hoping for—a friendly security guard at the gate, nicely kept gardens, a senior center where you could play cards or shuffleboard.

Of course, knowing how things worked, Angie would get some terrible,

wasting disease that lasted just long enough to suck away all his retirement money before she died.

"You're in, young man!" The guard was smiling, his straight white teeth showing beneath a bushy gray mustache. "Go left right out of the gate, then take another left, then right, and you'll be on Taylor Drive. They're 1693."

"Thanks," Will said, understanding only the street name and the numbers. The man had made a hand gesture indicating which way Will should go first, so he went through the gate and turned the car in that direction. After that, it was anyone's guess.

"Crap," Will mumbled, obeying the ten-mile-per-hour speed limit as he circled the large lake in the middle of the property. The houses were one-story cottages that all looked the same: weathered shingles, single-car garages and various assortments of concrete ducks and bunnies spotting the trimmed lawns.

There were old people out walking, and when they waved at him, he waved back, he supposed to convey the impression that he knew where he was going. Which was not the case. He stopped the car in front of an elderly woman who was dressed in a lilac wind suit. She had ski poles in her hands as if she were Nordic skiing.

"Good morning," Will said. "I'm looking for sixteen-ninety-three Taylor Drive."

"Oh, Henry and Judith!" the skier exclaimed. "Are you their son?"

He shook his head. "No, ma'am." He didn't want to alarm anyone, so he said, "I'm just a friend of theirs."

"This is a very nice car, isn't it?"

"Thank you, ma'am."

"I bet I couldn't get myself into there," she said. "Maybe even if I got in, I couldn't get out!"

He laughed with her to be polite, scratching this particular community off the list of places to which he'd want to retire.

She said, "Do you work with Judith at the homeless shelter?"

Will hadn't been questioned so much since he had trained for interrogations at the GBI academy. "Yes, ma'am," he lied.

"Got this at their little thrift store," she said, indicating the wind suit. "Looks brand-new, doesn't it?"

"It's lovely," Will assured her, though the color was nothing like what you would find in nature.

"Tell Judith I've got some more knickknacks I can give her if she wants to send the truck by." She gave a knowing look. "At my age, I find I don't need so many things."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well." The woman nodded, pleased. "Just go up here to the right." He watched the way her hand curved. "Then Taylor Drive is on the left."

"Thank you." He put the car in gear, but she stopped him.

"You know, it would've been easier next time if, right when you left the gate, you took a left, then an immediate left, then—"

"Thank you," Will repeated, rolling the car along. His brain was going to explode if he talked to another person in this place. He kept the Porsche inching along, hoping he was going in the right direction. His phone rang, and he nearly

wept with relief when he saw it was Faith.

Carefully, he opened the broken phone and held it to his ear. "How was your doctor's appointment?"

"Fine," she said. "Listen, I just talked to Tom Coldfield—"

"About meeting him? So did I."

"Jake Berman's going to have to wait."

Will felt his chest tighten. "I already talked to Jake Berman."

She was quiet—too quiet.

"Faith, I'm sorry. I just thought it would be better if I ..." Will didn't know how to finish the sentence. His grip on his cell phone slipped, bringing a crackling static onto the line. He waited for it to die down, then repeated, "I'm sorry."

She took a painfully long time letting the ax fall. When she finally spoke, her tone was clipped, like her words were getting strangled in her throat. "I don't treat you differently because of your disability."

She was wrong, actually, but he knew this was not the time to point that out. "Berman told me that Tom Coldfield was at the crime scene." She wasn't yelling at him, so he continued, "I guess Judith called him because Henry was having a heart attack. Tom followed them to the hospital in his car. The cops didn't show up until everyone was already gone."

She seemed to be debating between screaming at him and being a cop. As usual, her cop side won out. "That's why Galloway was jerking us around. He was covering Rockdale County's ass." She moved on to the next problem. "And Tom Coldfield didn't tell us he was at the scene."

Will paused for some more static. "I know."

"He's early thirties, closer to my age. Pauline's brother was older, right?"

Will wanted to talk to her about this in person rather than through his cracked phone. "Where are you?"

"I'm right outside the Coldfields'."

"Good," he told her, surprised she had gotten there so fast. "I'm right around the corner. I'll be there in two minutes."

Will ended the call and dropped the phone on the seat beside him. Another wire had slipped out between the clamshells. This one was red, which was not a good sign. He glanced at his rearview mirror. The skier was making her way toward him. She was coming up fast, and Will pushed the car up to fifteen miles per hour so he could get away from her.

The street signs were larger than normal, the letters a crisp white on black, which was a horrible combination for Will. He turned as soon as he could, not bothering to try to read the first letter on the sign. Faith's Mini would stand out like a beacon among the Cadillacs and Buicks the retired folks seemed to favor.

Will got to the end of the street, but there was no Mini. He turned down the next street, and nearly smacked into the skier. She made a motion with her hand, indicating he should roll down the window.

He put on a pleasant smile. "Yes, ma'am?"

"Right there," she said, pointing to the cottage on the corner. This particular model had a lawn jockey outside, its white face freshly painted. Two large cardboard boxes were by the mailbox, each labeled in black marker. "I guess you're not taking those back in this tiny car of yours."

"No, ma'am."

"Judith said her son was going to bring the truck later on today." She glanced up at the sky. "Better not be too late."

"I'm sure it won't be long," Will told the skier. She didn't seem as keen to continue the conversation this time. She tossed him a wave as she continued her walk down the street.

Will looked at the boxes in front of Judith and Henry Coldfield's house, reminded of the trash Jacquelyn Zabel had set outside her mother's place. Though the cardboard boxes and black trash bags Jackie had put on the curb weren't meant to be trash. Charlie Reed had said he'd shooed off a Goodwill truck just before Will and Faith had arrived. Had he meant Goodwill specifically, or was he using the word as a catchall, the way people always called plastic bandages Band-Aids and tissues Kleenexes?

All along, they had been looking for a physical link between the women, one thing that tied them all together. Had Will just stumbled onto it?

The front door to the house opened and Judith came out, walking cautiously as she tried to navigate her way down the two porch stairs with a large box in her hands. Will got out of the car and rushed over, catching the box before she dropped it.

"Thank you," she told him. She was out of breath, her cheeks flushed. "I've been trying to get this stuff out all morning and Henry's been no help whatsoever." She walked toward the curb. "Just put it here by the others. Tom's supposed to be by later to pick them up."

Will set the box down on the ground. "How long have you volunteered at the shelter?"

"Oh ..." She seemed to think about it as she walked back toward the house. "I don't know. Since we moved here. I guess that's a couple of years now. Goodness, how time flies."

"Faith and I saw a brochure the other day when we were at the shelter. It had a list of corporate sponsors on it."

"They want to get their money's worth. They're not being charitable because it's the right thing to do. It's public relations for them."

"There was a logo for a bank on the one we saw." Even now, he recalled the image of the four-point deer at the bottom of the pamphlet.

"Oh, yes. Buckhead Holdings. They donate the most money, which, between you and me, isn't nearly enough."

Will felt a bead of sweat roll down his back. Olivia Tanner was the community relations director for Buckhead Holdings. "What about a law firm?" he asked. "Does anyone do pro bono work for the shelter?"

Judith opened the front door. "There are a couple of firms who help out. We're a women's only shelter, you know. Lots of the women need help filing divorce papers, getting restraining orders. Some of them are in trouble with the law. It's all very sad."

"Bandle and Brinks?" Will asked, giving her the name of Anna Lindsey's law firm.

"Yes," Judith said, smiling. "They help out quite a lot."

"Do you know a woman named Anna Lindsey?"

She shook her head as she went into the house. "Was she staying in the

shelter? I'm ashamed to say there are so many that I often don't have the time to speak to them individually."

Will followed her inside, glancing around. The layout was exactly as he would have guessed from the street. There was a large living room that looked onto a screen porch and the lake. The kitchen was on the side of the house that had the garage, and the other side held the bedrooms. All the doors leading off the hallway were closed. The startling thing was that it looked as if an Easter egg had exploded inside the house. Decorations were everywhere. There were bunnies in pastel suits sitting on every available surface. Baskets with plastic eggs lying in silky green grass were scattered along the floor.

Will said, "Easter."

Judith beamed. "It's my second favorite time of the year."

Will loosened his tie, feeling a sweat come all over him. "Why is that?"

"The Resurrection. The rebirth of our Lord. The cleansing of all our sins. Forgiveness is a powerful, transformative gift. I see that at the shelter every day. Those poor, broken women. They want redemption. They don't realize it's not something that can just be given. Forgiveness has to be earned."

"Do they all earn it?"

"Considering your job, I think you know the answer to that better than I do."

"Some women aren't worthy?"

She stopped smiling. "People like to think that we've moved on from biblical times, but we still live in a society where women are cast out, don't we?"

"Like trash?"

"That's a bit harsh, but we all make our choices."

Will felt more beads of sweat roll down his back. "Have you always loved Easter?"

She straightened a bow tie on one of the rabbits. "I suppose part of it's because Henry's work only gave him off Easter and Christmas. It was always such a special time for us. Don't you love being with family?"

He asked, "Is Henry home?"

"Not at the moment." She turned her watch around on her wrist. "He's always late. He loses track of time so easily. We were supposed to go to the community center after Tom picked up the kids."

"Does Henry work at the shelter?"

"Oh, no." She gave a small laugh as she walked into her kitchen. "Henry's much too busy enjoying his retirement. Tom's good about helping out, though. He complains, but he's a good boy."

Will remembered Tom had been trying to fix a lawnmower when they'd found him at the charity shop. "Does he mostly work in the store?"

"Lord, no, he hates working in the store."

"So, what does he do?"

She picked up a sponge and wiped the counter. "A little bit of everything."

"Like what?"

She stopped wiping. "If a woman needs legal help, he tracks down one of the lawyers, or if one of the kids makes a spill, he grabs a mop." She smiled proudly. "I told you, he's a good boy."

"Sounds like it," Will agreed. "What else does he do?"

"Oh, this and that." She paused, thinking it through. "He coordinates the

donations. He's very good on the phone. If it sounds like he's talking to someone who might give a bit more, he'll drive the truck over to pick up their stuff, and nine times out of ten, he comes back with a nice check in addition. I think he likes getting out and talking to people. All he does at the airport is stare at blips on a screen all day. Would you like some iced water? Lemonade?"

"No, thank you," he answered. "What about Jacquelyn Zabel? Have you heard her name before?"

"That strikes a bell, but I'm not sure why. It's a very unusual name."

"How about Pauline McGhee? Or maybe Pauline Seward?"

She smiled, putting her hand over her mouth. "No."

Will forced himself to slow things down. The first rule of interviewing was to be calm, because it was hard to spot whether or not someone else was tense when you were tense yourself. Judith had gone still when he'd asked the last question, so he repeated it. "Pauline McGhee or Pauline Seward?"

She shook her head. "No."

"How often does Tom pick up donations?"

Judith's voice took on a falsely cheerful tone. "You know, I'm not sure. I've got my calendar in here somewhere. I usually mark the dates." She opened one of the kitchen drawers and started to rummage around. She was visibly nervous, and he knew she had opened the drawer to give herself something to do other than look him in the eye. She chattered on, telling Will, "Tom is so good about giving his time. He's very involved in the youth group at his church. The whole family volunteers at the soup kitchen once a month."

Will didn't let her get sidetracked. "Does he go out alone to pick up donations?"

"Unless there's a couch or something large." She closed the drawer and opened another. "I have no idea where my calendar is. All those years I wanted my husband home with me, and now he drives me crazy putting things up where they don't belong."

Will glanced out the front window, wondering what was keeping Faith. "The children are here?"

She opened another drawer. "Napping in the back."

"Tom said he would meet me here. Why didn't he tell us he was at the crime scene where your car hit Anna Lindsey?"

"What?" She looked momentarily confused, but told him, "Well, I called Tom to come see Henry. I thought he was having a heart attack, that Tom would want to be there, that—"

"But Tom didn't tell us he was there," Will repeated. "And neither did you."

"It didn't ..." She waved her hand, dismissing it. "He wanted to be with his father."

"These women who were abducted were cautious women. They wouldn't open the door to just anybody. It would have to have been someone they trusted. Somebody they knew was coming."

She stopped looking for the calendar. Her face showed her thoughts as clear as a picture: She knew something was horribly wrong.

Will asked, "Where is your son, Mrs. Coldfield?"

Tears welled into her eyes. "Why are you asking all these questions about Tom?"

“He was supposed to meet me here.”

Her voice was almost a whisper. “He said he had to go home. I don’t understand ...”

Will realized something then—something Faith had said on the phone. She’d already talked to Tom Coldfield. The reason she wasn’t here yet was because Tom had sent her to the wrong house.

Will made his voice deadly serious. “Mrs. Coldfield, I need to know where Tom is right now.”

She put her hand to her mouth, tears spilling from her eyes.

There was a phone on the wall. Will snatched the receiver off the hook. He dialed in Faith’s cell phone number, but his finger didn’t make it to the last digit. There was a searing pain in his back, the worst muscle spasm he’d ever had in his life. Will put his hand to his shoulder, his fingers feeling for a knot, but all he felt was cold, sharp metal. He looked down to find the bloody tip of what had to be a very large knife sticking out of his chest.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Faith sat outside Thomas Coldfield's house, her cell phone to her ear as she listened to Will's cell ring. He'd said he was two minutes away, but it was looking more like ten. The call went to voicemail. Will was probably lost, driving around in circles, looking for her car because he was too pigheaded to ask for help. If she was in a better mood, she'd go out and look for him, but she was scared of what she'd say to her partner if she had him alone.

Every time she thought about Will lying to her, going to talk to Jake Berman behind her back, she had to squeeze the steering wheel to keep from punching a hole into the dashboard of the car. They couldn't go on like this—not with Faith being a liability. If he thought she couldn't handle herself in the field, then there was no reason for them to be together anymore. She could put up with a lot of Will's crazy shit, but she had to have his trust or this would never work out. It wasn't as if Will didn't have his own liabilities. For instance, not knowing the difference between something as freaking simple as left and right.

Faith checked the time again. She would give Will another five minutes before going into the house.

The doctor hadn't given her good news, though Faith had foolishly been expecting it. From the minute she'd made the appointment with Delia Wallace, her health had improved dramatically. She hadn't woken up in a cold sweat this morning. Her blood sugar was high, but not off the chart. Her mind felt sharp, focused. And then Delia Wallace had sent it all crashing down.

Sara had ordered some kind of test at the hospital that showed Faith's blood sugar pattern over the last few weeks. The results had not been good. Faith was going to have to meet with a dietitian. Dr. Wallace had told her she was going to have to plan out every meal, every snack and every single moment of her life until she died—which she might do prematurely anyway, because her blood sugar was fluctuating so wildly that Dr. Wallace had told Faith the best thing she could do was take a couple of weeks off from work and focus on educating herself about the care and maintenance of a diabetic.

She loved when doctors said things like that, as if taking two weeks off from work was something that could be achieved with the snap of a finger. Maybe Faith could go to Hawaii or Fiji. She could call up Oprah Winfrey and ask for the name of her personal chef.

Fortunately, there was some good news with the bad. Faith had seen her baby. Well, not really *seen* it—the child was little more than a speck right now—but she had listened to his heartbeat, watched the ultrasound and seen the gentle up and down of the tiny blob inside her, and even though Delia Wallace had insisted that it wasn't quite time for such things, Faith would have sworn that she saw a tiny little hand.

Faith dialed in Will's cell phone number again. It rang over into voicemail almost immediately. She wondered if his phone had finally given up the ghost.

Why he would not get a new one was beyond her. Maybe there was some sort of emotional attachment he had to the thing.

Either way, he was holding her up. She opened the door and got out of the car. Tom Coldfield lived only ten minutes from where his parents had met with their unfortunate accident. His house was in the middle of nowhere, the closest neighbor barely within walking distance. The home itself had that boxlike feel of modern suburban architecture. Faith preferred her own ranch house, with its sloping floorboards and hideous fake paneling in the family room.

Every year when she got her tax rebate, she told herself she was going to have something done to the paneling, and every year Jeremy magically managed to need something around the same time as the check came in. Once, she thought she was going to get away clean, but the little scamp had broken his arm while trying to prove to his friends that he could jump his skateboard off the roof of the house and onto a mattress they had found in the woods.

She put her hand to her stomach. That paneling was going to be up until she died.

Faith fished in her purse for her ID as she walked to the front door. She was wearing heels and one of her nicest dresses, because for some reason this morning it had seemed important to look respectable in front of Delia Wallace—a silly affectation, since Faith had spent their entire time together in a thin paper gown.

She turned around, looking out into the empty street. Still no sign of her partner. She didn't understand what was taking him so long. Tom had told Faith on the phone that he'd already given Will directions to his house. Even taking into account the left/right thing, Will was good at finding his way. He should be here by now. Regardless, he should definitely be answering his phone. Maybe Angie had called again. The way Faith was feeling toward Will right now, she hoped his wife was being every bit her pleasant self.

Faith rang the doorbell and waited much too long for the door to be answered, considering she had been parked in the driveway for nearly a quarter of an hour.

"Hi." The woman who came to the door was thin and angular, but not pretty by any stretch. She gave Faith an awkward, forced smile. Her blonde hair was lank across her forehead, the dark roots growing in. She had that run-down look you get when you have small children.

"I'm Special Agent Faith Mitchell," Faith said, holding up her badge.

"Darla Coldfield." The woman's voice was one of those breathy whispers that implied delicacy. She picked at the collar of the purple blouse she was wearing. Faith could see the edge was worn, threads sticking up where she had picked open the seam.

"Tom said he'd meet me here."

"He should be home any second." The woman seemed to realize she was blocking the doorway. She stepped aside. "Won't you come in?"

Faith walked into the foyer, which was lined with black and white tile. She saw that the tile went all the way through to the back of the house, into the kitchen and family room. Even the dining room and study on either side of the front door were tiled.

Still, she made the perfunctory noise about the woman having a lovely home,

her own footsteps echoing in her ears as they made their way to the family room. The furnishings were more masculine than Faith would have guessed. There was a brown leather couch and matching recliner. The rug on the floor was black with not a speck of dirt or fuzz showing. There were no toys, which was odd considering the Coldfields had two children. Maybe they weren't allowed in the room. She wondered where they spent their time. The part of the house she had seen was hot and uncomfortable even though it was cool outside. Faith felt her skin on the edge of breaking into a sweat. Sun was streaming through the windows, yet every light in the place was on.

Darla asked, "Would you like some tea?"

Faith was looking at her watch again, wondering about Will. "Sure."

"Sweet? Unsweet?"

Faith's answer was not as automatic as it should have been. "Unsweet. Have you lived here long?"

"Eight years."

The place looked about as lived-in as a vacant warehouse. "You have two kids?"

"A boy and a girl." She smiled uncertainly. "Do you have a partner?"

The question seemed strange, given the conversation. "I have a son."

She smiled, putting her hand to her mouth. She had probably picked up the gesture from her mother-in-law. "No, I meant someone you work with."

"Yes." Faith looked at the family photos on the mantel. They were taken from the same series as the one Judith Coldfield had shown them at the shelter. "Maybe you could call Tom and see what's keeping him?"

Her smile faltered. "Oh, no. I wouldn't want to bother him."

"It's police business, so I really *do* need you to bother him."

Darla pressed her lips together. Faith couldn't read her expression. She was almost completely blank. "My husband doesn't like to be rushed."

"And I don't like to be kept waiting."

Darla gave her that same weak smile from before. "I'll go get that tea for you."

She started to leave, but Faith asked, "Do you mind if I use your bathroom?"

Darla turned again, her hands clasped in front of her chest. Her face was still blank. "Down the hall, on the right."

"Thank you." Faith followed her directions, her heels clicking like a drum major's on the tile as she walked past a pantry and what must have been the door to the basement. She was getting a creepy feeling off of Darla Coldfield, but she couldn't quite figure out why. Maybe it was Faith's instinctive hatred of women who constantly deferred to their husbands.

Inside the bathroom, she went straight to the sink, where she splashed cold water on her face. The lights were just as intense in the powder room, and Faith flipped down the switches, but nothing happened. She flipped them back up and then back down again. Still the lights stayed on. She looked up. The bulbs were probably a hundred watts each.

Faith blinked her eyes several times, thinking that looking directly into a burning lightbulb was probably not the smartest thing she had ever done. She grabbed the doorknob to the linen closet to keep herself steady as she waited for the feeling to pass. Maybe she would wait in here for Will instead of sitting on the sofa drinking tea with Darla Coldfield, straining to make small talk. The

bathroom was nice if sparsely furnished. The room was L-shaped, with a linen closet filling in the void between the top and bottom of the L. Faith guessed the laundry room was on the other side of the wall. She could hear the gentle rumble of a clothes dryer through the partition.

Because Faith was a nosy person, she opened the closet door. There was a slow squeak from the hinges, and she stood there waiting for Darla Coldfield to come in and chastise her for being rude. When this did not happen, Faith looked inside. The space was deeper than she would've guessed, but the shelves were narrow—stacked with towels that were neatly folded and a set of sheets with race cars on them that probably belonged to the children.

Where were the children? Maybe they were outside playing. Faith closed the closet door and looked out the small window. The backyard was empty—not even a swing set or tree house. Maybe the kids were taking naps in preparation for Grandma and Grandpa's visit. Faith had never let Jeremy sleep before her parents came to visit. She'd wanted her mother and father to run him ragged so that he was tired enough to sleep in the next morning.

She groaned out a long sigh as she sat on the toilet beside the sink. She was still feeling light-headed, probably from the heat. Or maybe from her blood sugar. She had been on the high side at the doctor's office.

She put her purse on her lap and dug around for her monitor. There had been a huge display for different blood glucose monitors on the wall in the doctor's office. Most of them were either cheap or free, because the real money came from the specialized strips they all used. Each manufacturer had a different one, so once you chose a monitor, you were locked in forever. Unless you dropped it on the bathroom floor and broke it.

"Shit," Faith mumbled, leaning down to pick up the monitor, which had slipped out of her hand and skittered over by the wall. She heard a faint, sonorous noise coming from the machine.

Faith picked up the monitor, wondering what damage she had done. The readout on the machine was still at zero, waiting for a strip. She shook the device, holding it to her ear and listening for the sound again. She leaned down, trying to duplicate the motion that had caused the monitor to make the noise. The sound repeated, more like the kind of thing you would hear on a playground this time—loud and frenzied.

And not coming from the monitor.

Could it be a cat? Some animal caught in the heating ducts? One Christmas, Jeremy's gerbil had been killed in the dryer, and Faith had sold the machine to a neighbor rather than deal with the carnage. But whatever this thing was, it was alive, and obviously intended to stay that way. She leaned down a third time, hovering near the heating grate at the base of the toilet.

The noise was clearer this time, but still muffled. Faith got down on her knees, pressing her ear to the grate. She thought of all the animals that could make that sort of noise. It sounded almost like words.

Help.

It wasn't an animal. It was a woman calling for help.

Faith's hand went into her purse, pulling out the velvet bag where she kept her Glock when she wasn't wearing it on her hip. Her hands were sweating.

There was a sudden, loud knock on the door: Darla. "Are you okay in there,

Agent Mitchell?"

"I'm fine," Faith lied, trying to keep her voice normal. She found her cell phone, tried to ignore that her hands had started shaking. "Is Tom here yet?"

"Yes." The woman went silent. Just that one word hanging in the air.

"Darla?" There was no answer. "Darla, my partner is on the way. He's going to be here any minute." Faith's heart was pounding so hard that her chest hurt. "Darla?"

There was another bang on the door, but this one was sharper. Faith dropped the phone and held the gun with both hands, ready to fire at whoever came into the bathroom. The Glock did not have a conventional safety. The only way it could be fired was if you pulled the trigger all the way back. Faith aimed at the center of the doorway, bracing herself to yank back the trigger as hard as she could.

Nothing. No one came through the door. The knob was not turning. Quickly, she glanced down, looking for her cell phone. It was behind the toilet. She kept her gun trained on the door while she reached down for the phone, snatching it up.

The door stayed closed.

Faith's hands were sweating so badly that her fingers couldn't stay on the buttons. She hissed a curse as she dialed in the number wrong. She was trying again when she heard the closet door squeak open behind her.

She spun around, her gun pointing straight at Darla's chest. Faith took in everything at once—the false door in the closet wall, the washing machine on the other side, the Taser in Darla's hands.

Faith lurched to the side, not bothering to aim as she pulled back on the trigger. The Taser hooks sailed past her, the thin metal wires shimmering in the bright light as the hooks bounced off the wall.

Darla stood there, the spent Taser in her hands. A chunk of sheetrock had been taken out over her left shoulder.

"Don't move," Faith warned, keeping the gun trained on Darla's chest as she fumbled for the doorknob. "I mean it. Don't move."

"I'm sorry," the woman whispered.

"Where's Tom?" When she didn't answer, Faith screamed, "Where the fuck is Tom?"

Darla would only shake her head.

Faith threw open the door, still pointing the gun at Darla as she backed out of the room.

"I'm so sorry," the woman repeated.

Two strong arms wrapped around Faith from behind—a man, his body hard, his strength palpable. It had to be Tom. He lifted her off the floor and, without thinking, Faith pulled the trigger again, firing the Glock into the ceiling. Darla was still standing in the closet, and Faith pulled the trigger with purpose this time, wanting to put a bullet in the woman that could be traced back to her gun. The Glock missed, and Darla ducked away, shutting the false door behind her.

Faith fired again and again as Tom backed her out into the hallway. His hand clamped around Faith's wrist like a vise, the pain so sharp that she was sure her bones had snapped. She held on to the gun as long as she could, but she was no match for his strength. Dropping the weapon, she started kicking with all her

might, reaching out to grab anything she could find—the edge of the door, the wall, the knob on the basement door. Every muscle in her body screamed from pain.

“Fight,” Tom grunted, his lips so close to Faith’s ear that she felt like he was inside of her head. She could feel his body responding to the struggle, the pleasure he was deriving from her fear.

Faith felt a surge of fury tighten her resolve. Anna Lindsey. Jacquelyn Zabel. Pauline McGhee. Olivia Tanner. She would not be another one of his victims. She would not end up at the morgue. She would not abandon her son. She would not lose her baby.

She twisted around and scratched Tom’s face, digging her fingernails into his eyes. She used every part of her body—her hands, her feet, her teeth—to fight him. She would not give in. She would kill him with her bare hands if she had to.

“Let me out of here!” someone screamed from the basement. The noise was a surprise. For a split second, Faith stopped struggling. Tom stopped, too. The door shook. “Let me the fuck out!”

Faith came to her senses. She started kicking again, flailing, doing everything she could to free herself. Tom held on, his powerful arms like a clamp around her body. Whoever was behind the basement door was beating it, trying to break it down. Faith opened up her mouth and screamed as loud as she could. “Help! Help me!”

“Do it!” Tom yelled.

Darla stood at the end of the hallway, the reloaded Taser in her hands. Faith saw her Glock at the woman’s feet.

“Do it!” Tom demanded, his voice barely audible over the banging behind the door. “Shoot her!”

All Faith could think about was the child inside her, those tiny fingers, that delicate heartbeat pressing up and down against her baby’s tissue-thin chest. She went completely limp, relaxing every muscle in her body. Tom hadn’t been expecting her to give in, and he stumbled as he took on her full weight. They both dropped to the floor. Faith scrambled across the tile, reaching for the gun, but he yanked her back like a fish on a line.

The door splintered open, shards of wood flying. A woman ran out, half-fell into the hallway, screaming obscenities. Her hands were at her waist, her feet chained, but she moved with almost laser precision as she slammed her body into Tom’s.

Faith took advantage of the distraction and grabbed the Glock, twisting around, aiming at the bodies thrashing on the floor.

“Fucker!” Pauline McGhee screeched. She was kneeling on Tom’s chest, leaning over him. Her hands were cuffed tight to a belt around her waist, but she had managed to wrap her fingers around his neck. “Die!” she screamed, blood spraying from her torn mouth. Her lips were shredded, her eyes wild. She was forcing all of her weight into Tom’s neck.

“Stop,” Faith managed, her breath rasping between her lips. She felt a deep, searing pain in her belly, like something had torn. Still, she kept her gun trained at Pauline’s chest. There was at least half a magazine left in the Glock; she would use it if she had to. “Get off him,” Faith ordered.

Tom bucked, hands clawing at Pauline. Pauline pressed harder, pivoting on her knees, putting her full weight into his neck.

"Kill him," Darla begged. She was curled into a ball by the bathroom door, the Taser on the floor beside her. "Please ... kill him."

"Stop," Faith warned Pauline, willing her hand not to shake as she gripped the gun.

"Let her do it," Darla pleaded. "Please, let her do it."

Faith groaned as she staggered to her feet. She put the gun to Pauline's head, made her voice as steady and strong as possible. "Stop right now or I will pull this fucking trigger, so help me God."

Pauline looked up. Their eyes locked, and Faith willed every ounce of resolve into her face, even though all she wanted to do was fall to her knees and pray that the life inside of her was going to continue.

"Let him go right now," Faith demanded.

Pauline took her time obeying the order, as if she hoped that one more second of pressure would do the trick. She sat back on the floor, her hands still clenched. Tom rolled over, coughing so hard that his entire body spasmed from the effort.

"Call an ambulance," Faith said, though no one seemed to be moving. Her mind raced. Her vision kept blurring. She had to call Amanda. She had to find Will. Where was he? Why wasn't he here?

"What's wrong with you?" Pauline asked, giving Faith a nasty look.

Faith's head was spinning. She sagged against the wall, trying not to pass out. She felt something wet between her legs. There was another twinge in her belly, almost like a contraction. "Call an ambulance," she repeated.

"Trash ..." Tom Coldfield muttered. "You're all nothing but trash."

"Shut up," Pauline hissed.

Tom rasped, " 'Put now this woman out from me ... and bolt the door after her.' "

"Shut up," Pauline repeated through clenched teeth.

A guttural sound came from Tom's throat. He was laughing. " 'O, Absalom, I am risen.' "

Pauline struggled to get to her knees. "You're going straight to hell, you sick bastard."

"Don't," Faith warned, raising the gun again. "Get a phone." She glanced over her shoulder at Darla. "Get my phone out of the bathroom."

Faith snapped her head around as Pauline leaned over Tom.

"Don't," Faith repeated.

Pauline smiled a grotesque jack-o'-lantern sneer down at Tom Coldfield. Instead of wrapping her hands around his throat again, she spit in his face. "Georgia's a death penalty state, motherfucker. Why else do you think I moved here?"

"Wait," Faith said, bewildered. "You know him?"

Raw hatred flashed in the woman's eyes. "Of course I know him, you stupid bitch. He's my brother."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Will lay on his side on Judith Coldfield's kitchen floor, watching Judith sob into her hands. His nose was itching, which was a funny thing to bother him, considering the fact that he had a kitchen knife sticking out of his back. At least he thought it was a kitchen knife. Every time he tried to turn his head to look, the pain got so bad that he felt himself start to pass out.

He wasn't bleeding badly. The real threat came from the knife moving, shifting away from whatever vessel or artery it was damming and causing the blood to start flowing in earnest. Just thinking about the mechanics of the thing, the metal blade pressing between muscle and sinew, made his head swim. Sweat drenched his body, and he was starting to get chills. Oddly, holding up his neck was the hardest part. The muscles were so tense that his head throbbed with every heartbeat. If he let go for even a second, the pain in his shoulder brought the taste of vomit into his mouth. Will had never realized how many parts of his body were connected to his shoulder.

"He's a good boy," Judith told Will, her voice muffled by her hands. "You don't know how good he is."

"Tell me. Tell me why you think he's good."

The request startled her. She finally looked up at him, seemed to realize he was in danger of eventually dying. "Are you in pain?"

"I'm hurting pretty badly," he admitted. "I need to call my partner. I need to know if she's okay."

"Tom would never hurt her."

The fact that she felt compelled to make that statement sent an icy dread through Will. Faith was a good cop. She could take care of herself, except the times when she couldn't. She had passed out a few days ago—just dropped to the pavement in the parking garage at the courthouse. What if she passed out again? What if she passed out and when she finally came to, she opened her eyes to see another cave, another torture chamber excavated by Tom Coldfield?

Judith wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "I don't know what to do ..."

Will didn't think she was looking for suggestions. "Pauline Seward left Ann Arbor, Michigan, twenty years ago. She was seventeen years old."

Judith looked away.

He took a calculated guess. "The missing persons report filed on her said that she left home because her brother was abusing her."

"That's not true. Pauline was just ... she made that up."

"I've read the report," he lied. "I saw what he did to her."

"He didn't do anything," Judith insisted. "Pauline did those things to herself."

"She hurt herself?"

"She hurt herself. She made up stories. From the moment she was born, she was always making trouble."

Will should have guessed. "Pauline's your daughter."

Judith nodded, obviously disgusted by the fact.

"What kind of trouble did she get into?"

"She wouldn't eat," Judith told him. "She starved herself. We took her to doctor after doctor. We spent every dime we had trying to get help for her, and she repaid us by going to the police and telling them awful stories about Tom. Just awful, awful things."

"That he hurt her?"

She hesitated, then gave the slightest of nods. "Tom has always had a sweet nature. Pauline was just too—" She shook her head, unable to find words. "She made things up about him. Awful things. I knew they couldn't be true." Judith kept coming back to the same point. "Even when she was a small child, she told lies. She was always looking for ways to hurt people. To hurt Tom."

"His name isn't really Tom, is it?"

She was looking somewhere over his shoulder, probably at the handle of the knife. "Tom is his middle name. His first is—"

"Matthias?" he guessed. She nodded again, and for just a moment Will let himself think about Sara Linton. She had been joking at the time, but she had also been right. *Find the guy named Matthias and you find your killer.*

"After Judas's betrayal, the apostles had to decide who would help them tell the story of the resurrection of Jesus." She finally met his gaze. "They chose Matthias. He was a holy man. A true disciple to our Lord."

Will blinked to get the sweat out of his eyes. He told Judith, "Every woman who is missing or dead has a connection to your shelter. Jackie donated her mother's things. Olivia Tanner's bank sponsored your community outreach. Anna Lindsey's law firm did pro bono work. Tom must've met them all there."

"You don't know that."

"Then tell me another connection."

Judith's eyes scanned his back and forth, and he could read the desperation in her face. "Pauline," she suggested. "She might be—"

"Pauline is missing, Mrs. Coldfield. She was abducted from a parking lot two days ago. Her six-year-old son was left in the car."

"She has a child?" Judith's mouth opened in shock. "Pauline has a baby?"

"Felix. Your grandson."

She put her hand to her chest. "The doctors said she wouldn't—I don't understand. How could she have a baby? They said she'd never be able to carry —" She kept shaking her head in disbelief.

"Did your daughter have an eating disorder?"

"We tried to get help for her, but in the end ..." Judith shook her head, as if it was all useless. "Tom teased her about her weight, but all little brothers tease their older sisters. He never meant her any harm. He never meant ..." She stopped, holding back a strangled sob. There was a crack in her façade as she let herself consider the possibility that her son might be the monster Will had described. Just as quickly, she recovered, shaking her head. "No. I don't believe you. Tom would never hurt anyone."

Will's body started to shiver. He still wasn't losing much blood, but his mind wasn't capable of ignoring the pain for longer than a minute at a time. His head would drop, or he would flick sweat out of his eye, and it would flare up like

hellfire. The darkness kept calling to him, the sweet relief of letting go. He let his eyes close for a few seconds, then a few more. Will jerked himself awake, groaning at the searing pain.

Judith said, "You need help. I should get you help." She made no move to do this. The phone started to ring again, and she simply stared at the receiver on the wall.

"Tell me about the cave."

"I don't know anything about that."

"Did your son like to dig holes?"

"My son likes to go to church. He loves his family. He loves helping people."

"Tell me about the number eleven."

"What about it?"

"Tom seems drawn to it. Is it because of his name?"

"He just likes it."

"Judas betrayed Jesus. There were eleven apostles until Matthias came along."

"I know my Bible stories."

"Did Pauline betray you? Were you incomplete until your son came along?"

"This means nothing to me."

"Tom's obsessed with the number eleven," Will told her. "He took Anna Lindsey's eleventh rib. He shoved eleven trash bags up inside her womb."

"Stop!" she shouted. "I don't want to hear any more."

"He electrocuted them. He tortured and raped them."

She screeched, "He was trying to save them!"

The words echoed around the tiny room like a pinball striking metal.

Judith covered her mouth with her hand, horrified.

Will said, "You knew."

"I didn't know anything."

"You must have seen it on the news. Some of the women's names were released. You had to recognize them from your work at the shelter. You saw Anna Lindsey in the road after Henry hit her with the car. You called Tom to take care of her, but there were too many people around."

"No."

"Judith, you know—"

"I know my son," she insisted. "If he was with those women, it was only because he was trying to help them."

"Judith—"

She stood up, and Will could tell she was angry. "I'm not going to listen to you lie about him. I nursed him when he was a baby. I held him—" She cradled her arms. "I held him to my chest and promised him that I would protect him."

"You didn't do that with Pauline, too?"

Her face became emotionless. "If Tom doesn't come, I'm going to have to take care of you myself." She took a knife out of the butcher block. "I don't care if I go to prison for the rest of my life. I will not let you destroy my son."

"You sure you can do that? Stabbing someone in the back isn't the same as stabbing them to their face."

"I'm not going to let you hurt him." She held the knife awkwardly, gripped in both hands. "I won't let you."

"Put the knife down."

“What makes you think you can tell me what to do?”

“My boss is behind you with a gun pointed at your head.”

She gasped, the sound catching in her throat when she whirled around and saw Amanda standing on the other side of the window. Without warning, Judith raised the knife and lunged toward Will. The window exploded. Judith fell to the floor in front of him, the knife still gripped in her hand. A perfect circle of blood seeped into the back of her shirt.

He heard a door break open. People ran in, heavy shoes on the floor, orders being barked. Will couldn't take it anymore. He dropped his head and the pain shot through to his core. Amanda's high heels swam into his vision. She knelt down in front of him. Her mouth was moving, but Will couldn't hear what she was saying. He wanted to ask about Faith, about her baby, but it was too easy to surrender to the darkness.

THREE DAYS LATER



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Pauline McGhee was hard to look at, even as she held her child in her lap. Her mouth had been ripped to shreds by the metal wire she'd chewed through, so she mumbled as she tried to speak, her lips tightly held together. Tiny sutures held the skin in place like something out of *Frankenstein*. And yet, she was hard to feel any sympathy for, perhaps because she kept referring to Faith as "bitch" more than any man ever had.

"Bitch," she said now, "I don't know what I can tell you. I haven't seen my family in twenty years."

Will shifted in his chair beside Faith. His arm was in a sling tight to his chest and he was in visible pain, but he had insisted on coming in for the interview. Faith couldn't blame him for wanting answers. Unfortunately, it was fast becoming obvious that they weren't going to get them from Pauline.

"Tom has lived in sixteen different cities over the last thirty years," Will told her. "We've found cases in twelve of them—women who were abducted and never returned. They were always in pairs. Two women at a time."

"I know what a fucking pair is."

Will opened his mouth to speak, but Faith reached under the table, pressing his knee. Their usual tactics weren't working. Pauline McGhee was a survivor, willing to step over anything or anyone to save her own skin. She had kicked Olivia Tanner into unconsciousness in order to make sure she was the first one to escape the basement. She would have strangled her own brother to death if Faith hadn't stopped her. She wasn't someone who could be reached through empathy.

Faith took a gamble. "Pauline, stop the bullshit. You know you can leave this room at any time. You're staying for a reason."

The injured woman looked down at Felix, stroking his hair. For just an instant, Pauline McGhee seemed almost human. Something about the child transformed her so that Faith suddenly understood the hard outer shell was a defense against the world that only Felix could penetrate. The boy had fallen asleep in her arms as soon as his mother sat down at the conference table. His thumb kept going to his mouth, and Pauline moved it away a few times before giving in. Faith could understand why she wouldn't want to let her son out of sight, but this was hardly the kind of thing you'd want to bring a kid to.

Pauline asked, "Were you really going to shoot me?"

"What?" Faith asked, even though she knew exactly what the woman meant.

"In the hall," she said. "I would've killed him. I wanted to kill him."

"I'm a police officer," Faith answered. "It's my job to protect life."

"*That* life?" Pauline asked, incredulous. "You know what that bastard did." She lifted her chin toward Will. "Listen to your partner. My brother killed at least two dozen women. Do you really think he deserves a trial?" She pressed her lips to the top of Felix's head. "You should've let me kill him. Put him down

like a fucking dog.”

Faith didn't answer, mostly because there was nothing to say. Tom Coldfield was not talking. He wasn't bragging about his crimes or offering to tell where the bodies were buried in exchange for his life. He was resolved to go to prison, probably death row. All he had asked for was bread and water and his Bible, a book that had so many scribbled notations in the margins that the words were barely legible.

Still, Faith had tossed and turned in bed over the last few nights, reliving those few seconds in the hallway. Sometimes she let Pauline kill her brother. Sometimes she ended up having to shoot the woman. None of the scenarios sat well with her, and she had resigned herself to knowing that these emotions were the type that only time could heal. The process of moving on was helped by the fact that the case was no longer Faith and Will's responsibility. Because Matthias Thomas Coldfield's crimes had crossed state lines, he was the FBI's problem now. Faith was only allowed to interview Pauline because they thought the women shared a bond. They were dead wrong.

Or maybe not.

Pauline asked, “How far along are you?”

“Ten weeks,” Faith answered. She had been at the edge of insanity when the paramedics arrived at Tom Coldfield's house. All she could think about was her baby, whether or not it was still safe. Even when the heartbeat had bleated through the fetal monitor, Faith had kept sobbing, begging the EMTs to take her to the hospital. She'd been sure they were all wrong, that something horrible had happened. Oddly, the only person who could convince her otherwise had been Sara Linton.

On the plus side, her whole family knew she was pregnant now, thanks to the Grady nurses referring to Faith as “that hysterical pregnant cop” her entire stay in the ER.

Pauline stroked back Felix's hair. “I got so fat with him. It was disgusting.”

“It's hard,” Faith admitted. “It's worth it, though.”

“I guess.” She brushed her torn lips across her son's head. “He's the only thing good about me.”

Faith had often said the same thing about Jeremy, but now, facing Pauline McGhee, she saw how lucky she was. Faith had her mother, who loved her despite all Faith's faults. She had Zeke, even though he had moved to Germany to get away from her. She had Will, and for better or worse, she had Amanda. Pauline had no one—just a small boy who desperately needed her.

Pauline said, “When I had Felix, it just made me think about her. Judith. How could she hate me so much?” She looked up at Faith, expecting an answer.

Faith said, “I don't know. I can't imagine how anyone could hate their own child. Any child, for that matter.”

“Well, some kids just suck, but your own kid ...”

Pauline went quiet again for such a long time that Faith wondered if they were back to square one again.

Will spoke. “We need to know why all of this happened, Pauline. I need to know.”

She was staring back out the window, her son held close to her heart. She spoke so quietly that Faith had to strain to hear her. “My uncle raped me.”

Faith and Will were both silent, giving the woman space.

Pauline confided, "I was three years old, then four, then coming up on five. I finally told my grandmother what was happening. I thought the bitch would save me, but she turned it around like I was some devil child." Her lips twisted into a bitter sneer. "My mother believed them, not me. She chose their side. Like always."

"What happened?"

"We moved away. We always moved when things got bad. Dad put in for a transfer at work, we sold the house and then we started all over again. Different town, different school, same fucking situation."

Will asked, "When did it get bad with Tom?"

"I was fifteen." Pauline shrugged again. "I had this friend, Alexandra McGhee—that's where I got my name when I changed it. We lived in Oregon a couple of years before we moved to Ann Arbor. That's when it really started with Tom—when everything got bad." Her tone had turned to a dull narrative, as if she was giving a secondhand account of something mundane instead of revealing the most horrible moments of her life. "He was obsessed with me. Like, in love with me. He followed me around, and he would smell my clothes and try to touch my hair and ..."

Faith tried to hide her revulsion, but her stomach clenched at the image the other woman's words conjured.

Pauline said, "Suddenly, Alex stopped coming over. We were best friends. I wanted to know if I'd said something, or done something ..." Her voice trailed off. "Tom was hurting her. I don't know how. At least, I didn't know how in the beginning. I found out soon enough."

"What happened?"

"She was writing this sentence everywhere, over and over again. On her books, on the soles of her shoes, the back of her hand."

"*I will not deny myself,*" Will guessed.

Pauline nodded. "It was this exercise one of the doctors at the hospital gave me. I was supposed to write the sentence, convince myself not to binge and purge, like writing a fucking sentence a zillion times would make it all go away."

"Did you know Tom was making Alex write the sentence?"

"She looked like me," Pauline admitted. "That's why he liked her so much. She was like a substitution for me—same color hair, same height, about the same weight but she looked fatter than me."

The same qualities that had drawn Tom to all the recent victims: Each woman resembled his sister.

Pauline told them, "I asked him about it—why he was making her write the sentence. I mean, I was pissed, right? And I yelled at him, and he just hit me. Not like a slap, but with his fist. And when I fell down, he started beating me."

Faith asked, "What happened next?"

Pauline stared blankly out the window, as if she was alone in the room. "Alex and I were in the woods. We'd go out there to smoke after school. The day that Tom beat me, I met her out there. At first, she wouldn't say anything, but then she just broke down. She finally told me that Tom had been taking her into the basement of our house and doing things to her. Bad things." She closed her eyes.

"Alex took it because Tom said if she didn't, then he would start doing it to me. She was protecting me."

She opened her eyes, staring at Faith with startling intensity. "Alex and I were talking about what to do. I told her it was useless telling my parents, that nothing would happen. So we decided to go to the police. There was this cop I knew. Only, I guess Tom followed us out to the woods. He was always watching us. He had this baby monitor he hid in my room. He'd listen to us and ..." She shrugged, and Faith could very easily guess what Tom had been doing while he listened to his sister and her friend.

Pauline continued, "Anyway, Tom found us in the woods. He hit me in the back of the head with a rock. I don't know what he did to Alex. I didn't see her for a while. I think he was working on her, trying to break her. That was the hardest part. Was she dead? Was he beating her? Torturing her? Or maybe he'd let her go and she was keeping quiet because she was scared of him." She swallowed. "But it wasn't that."

"What was it?"

"He was keeping her in the basement again. Priming her for the really bad stuff."

"No one heard her down there?"

Pauline shook her head. "Dad was gone, and Mom ..." She shook her head again. Faith was convinced they would never really know what Judith Coldfield knew about her son's sadistic ways.

Pauline said, "I don't know how long it lasted, but eventually, Alex ended up in the same place as me."

"Where was that?"

"In the ground," she said. "It was dark. We were blindfolded. He put cotton in our ears, but we could still hear each other. We were tied up. Still ... we knew we were underground. There's a taste, right? Kind of like a wet, dirty taste you get in your mouth. He had dug a cave. It must've taken him weeks. He always liked to plan everything, to control every last detail."

"Was Tom with you all the time after that?"

"Not at first. I guess he was still working on his alibi. He just left us there for a few days—tied up so we couldn't move, couldn't see, could barely hear anything. We screamed at first, but ..." She shook her head as if she could shake away the memory. "He brought us water, but not food. I guess a week went by. I was okay—I'd gone longer than that without eating. But Alex ... She broke. She kept crying all the time, begging me to do something to help her. Then Tom would come, and I'd beg him to shut her up, to make it so I didn't have to hear it." She went silent again, lost in her memories. "And then one day, something changed. He started in on us."

"What did he do?"

"At first, he just talked. He was all into biblical stuff—stuff my mom put into his head about him being a replacement for Judas, who betrayed Jesus. She was always saying how I had betrayed her, how she had carried me to be a good kid, but I had turned out rotten, made her family hate her with my lies."

Faith quoted the last sentence she had heard Tom Coldfield utter. "'O Absalom, I am risen.'"

Pauline shivered, as if the words cut through her. "It's from the Bible. Ammon

raped his own sister, and once he was finished with her, he cast her out for being a whore.” Her torn lips twisted into an approximation of a smile. “Absalom was Ammon’s brother. He killed him for raping their sister.” She gave a harsh laugh. “Too bad I didn’t have another brother.”

“Was Tom always obsessed with religion?”

“Not a regular religion. Not normal. He twisted the Bible to suit whatever he wanted to do. That’s why he was keeping me and Alex underground—so that we would have a chance to be reborn like Jesus.” She looked up at Faith. “Crazy shit, right? He’d go on and on for hours, telling us how bad we were, talking about how he was going to redeem us. He’d touch me sometimes, but I couldn’t see ...” She shuddered again, her whole body shaking from the movement. Felix stirred, and she soothed him back to sleep.

Faith felt her heart thumping in her chest. She could remember her own struggle with Tom, the feel of his hot breath in her ear when he told her, “Fight.”

Will asked, “What did Tom do when he stopped talking to you and Alex?”

“What do you think he did?” she asked sarcastically. “He didn’t know what he was doing, but he knew he liked it when he hurt us.” She swallowed, her eyes tearing up. “It was our first time—both of us. We were only fifteen. Girls didn’t sleep around a lot back then. We weren’t angels or anything, but we weren’t sluts, either.”

“Did he do anything else?”

“He starved us. Not like what he did to the other women, but bad enough.”

“The trash bags?”

She gave a single, tight nod. “We were trash to him. Nothing but trash.”

Tom had said as much in the hallway. “No one missed you or Alex when Tom had you in the cave?”

“They thought we’d run away. Girls do that, right? They just run away from home, and if the parents are there to say that the girls are bad, that they lie all the time and can’t be trusted, then it’s no big deal, right?” She didn’t let them answer. “I bet Tom got a hard-on lying to the cops, telling them he had no idea where we’d gone.”

“How old was Tom when this happened?”

“Three years younger than me.”

“Twelve,” Will said.

“No,” Pauline corrected. “He hadn’t had his birthday yet. He was only eleven when it happened. He turned twelve a month later. Mom had a party. The little freak was out on bail and she threw him a birthday party.”

“How did you get out of the cave?”

“He let us go. He said he was going to kill us if we told anybody, but Alex told her parents anyway, and they believed her.” She snorted a laugh. “Fuck me if they didn’t believe her.”

“What happened to Tom?”

“He was arrested. The cops called, and Mom took him down to the station. They didn’t come get him. They didn’t arrest him. They just called us on the phone and said to bring him in.” She paused, collecting herself. “Tom had a psychiatric evaluation. There was all this talk about sending him to adult prison, but he was only a kid, and the shrinks were screaming about how he needed

help. Tom could look younger when he wanted—much younger than he actually was. Bewildered, like he didn't understand why people were saying all these bad things about him."

"What did the courts decide to do?"

"He was diagnosed with something. I don't know. Psychopath, probably."

"We have his Air Force records. Did you know he served?" Pauline shook her head, and Faith told her, "Six years. He was discharged in lieu of court-martial."

"What does that mean?"

"Reading between the lines, I'd guess that the Air Force didn't want—or know how—to treat his disorder, so they offered him an honorable discharge and he took it." Tom Coldfield's military records were written in the sort of departmental code only a seasoned vet could decipher. As a doctor, Faith's brother, Zeke, had recognized all the clues. The nail in the coffin was the fact that Tom had never been called back up to serve in Iraq, even at the height of the war when enlistment standards had dropped to almost nonexistent.

Will asked, "What happened to Tom in Oregon?"

Pauline answered in a measured tone. "He was supposed to go to the state hospital, but Mom talked to the judge, said we had family back east and could we take him back and put him in a hospital there so he could be close to the people who cared about him. The judge said okay. I guess they were glad to get rid of us. Sort of like with the Air Force, huh? Out of sight, out of mind."

"Did your mother get him treatment?"

"Hell no," she laughed. "My mother did the same fucking thing all over again. She said Alex and I were lying, that we had run away and gotten hurt by a stranger, and we were trying to pin it on Tom because we hated him and we wanted people to feel sorry for us."

Faith felt a sickness in the pit of her stomach, wondering how a mother could be so blind to her child's suffering.

Will asked, "Is that when you changed your names to Coldfield?"

"We changed them to Seward after what happened to Tom. It wasn't easy. There were bank accounts, all sorts of documents to file to make it legal. My dad started asking questions. He wasn't happy, because he actually had to *do* something, you know? Go down to the courthouse, get copies of birth certificates, fill out forms. They were in the middle of changing everything over to Seward when I ran away. I guess when they left Michigan, they changed it back to Coldfield. It's not like Oregon was following up on Tom. As far as they were concerned, his case was closed."

"Did you ever hear from Alex McGhee?"

"She killed herself." Pauline's voice was so cold it sent a chill down Faith's spine. "I guess she couldn't take it. Some women are like that."

Will asked, "You're sure your father didn't know what was going on?"

"He didn't want to know," Pauline answered. But there was no way of confirming this. Henry Coldfield had suffered a massive coronary upon hearing what had happened to his wife and son. He'd died en route to the hospital.

Will kept pressing. "Your father never noticed—"

"He traveled all the time. He was gone for weeks, sometimes as much as a whole month. And even when he was home, he was never really home. He was flying his plane or off hunting or playing golf or just doing whatever the hell he

wanted to do.” Pauline’s tone got angrier with every word. “They had this kind of bargain, you know? She kept the house running, didn’t ask him to help with anything, and he got to do whatever he wanted so long as he handed over his paycheck and didn’t ask any questions. Nice life, huh?”

“Did your father ever hurt you?”

“No. He was never there to hurt me. We saw him at Christmas and Easter. That was about it.”

“Why Easter?”

“I don’t know. It was always special to my mother. She would dye eggs and hang up streamers and stuff. She would tell Tom the story of his birth, how he was special, how she had wanted a son so badly, how he’d made her life complete.”

“Is that why you chose to run away on Easter?”

“I ran away because Tom was digging another hole in the backyard.”

Faith gave her a moment to collect her thoughts. “This was in Ann Arbor?”

Pauline nodded, a faraway look in her eyes. “I didn’t recognize him, you know?”

“When he abducted you?”

“It happened so fast. I was so damn happy to see Felix. I thought I’d lost him. And then my brain started to make the connection that it was Tom standing there, but it was too late by then.”

“You recognized him?”

“I *felt* him. I can’t describe it. I just knew with every part of my body that it was him.” She closed her eyes for a few seconds. “When I came to in the basement, I could still feel him. I don’t know what he did to me while I was passed out. I don’t know what he did.”

Faith suppressed a shudder at the thought. “How did he find you?”

“I think he always knew where I was. He’s good at tracking people down, watching them, figuring out their habits. I guess I didn’t make it too hard, using Alex’s name like I did.” She gave a humorless laugh. “He called me at work about a year and a half ago. Can you believe that? What are the odds that I’d take a call like that and it would be Tom on the other end?”

“Did you know it was him on the phone?”

“Fuck no. I would’ve grabbed Felix and run.”

“What did he want when he called?”

“I told you. It was a cold call.” She shook her head, disbelieving. “He told me about the shelter, that they would take donations and give blank receipts. We’ve got all these rich clients, and they give away their furniture to charity for the tax write-off. It makes them feel better about ditching a fifty-thousand-dollar living room set and buying an eighty-thousand-dollar one.”

Faith couldn’t even comprehend the numbers. “So, you decided to refer your clients to the shelter?”

“I was pissed at Goodwill. They give you a time frame, like between ten and noon. Who can wait for that? My clients are millionaires. They can’t sit around all morning waiting for some homeless dude to show up. Tom said the shelter would make an exact appointment and be there on time. And they always were. They were friendly and clean, which, trust me, is saying a lot. I told everybody to use them.” She realized what she had said. “I told everybody.”

"Including the women on your Internet board?"

She kept silent.

Faith told her what they had found out over the last few days. "Anna Lindsey's firm started giving the shelter legal advice six months ago. Olivia Tanner's bank became a major donor last year. Jackie Zabel called the shelter to pick up things from her mother's house. They all heard about the shelter somewhere."

"I didn't ... I didn't know."

They still hadn't managed to break into the chat room. The site was too sophisticated, and cracking the passwords no longer had a priority for the FBI, since their guy was already sitting in jail. Faith needed the confirmation, though. She had to hear it from Pauline. "You posted about the shelter, didn't you?"

Pauline still did not answer.

"Tell me," Faith said, and for some reason, the request worked.

"Yeah. I posted it."

Faith hadn't realized that she had been holding her breath. She let it out in a slow stream. "How did Tom know they all had eating disorders?"

Pauline looked up. Some of her color seeped back into her cheeks. "How did you know?"

Faith thought about the question. They knew because they had investigated the women's lives, just as methodically as Tom Coldfield had. He'd followed them around, spied on their most intimate moments. And none of them had known he was doing it.

Pauline asked, "Is the other woman all right? The one I was with."

"Yes." Olivia Tanner was well enough to refuse to talk to the police.

"She's a tough bitch."

"So are you." Faith told her, "It might help to talk to her."

"I don't need help."

Faith didn't bother to argue.

Pauline said, "I knew Tom would find me eventually. I kept training myself. Making sure I could go without food. Making sure I could last." She explained, "When it was me and Alex, he would hurt whoever screamed the loudest, whoever broke first. I made sure it wasn't me. That's how I helped myself."

Will asked, "Your father never asked why your mother wanted to change your names and move?"

"She told him it was to give Tom a fresh start—give us all a fresh start." She gave a humorless laugh, directing her words toward Faith. "It's always about the boys, isn't it? Mothers and their sons. Fuck the daughters. It's the sons they really love."

Faith put her hand to her stomach. The gesture had become second nature over the last few days. All along, she had been thinking that the child inside of her was a boy; another Jeremy who would draw pictures and sing to her. Another toddler who would puff out his chest when he told his friends that his mom was a cop. Another young man who was respectful of women. Another adult who knew from his single mother how hard it was to be the fairer sex.

Now Faith prayed that she would have a daughter. Every woman they had met on this case had found a way to hate herself long before Tom Coldfield had gotten hold of her. They all were used to depriving their bodies of everything

from nourishment to warmth to something as vital as love. Faith wanted to show her own child a different path. She wanted a girl she could raise who might have a chance of loving herself. She wanted to see that girl grow into a strong woman who knew her value in the world. And she never wanted either of her children to meet someone as bitter and damaged as Pauline McGhee.

Will told Pauline, "Judith's in the hospital. The bullet just missed her heart."

The woman's nostrils flared. Tears came into her eyes, and Faith wondered if there was still a part of her, no matter how small, that wanted some kind of bond with her mother.

Faith offered, "I can take you to see Judith if you want."

She snorted a laugh, angrily wiping away her tears. "Bitch, don't even. She was never there for me. I'm sure as shit not going to be there for her." She shifted her son on her shoulder. "I need to get him home."

Will tried. "If you could just—"

"Just what?"

He didn't have an answer for her. Pauline stood up and walked to the door, trying to hold Felix as she reached for the knob.

Faith told her, "The FBI will probably be getting in touch with you."

"The FBI can kiss my ass." She managed to get the door open. "And so can you."

Faith watched her walk down the hallway, shifting Felix as she turned toward the elevators. "God," she said softly. "It's hard to feel sorry for her."

"You did the right thing," Will told her.

Faith saw herself in Tom Coldfield's hallway again, her gun pointed at Pauline's head, Tom bucking on the floor. They weren't trained to wing suspects. They were trained to fire a rapid bullet spread straight over the center of the chest.

Unless you were Amanda Wagner. Then you squeezed off a single shot that did enough damage to take them down but not take their life.

Will asked, "If you had to do it again, would you let Pauline kill Tom?"

"I don't know," Faith confessed. "I was operating on autopilot. I just did what I was trained to do."

"Considering what Pauline's been through ..." Will began, then stopped himself. "She's not very nice."

"She's a cold-blooded bitch."

"I'm surprised I haven't fallen in love with her."

Faith laughed. She had seen Angie at the hospital when they brought Will out of surgery. "How is Mrs. Trent doing?"

"She's making sure my life insurance policies are paid up." He took out his phone. "I told her I'd be back by three."

Faith didn't make a comment about the new phone, or the wary look on his face. She supposed Angie Polaski was back in Will's life now. Faith would just have to get used to her, the same way you tolerated an annoying sister-in-law or the boss's whorishly obnoxious daughter.

He pushed back his chair. "I guess I should go."

"You want me to drive you home?"

"I'll walk."

He only lived a few blocks over, but he'd been in surgery less than seventy-

two hours ago. Faith opened her mouth to protest, but Will stopped her.

“You’re a good cop, Faith, and I’m glad you’re my partner.”

There were few things he could have said that would have stunned her more. “Really?”

He leaned down and kissed the top of her head. Before she could respond, he told her, “If you ever see Angie on top of me like that, don’t give her a warning, all right? Just pull the trigger.”

EPILOGUE

Sara stood back as they rolled her patient out of the trauma room. The man had been in a head-on collision with a motorcyclist who thought red lights were only for cars. The cyclist was dead, but the man had a good chance thanks to the fact that he was wearing his seatbelt. Sara was constantly amazed at the number of people she saw in the Grady ER who believed seatbelts were unnecessary. She had seen almost as many in the morgue during her years as coroner for Grant County.

Mary came into the room to clean up the mess for the next patient. "Good save," she said.

Sara felt herself smiling. Grady saw only the worst of the worst. She didn't hear that often enough.

"How's that hysterical pregnant cop doing? Mitchell?"

"Faith," Sara supplied. "Good, I guess." She hadn't talked to Faith since the woman had been airlifted to the emergency room two weeks ago. Every time Sara thought to pick up the phone to check on her, something stopped her from making the call. For her part, Faith hadn't called, either. She was probably embarrassed that Sara had seen her at such a low moment. For a woman who hadn't been sure whether or not she was going to keep her baby, Faith Mitchell had sobbed like a child when she thought she'd lost it.

Mary asked, "Isn't your shift over?"

Sara glanced at the clock. Her shift had ended twenty minutes ago. "You need help?" She indicated various detritus she'd thrown on the floor minutes earlier as she'd worked to save her patient's life.

"Go on," Mary told her. "You've been here all night."

"So have you," Sara reminded her, but she didn't have to be told twice to leave.

Sara walked down the hall toward the doctors' lounge, stepping aside as gurneys whizzed by. Patients were stacked up like sardines again, and she ducked under the counter at the nurses' station to take a shortcut away from them. CNN was on the television over the desk; she saw that the Tom Coldfield case was still in the news.

As big as the story was, Sara found it remarkable that more people had not come forward to tell their version of events. She hadn't expected Anna Lindsey to exploit herself for money, but the fact that the other two surviving women were equally as tight-lipped was surprising in this age of instant movie deals and television exclusives. Sara had gleaned from the news reports that there was more to the story than GBI was letting on, but she was hard-pressed to find anyone who was willing to share the truth.

She certainly could not be faulted for trying. Faith had been incapable of communicating anything when she'd been brought into the ER, but Will Trent had been kept overnight for observation. The kitchen knife had missed all the

major arteries, but his tendons were another story. He was looking at months of physical therapy before he got back his full range of motion. Despite this, Sara had gone into his room the next morning with the blatant intent of pumping him for information. He'd been different with her, and kept pulling up the bedsheet, finally tucking it under his chin in an oddly chaste manner, as if Sara had never seen a man's chest before.

Will's wife had shown up a few minutes later, and Sara had realized instantly that the awkward moment she'd had with Will Trent on her couch was purely a figment of her imagination. Angie Trent was striking and sexy in that dangerous-looking way that drives men to extremes. Standing beside her, Sara had felt slightly less interesting than the hospital wallpaper. She had made her excuses and left as quickly as politeness would allow. Men who liked women like Angie Trent did not like women like Sara.

She was relieved by the revelation, if only slightly disappointed. It had been nice thinking that a man had found her attractive. Not that she would do anything about it. Sara would never be able to give her heart away to another human being the way she had with Jeffrey. It wasn't that she was incapable of love; she was simply incapable of repeating that kind of abandon.

"Hey there." Krakauer was walking out of the lounge as she went in. "You off?"

"Yes," Sara told him, but the doctor was already down the hall, staring straight ahead, trying to ignore the patients who were calling to him.

She went to her locker and spun the dial. She took out her purse and dropped it on the bench behind her. The zipper gaped open. She saw the edge of the letter tucked in between her wallet and her keys.

The Letter. The explanation. The excuse. The plea for absolution. The shifting of blame.

What could the woman who had single-handedly brought about Jeffrey's death possibly have to say?

Sara took out the envelope. She rubbed it between her fingers. There was no one else in the lounge. She was alone with her thoughts. Alone with the diatribe. The ramblings. The juvenile justifications.

What could be said? Lena Adams had worked for Jeffrey. She was one of his detectives on the Grant County police force. He had covered for Lena, bailed her out of trouble and fixed her mistakes for over ten years. In return, she had put his life in jeopardy, gotten him mixed up with the kind of men who killed for sport. Lena had not planted that bomb or even known about it. There was no court of law that would condemn her for her actions, but Sara knew—knew to the core of her being—that Lena was responsible for Jeffrey's death. It was Lena who had gotten him involved with those bloodless mercenaries. It was Lena who had put Jeffrey in the way of the men who murdered him. As usual, Jeffrey had been protecting Lena, and it had gotten him killed.

And for that, Lena was as guilty as the man who had planted the bomb. Even guiltier, as far as Sara was concerned, because Sara knew that Lena's conscience was eased by now. She knew that there were no charges that could be brought, no punishment to bring down on her head. Lena would not be fingerprinted or humiliated as they photographed and strip-searched her. She would not be put into solitary confinement because the inmates wanted to kill the cop who'd just

been sentenced to prison. She would not feel the needle in her arm. She would not look out into the viewing area of the death chamber at the state penitentiary and see Sara sitting there, waiting for Lena Adams to finally die for her crimes.

She had gotten away with cold-blooded murder, and she would never be punished for it.

Sara tore off the corner of the envelope and slipped her thumb along the edge, breaking the seal. The letter was on yellow legal paper, one-sided, each of the three pages numbered. The ink was blue, probably from a ballpoint pen.

Jeffrey had favored yellow legal pads. Most cops do. They keep stacks of them on hand, and they always produce a fresh one when a suspect is ready to write a confession. They slide the tablet across the table, uncap a fresh new pen and watch the words flow from pen to paper, the confessor turning from suspect to criminal.

Juries like confessions written on yellow legal paper. It's something familiar to them, less formal than a typed statement, though there was always a typed statement to back it up. Sara wondered if somewhere there was a transcription of the printed capital letters that crossed the pages she now held in her hands. Because, as sure as Sara was standing in the doctors' lounge at Grady Hospital, this was a confession.

Would it make a difference, though? Would Lena's words change anything? Would they bring back Jeffrey? Would they give Sara back her old life—the life where she belonged?

After the last three and a half years, Sara knew better. Nothing would bring that back, not pleading or pills or punishments. No list would ever capture a moment. No memory would ever re-create that state of bliss. There would only be the emptiness, the gaping hole in Sara's life that had once been filled by the only man in the world she could ever possibly love.

In short, no matter what Lena had to say, it would never bring Sara any peace. Maybe knowing this made it easier.

Sara sat down on the bench behind her and read the letter anyway.

To my readers ...

thank you for trusting me.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First off, I want to thank my readers from the bottom of my heart for their continued support. I felt such a sense of purpose while I was writing Sara's story, and I hope y'all think it was worth it.

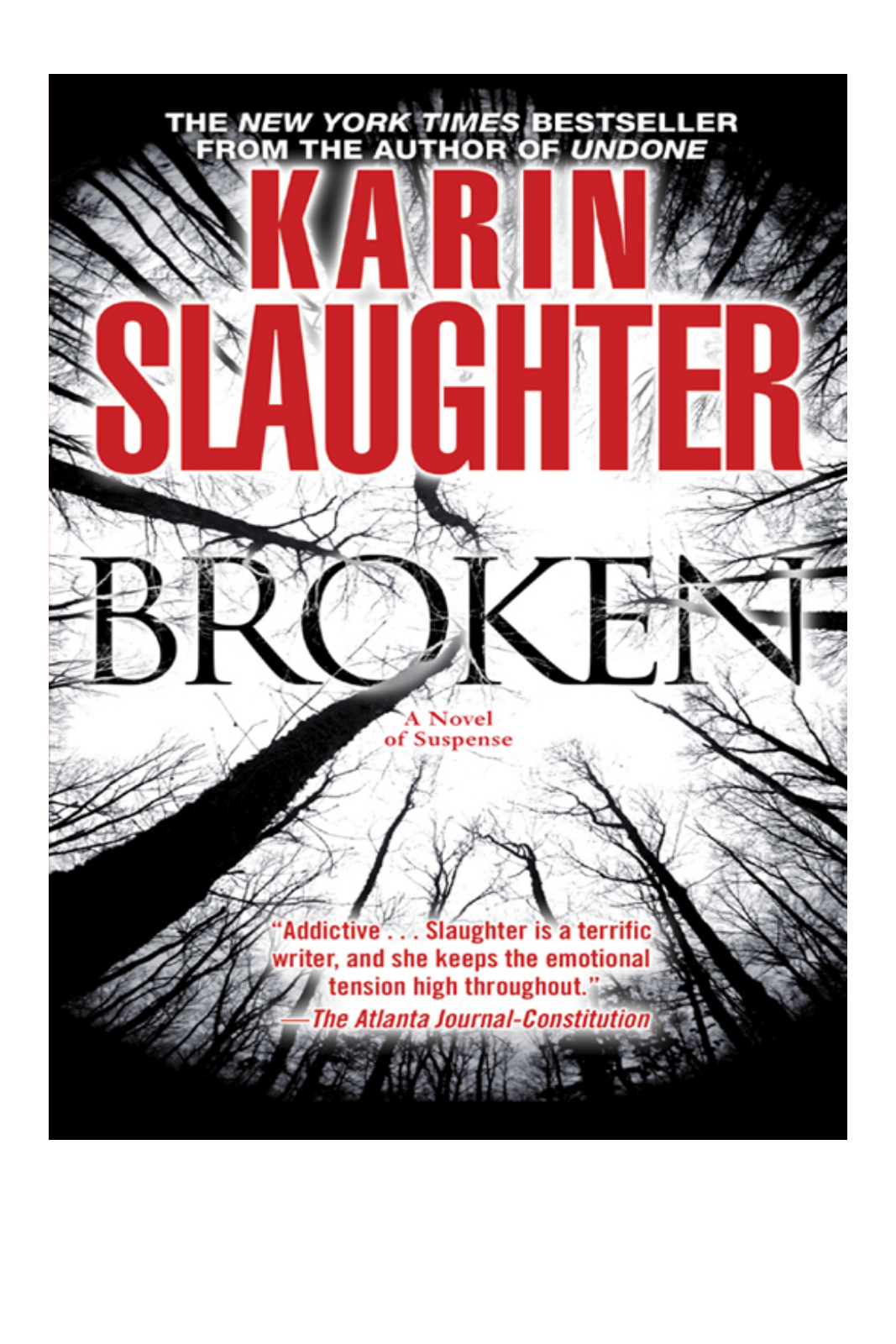
On the publishing side, the usual suspects are to be thanked: the Kates (M and E, respectively), Victoria Sanders, and everyone at Random House U.S., U.K. and Germany. Special appreciation goes to my friends at the Busy Bee. I wanted to thank you in Dutch, but the only Dutch words I know are the bad ones. *Schijten!*

The Georgia Bureau of Investigation was kind enough to let me go behind the scenes with some of their special agents and technicians. Holy crap at the job y'all do. Director Vernon Keenan, John Bankhead, Jerrie Gass, Assistant Special Agent in Charge Jesse Maddox, Special Agent Wes Horner, Special Agent David Norman and others unnamed here—thank you all for your time and patience, especially when I was asking the crazier questions.

Sara continues to benefit from Dr. David Harper's many years in medicine. Trish Hawkins and Debbie Teague were again instrumental in giving Will obstacles—and helping me figure ways around them. Don Taylor, you are a peach and a true friend.

My daddy made me vegetable soup when I was too loopy from cold medicine to string two sentences together. D.A. ordered pizza when my fingers were too tired from typing.

Oh—and, yet again, I have taken liberties with roads and landmarks. For instance, Georgia Route 316 in Conyers is not meant to be Highway 316, which runs through Dacula. It's fiction, y'all.

The background of the book cover is a black and white photograph of a dense forest of bare trees, viewed from a low angle looking up towards the sky. The branches are intricate and dark against a lighter sky.

THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER
FROM THE AUTHOR OF *UNDONE*

KARIN SLAUGHTER

BROKEN

A Novel
of Suspense

"Addictive . . . Slaughter is a terrific
writer, and she keeps the emotional
tension high throughout."

—*The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

**KARIN
SLAUGHTER**

BROKEN

A Novel of Suspense



DELL • NEW YORK

Broken is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2010 by Karin Slaughter

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by Delacorte Press, an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc., New York.

DELACORTE PRESS is a registered trademark of Random House, Inc., and the colophon is a trademark of Random House, Inc.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Slaughter, Karin,
Broken : a novel / Karin Slaughter.
p. cm.

eISBN: 978-0-440-33959-5

1. Linton, Sara (Fictitious character)—Fiction.
2. Policewomen—Fiction.
3. Georgia—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3569.L275B76 2010

813'.54—dc22 2010004424

www.bantamdell.com

Cover design: Carlos Beltran

v3.0_r1

Contents

Master - Table of Contents

Broken

Title Page

Copyright

Prologue

Monday

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Tuesday

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Wednesday

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

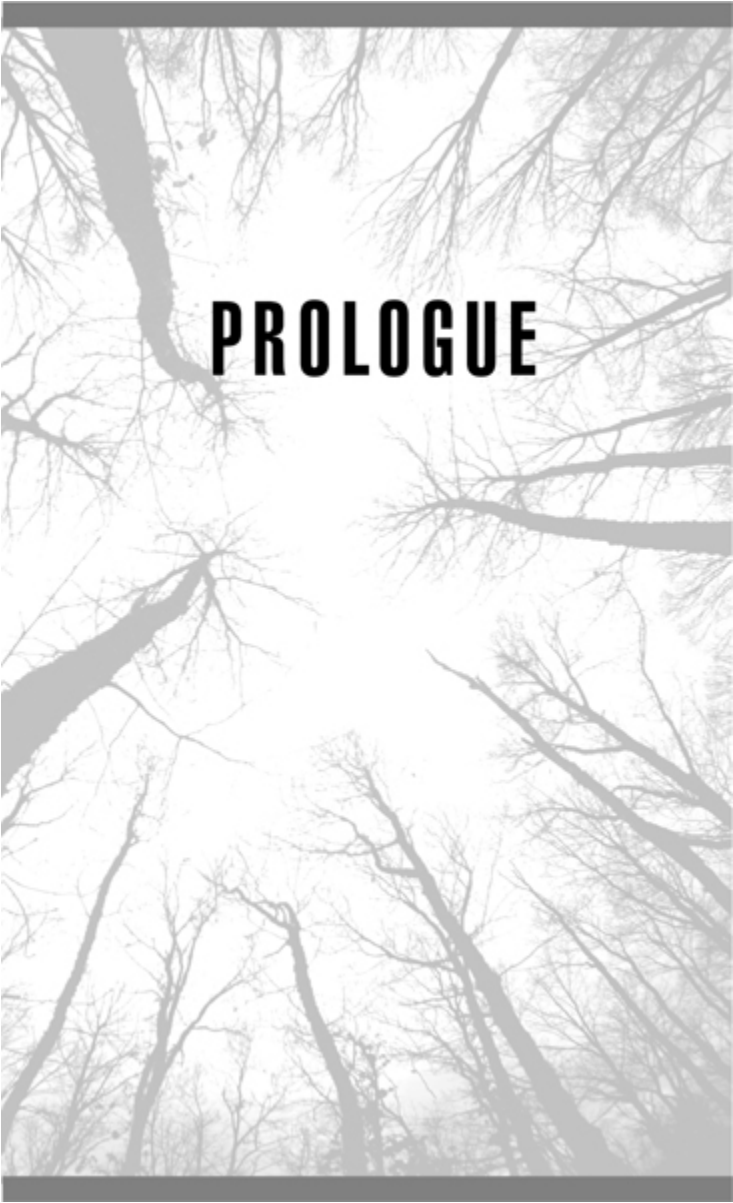
Chapter 19

Three Weeks Later

Epilogue

Dedication

Acknowledgments



PROLOGUE

Allison Spooner wanted to leave town for the holiday, but there was nowhere to go. There was no reason to stay here, either, but at least it was cheaper. At least she had a roof over her head. At least the heat in her crappy apartment occasionally worked. At least she could eat a hot meal at work. At least, at least, at least ... Why was her life always about the least of things? When was there going to come a time when it started being about the most?

The wind picked up and she clenched her fists in the pockets of her light jacket. It wasn't so much raining as misting down a cold wetness, like walking around inside a dog's nose. The icy chill coming off Lake Grant made it worse. Every time the breeze picked up, she felt as if tiny, dull razors were slicing through her skin. This was supposed to be south Georgia, not the freaking South Pole.

As she struggled for her footing along the tree-lined shores, it seemed like every wave that lapped the mud brought the temperature down another degree. She wondered if her flimsy shoes would be enough to keep her toes from getting frostbite. She had seen a guy on TV who'd lost all his fingers and toes to the cold. He'd said he was grateful to be alive, but people will say anything to get on TV. The way Allison's life was going right now, the only program she'd end up on was the nightly news. There'd be a picture—probably that awful one from her high school yearbook—beside the words “Tragic Death.”

The irony was not lost on Allison that she would be more important to the world if she were dead. No one gave a crap about her now—the meager living she was scraping out, the constant struggle of keeping up with her classes while juggling all the other responsibilities in her life. None of it would matter to anybody unless she turned up frozen on the lakeshore.

The wind picked up again. Allison turned her back to the cold, feeling its freezing fingers probe her rib cage, squeeze her lungs. A shiver racked her body. Her breath was a cloud in front of her. She closed her eyes. She chanted her problems through chattering teeth.

Jason. School. Money. Car. Jason. School. Money. Car.

The mantra continued well past the penetrating gust. Allison opened her eyes. She turned around. The sun was going down faster than she'd thought. She turned around, facing the college. Should she go back? Or should she go forward?

She chose to go forward, tucking her head down against the howling wind.

Jason. School. Money. Car.

Jason: Her boyfriend had turned into an asshole, seemingly overnight.

School: She was going to flunk out of college if she didn't find more time to study.

Money: She wasn't going to be able to live, let alone go to school, if she cut back any more hours at work.

Car: Her back had started smoking this morning when she cranked it up, which was no big deal since it had been smoking for months, but this time the smoke was on the inside, coming through the heating vents. She'd nearly suffocated driving to school.

Allison trudged along, adding “frostbite” to her list as she rounded the bend in the lake. Every time she blinked, it felt like her eyelids were cutting through thin sheets of ice.

Jason. School. Money. Car. Frostbite.

The frostbite fear seemed more immediate, though she was reluctant to admit that the more she worried about it, the warmer she felt. Maybe her heart was beating faster or her walking pace was picking up as the sun began to set and she realized that all of her whining about dying in the cold might come true if she didn't hurry the hell up.

Allison reached out, bracing herself against a tree so that she could pick her way past a tangle of roots that dipped into the water. The bark was wet and spongy under her fingertips. A customer had sent back a hamburger at lunch today because he said the bun was too spongy. He was a big, gruff man in full hunting gear, not the sort of guy you'd expect to use a delicate word like "spongy." He had flirted with her and she had flirted back, and then when he left there was a fifty-cent tip on his ten-dollar meal. He'd actually winked at her as he walked out the door, like he was doing her a favor.

She wasn't sure how much more of this she could take. Maybe her grandmother had been right. Girls like Allison didn't go to college. They found work at the tire factory, met a guy, got pregnant, got married, had a couple of more kids, then got divorced, sometimes in that order, sometimes not. If she was lucky, the guy didn't beat her much.

Was that the kind of life Allison wanted for herself? It was the kind of life that was written in her blood. Her mother had lived it. Her grandmother had lived it. Her aunt Sheila had lived it until she pulled a shotgun on her uncle Boyd and nearly took his head off. All three of the Spooner women had at some point or another thrown away everything for a worthless man.

Allison had watched it happen to her mother so often that by the time Judy Spooner was in the hospital for the last time, every bit of her insides eaten away from the cancer, all Allison could reflect on was the waste of her mother's life. She'd even *looked* wasted. At thirty-eight years old, her hair was thinning and nearly all gray. Her skin was faded. Her hands were clawed from working at the tire factory—picking tires off the belt, pressure-testing them, putting them back on the belt, then picking up the next tire, then again and again, over two hundred times a day, so that every joint in her body ached by the time she crawled into bed at night. Thirty-eight years old and she welcomed the cancer. Welcomed the relief.

One of the last things Judy had told Allison was that she was glad to be dying, glad that she didn't have to be alone anymore. Judy Spooner believed in heaven and redemption. She believed that one day streets of gold and many mansions would replace her gravel drive and trailer-park existence. All Allison believed was that she had never been enough for her mother. Judy's glass was perpetually half empty, and all the love Allison poured into her over the years would never fill her mother up.

Judy was too far drawn into the muck. The muck of her dead-end job. The muck of one worthless man after another. The muck of a baby holding her down.

College was going to be Allison's salvation. She was good at science. Looking at her family, it made no sense, but somehow she understood how chemicals worked. She understood at a basic level the synthesis of macromolecules. Her grasp of synthetic polymers came hand in glove. Most important, she knew how

to study. She knew that somewhere on earth, there was always a book with an answer in it, and the best way to find that answer was to read every book you could get your hands on.

By her senior year in high school, she had managed to stay away from the boys and the drinking and the meth that had ruined just about every girl her age in her small hometown of Elba, Alabama. She wasn't going to end up being one of those soulless, washed-out girls who worked the night shift and smoked Kools because they were elegant. She wasn't going to end up with three kids by three different men before she hit thirty. She wasn't going to ever wake up one morning unable to open her eyes because some man's fist had beaten them shut the night before. She wasn't going to end up dead and alone in a hospital bed like her mother.

At least that's what she'd been thinking when she left Elba three years ago. Mr. Mayweather, her science teacher, had pulled every string he could grab to get her enrolled in a good college. He wanted her to get as far away from Elba as possible. He wanted her to have a future.

Grant Tech was in Georgia, and it wasn't far away in miles so much as far away in feeling. The college was enormous compared to her high school, which had a graduating class of twenty-nine people. Allison had spent her first week on campus wondering how it was possible to be in love with a place. Her classes were filled with kids who had grown up with opportunities, who'd never considered *not* going to college straight out of high school. None of her fellow students snickered when she raised her hand to answer a question. They didn't think you were selling out if you actually listened to the teacher, tried to learn something other than how to give yourself French tips or weave extensions into your hair.

And the area around the college was so pretty. Elba was a blight, even for south Alabama. Heartsdale, the city where Grant Tech was located, felt like a town you'd see on television. Everyone tended their yards. Flowers lined Main Street in the spring. Total strangers waved at you with a smile on their face. At the diner where she worked, the locals were so kind, even if they were bad tippers. The town wasn't so big that she got lost. Unfortunately, it wasn't so big that she didn't meet Jason.

Jason.

She'd met him her sophomore year. He was two years older, more experienced, more sophisticated. His idea of a romantic date wasn't sneaking into a movie and doing it quick in the back row before the manager kicked you out. He took her to real restaurants with cloth napkins on the tables. He held her hand. He listened to her. When they had sex, she finally understood why people called it making love. Jason didn't just want better things for himself. He wanted better things for Allison. She'd thought what they had was a serious thing—the last two years of her life had been spent building something with him. And then suddenly, he had turned into a different person. Suddenly, everything that had been so great about their relationship was the reason it was falling apart.

And, as with her mother, Jason had somehow managed to make it all Allison's fault. She was cold. She was distant. She was too demanding. She never had time for him. As if Jason was an affectionate saint who spent his days wondering what would make Allison happy. She wasn't the one who went on all-night

benders with her friends. She wasn't the one getting mixed up with weird people at school. She sure as hell wasn't the one who got them involved with that jerk from town. How could that be Allison's fault if she had never even seen the guy's face?

Allison shivered again. Every step she took around this damn lake, it seemed like the shoreline squeezed out another hundred yards just to spite her. She looked down at the wet ground beneath her feet. It had been storming for weeks. Flash floods had taken out roads, cut down trees. Allison had never been good with bad weather. The darkness got to her, tried to pull her down. It made her moody and tearful. All she wanted to do was sleep away the time until the sun came back out.

"Shit!" Allison hissed, catching herself before she slipped. The cuffs of her pants were caked in mud, her shoes nearly soaked through. She looked out into the churning lake. The rain was sticking to her eyelashes. She brushed back her hair with her fingers as she stared at the dark waters. Maybe she should let herself slip. Maybe she should let herself fall all the way into the lake. What would it be like to let herself go? What would it feel like to let the undertow take her farther to the center of the lake where her feet no longer touched the ground and her lungs could no longer find air?

This wasn't the first time she'd thought about it. It was probably the weather, the relentless rain and dreary sky. Everything seemed more depressing in the rain. And some things were more depressing than others. There had been a story in the paper last Thursday about a mother and child who'd drowned in their Volkswagen Beetle two miles outside of town. They were within spitting distance of the Third Baptist Church when a flash flood cut through the street and whisked them away. There was something about the design of the old Beetles that made them able to float, and this newer model had floated, too. At least at first.

The church crowd who'd just left their usual potluck were helpless to do anything for fear of getting caught up in the flood. They watched in horror as the Beetle spun around on the surface of the water, then tipped over. Water flooded into the cab. Mother and child were tossed into the current. The woman they interviewed in the paper said she would go to sleep every night and wake up every morning for the rest of her life seeing that little three-year-old's hand reaching out from the water before the final time the poor thing was pulled down.

Allison could not stop thinking of the child, either. Even though she had been at the library when it happened. Even though she'd never met the woman or the child or even the lady who spoke to the paper, she could see that little hand reaching up every time she closed her eyes. Sometimes, the hand grew larger. Sometimes, it was her mother reaching out for her help. Sometimes, she woke up screaming because the hand was pulling her down.

If she was telling the truth, Allison's mind had turned toward dark thinking long before the newspaper story. She couldn't blame the weather completely, but certainly the constant rain, the unrelenting overcast, had churned up inside of her mind its own kind of despair. How much easier would it be if she just gave in? Why go back to Elba and turn into some toothless, haggard old woman with eighteen kids to feed when she could just walk into the lake and for once

take control of her destiny?

She was turning into her mother so fast that she could almost feel her hair going gray. She was just as bad as Judy—thinking she was in love when all the guy was interested in was what was between her legs. Her aunt Sheila had said as much on the phone last week. Allison had been whining about Jason, wondering why he wouldn't return her calls.

A long drag on her cigarette, then, during the exhale, *"You sound just like your mother."*

A knife in her chest would have been faster, cleaner. The worst part was that Sheila was right. Allison loved Jason. She loved him way too much. She loved him enough to call him ten times a day even though he never picked up. She loved him enough to hit reload on her stupid computer every two minutes to see if he had answered one of her nine billion emails.

She loved him enough to be out here in the middle of the night doing the dirty work that he didn't have the balls to do.

Allison took another step closer to the lake. She could feel her heel start to slip, but her body's automatic need for self-preservation took over before she fell. Still, the water lapped against her shoes. Her socks were already soaked. Her toes were beyond numb, to that point where a sharp pain seemed to pierce through the bone. Was that what it would be like—a slow numbing falling into a painless passage?

She was terrified of suffocating. That was the problem. She'd loved the ocean for maybe ten minutes as a kid, but that had changed by the time she turned thirteen. Her idiot cousin Dillard had held her under the water once at the municipal pool, and now she didn't even like to take baths because she was afraid she'd get water up her nose and panic.

If Dillard were here, he'd probably push her into the lake without her even having to ask. That first time he'd held her head down under the water, he hadn't shown a bit of remorse. Allison had thrown up her lunch. She was racked with sobs. Her lungs were burning, and he'd just said, "Heh-heh," like an old man who pinches the fire out of the back of your arm just to hear you squeal.

Dillard was Sheila's boy, her only child, more disappointing to her than his father, if that was even possible. He huffed so much spray paint that his nose was a different color every time you saw him. He smoked crystal. He stole from his mama. The last Allison heard, he was in prison for trying to rob a liquor store with a water pistol. The clerk had cracked open his skull with a baseball bat by the time the cops got there. The result was that Dillard was even dumber than before, but that wouldn't have stopped him from passing up a good opportunity. He would've given Allison a good shove with both hands, sending her headfirst into the water as he let out his little cackle. "Heh-heh." All the while she'd be flailing, working her way up to drowning.

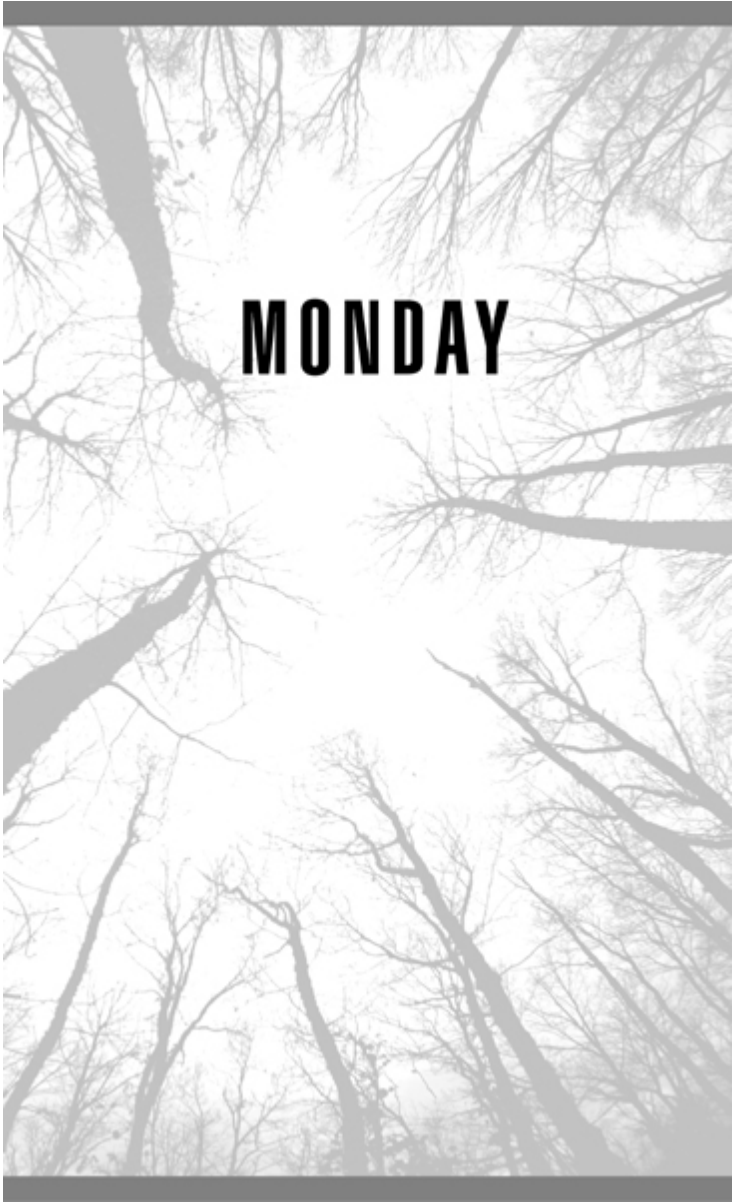
How long would it take before she passed out? How long would Allison have to live in terror before she died? She closed her eyes again, trying to think about the water surrounding her, swallowing her. It would be so cold that it would feel warm at first. You couldn't live long without air. You'd pass out. Maybe the panic would take hold, sending you into some kind of hysterical unconsciousness. Or maybe you would feel alive—shot through with adrenaline, fighting like a squirrel trapped in a paper bag.

She heard a branch snap behind her. Allison turned, surprised.

“Jesus!” She slipped again, this time for real. Her arms flailed out. Her knee collapsed. Pain took away her breath. She slammed face-first into the mud. A hand grabbed the back of her neck, forcing her to stay down. Allison inhaled the bitter coldness of the earth, the wet, oozing muck.

Instinctively, she struggled, fighting the water, fighting the panic that flooded into her brain. She felt a knee jam into the base of her spine, pinning her firmly to the ground. Burning pain seared into her neck. Allison tasted blood. She didn’t want this. She wanted to live. She *had* to live. She opened her mouth to scream it at the top of her lungs.

But then—darkness.



MONDAY

CHAPTER ONE

Fortunately, the winter weather meant the body at the bottom of the lake would be well preserved, though the chill on the shore was bone-aching, the sort of thing that made you strain to remember what August had been like. The sun on your face. The sweat running down your back. The way the air conditioner in your car blew out a fog because it could not keep up with the heat. As much as Lena Adams strained to remember, all thoughts of warmth were lost on this rainy November morning.

“Found her,” the dive captain called. He was directing his men from the shore, his voice muffled by the constant shush of the pouring rain. Lena held up her hand in a wave, water sliding down the sleeve of the bulky parka she had thrown on when the call had come in at three this morning. The rain wasn’t hard, but it was relentless, tapping her back insistently, slapping against the umbrella that rested on her shoulder. Visibility was about thirty feet. Everything beyond that was coated in a hazy fog. She closed her eyes, thinking back to her warm bed, the warmer body that had been wrapped around her.

The shrill ring of a phone at three in the morning was never a good sound, especially when you were a cop. Lena had woken out of a dead sleep, her heart pounding, her hand automatically snatching up the receiver, pressing it to her ear. She was the senior detective on call, so she in turn had to start other phones ringing across south Georgia. Her chief. The coroner. Fire and rescue. The Georgia Bureau of Investigation to let them know that a body had been found on state land. The Georgia Emergency Management Authority, who kept a list of eager civilian volunteers ready to look for dead bodies on a moment’s notice.

They were all gathered here at the lake, but the smart people were waiting in their vehicles, heat blasting while a chill wind rocked the chassis like a baby in a cradle. Dan Brock, the proprietor of the local funeral home who did double duty as the town coroner, was asleep in his van, head back against the seat, mouth gaping open. Even the EMTs were safely tucked inside the ambulance. Lena could see their faces peering through the windows in the back doors. Occasionally, a hand would reach out, the ember of a cigarette glowing in the dawn light.

She held an evidence bag in her hand. It contained a letter found near the shore. The paper had been torn from a larger piece—college ruled, approximately eight and a half inches by six. The words were all caps. Ballpoint pen. One line. No signature. Not the usual spiteful or pitiful farewell, but clear enough: *I WANT IT OVER.*

In many ways, suicides were more difficult investigations than homicides. With a murdered person, there was always someone you could blame. There were clues you could follow to the bad guy, a clear pattern you could lay out to explain to the family of the victim exactly why their loved one had been stolen away from them. Or, if not why, then who the bastard was who’d ruined their

lives.

With suicides, the victim is the murderer. The person upon whom the blame rests is also the person whose loss is felt most deeply. They are not around to take the recriminations for their death, the natural anger anyone feels when there is a loss. What the dead leave instead is a void that all the pain and sorrow in the world can never fill. Mother and father, sisters, brothers, friends and other relatives—all find themselves with no one to punish for their loss.

And people always want to punish someone when a life is unexpectedly taken.

This was why it was the investigator's job to make sure every single inch of the death scene was measured and recorded. Every cigarette butt, every discarded piece of trash or paper, had to be catalogued, checked for fingerprints, and sent to the lab for analysis. The weather was noted in the initial report. The various officers and emergency personnel on scene were recorded in a log. If a crowd was present, photographs were taken. License plates were checked. The suicide victim's life was investigated just as thoroughly as with a homicide: Who were her friends? Who were her lovers? Was there a husband? Boyfriend? Girlfriend? Were there angry neighbors or envious co-workers?

Lena knew only what they had found so far: a pair of women's sneakers, size eight, placed a few feet away from the suicide note. Inside the left shoe was a cheap ring—twelve-karat gold with a lifeless ruby at the center. The right shoe contained a white Swiss Army watch with fake diamonds for numbers. Underneath this was the folded note.

I want it over.

Not much of a comfort for those left behind.

Suddenly, there was a splash of water as one of the divers surfaced from the lake. His partner came up beside him. They each struggled against the silt on the lake bottom as they dragged the body out of the cold water and into the cold rain. The dead girl was small, making the effort seem exaggerated, but quickly Lena saw the reason for their struggle. A thick, industrial-looking chain was wrapped around her waist with a bright yellow padlock that hung low, like a belt buckle. Attached to the chain were two cinder blocks.

Sometimes in policing, there were small miracles. The victim had obviously been trying to make sure she couldn't back out. If not for the cinder blocks weighing her down, the current would have probably taken the body into the middle of the lake, making it almost impossible to find her.

Lake Grant was a thirty-two-hundred-acre man-made body of water that was three hundred feet deep in places. Underneath the surface were abandoned houses, small cottages and shacks where people had once lived before the area was turned into a reservoir. There were stores and churches and a cotton mill that had survived the Civil War only to be shut down during the Depression. All of this had been wiped out by the rushing waters of the Ochawahee River so that Grant County could have a reliable source of electricity.

The National Forestry Service owned the best part of the lake, over a thousand acres that wrapped around the water like a cowl. One side touched the residential area where the more fortunate lived, and the other bordered the Grant Institute of Technology, a small but thriving state university with almost five thousand students enrolled.

Sixty percent of the lake's eighty-mile shoreline was owned by the State

Forestry Division. The most popular spot by far was this one, what the locals called Lover's Point. Campers were allowed to stake tents. Teenagers came here to party, often leaving behind empty beer bottles and used condoms. Occasionally, there would be a call about a fire someone had let get out of control, and once, a rabid bear had been reported, only to turn out to be an elderly chocolate Labrador who had wandered away from his owners' campsite.

And bodies were occasionally found here, too. Once, a girl had been buried alive. Several men, predictably teenagers, had drowned performing various acts of stupidity. Last summer, a child had broken her neck diving into the shallow waters of the cove.

The two divers paused, letting the water drip off the body before resuming their task. Finally, nods went around and they dragged the young woman onto the shore. The cinder blocks left a deep furrow in the sandy ground. It was six-thirty in the morning, and the moon seemed to wink at the sun as it began its slow climb over the horizon. The ambulance doors swung open. The EMTs cursed at the bitter cold as they rolled out the gurney. One of them had a pair of bolt cutters hefted over his shoulder. He slammed his hand on the hood of the coroner's van, and Dan Brock startled, comically flailing his arms in the air. He gave the EMT a stern look, but stayed where he was. Lena couldn't blame him for not wanting to rush into the rain. The victim wasn't going anywhere except the morgue. There was no need for lights and sirens.

Lena walked closer to the body, carefully folding the evidence bag containing the suicide note into her jacket pocket and taking out a pen and her spiral-bound notebook. Crooking her umbrella between her neck and shoulder, she wrote the time, date, weather, number of EMTs, number of divers, number of cars and cops, what the terrain was like, noted the solemnity of the scene, the absence of spectators—all the details that would need to be typed exactly into the report.

The victim was around Lena's height, five-four, but she was built much smaller. Her wrists were delicate, like a bird's. The fingernails were uneven, bitten down to the quick. She had black hair and extremely white skin. She was probably in her early twenties. Her open eyes were clouded like cotton. Her mouth was closed. The lips looked ragged, as if she chewed them out of nervous habit. Or maybe a fish had gotten hungry.

Her body was lighter without the drag of the water, and it only took three of the divers to heft her onto the waiting gurney. Muck from the bottom of the lake covered her head to toe. Water dripped from her clothes—blue jeans, a black fleece shirt, white socks, no sneakers, an unzipped, dark blue warm-up jacket with a Nike logo on the front. The gurney shifted, and her head turned away from Lena.

Lena stopped writing. "Wait a minute," she called, knowing something was wrong. She put her notebook in her pocket as she took a step closer to the body. She had seen a flash of light at the back of the girl's neck—something silver, maybe a necklace. Pondweed draped across the victim's throat and shoulders like a shroud. Lena used the tip of her pen to push away the slippery green tendrils. Something was moving beneath the skin, rippling the flesh the same way the rain rippled the tide.

The divers noticed the undulations, too. They all bent down for a better look. The skin fluttered like something out of a horror movie.

One of them asked, “What the—”

“Jesus!” Lena jumped back quickly as a small minnow slithered out from a slit in the girl’s neck.

The divers laughed the way men do when they don’t want to admit they’ve just soiled themselves. For her part, Lena put her hand to her chest, hoping no one noticed that her heart had practically exploded. She took a gulp of air. The minnow was floundering in the mud. One of the men picked it up and tossed it back into the lake. The dive captain made the inevitable joke about something being fishy.

Lena shot him a hard look before leaning down toward the body. The slit where the fish had come out was at the back of the neck, just to the right of the spine. She guessed the wound was an inch wide, tops. The open flesh was puckered from the water, but at one point the injury had been clean, precise—the kind of incision that was made by a very sharp knife.

“Somebody go wake up Brock,” she said.

This wasn’t a suicide investigation anymore.

CHAPTER TWO

Frank Wallace never smoked in his county-issued Lincoln Town Car, but the cloth seats had absorbed the fug of nicotine that seeped from every pore in his body. He reminded Lena of Pig Pen from the Peanuts comic strip. No matter how clean he was or how often he changed his clothes, the stench followed him like a dust cloud.

"What's wrong?" he demanded, not even giving her time to shut the car door.

Lena shucked her wet parka onto the floorboard. Earlier, she had thrown on a jacket with two shirts underneath to help fight the cold. Still, even with the heat blasting, her teeth were chattering. It was as if her body had stored up all the chill while she was standing outside in the rain and only let it out now that she was safely sheltered.

She held her hands up to the vent. "God, it's freezing."

"What's wrong?" Frank repeated. He made a show of pulling back his black leather glove so he could see his watch.

Lena shivered involuntarily. She couldn't keep the excitement out of her voice. No cop would ever admit it to a civilian, but murders were the most exciting cases to work. Lena was so pumped through with adrenaline that she was surprised the cold was getting to her. Through chattering teeth, she told him, "It's not a suicide."

Frank looked even more annoyed. "Brock agree with you?"

Brock had gone back to sleep in his van while he waited for the chains to be cut, which they both knew because they could see his back molars from where they were sitting. "Brock wouldn't know his ass from a hole in the ground," Lena shot back. She rubbed her arms to coax some warmth back into her body.

Frank took out his flask and handed it to her. She took a quick sip, the whisky burning its way down her throat and into her stomach. Frank took a hefty drink of his own before returning the flask to his coat pocket.

She told him, "There's a knife wound in the neck."

"Brock's?"

Lena gave him a withering glance. "The dead girl." She leaned down and searched her parka for the wallet she had found in the pocket of the woman's jacket.

Frank said, "Could be self-inflicted."

"Not possible." She put her hand to the back of her neck. "Blade went in about here. The killer was standing behind her. Probably took her by surprise."

Frank grumbled, "You get that from one of your textbooks?"

Lena held her tongue, something she wasn't used to doing. Frank had been interim police chief for the last four years. Everything that happened in the three cities that comprised Grant County fell under his purview. Madison and Avondale carried the usual drug problems and domestic violence, but Heartsdale was supposed to be easy. The college was here, and the affluent residents were

vocal about crime.

Even without that, complicated cases had the tendency to turn Frank into an asshole. Actually, life in general could turn him into an asshole. His coffee going cold. The engine in his car not catching on the first try. The ink running dry in his pen. Frank hadn't always been like this. He'd certainly leaned toward grumpy for as long as Lena had known him, but his attitude lately was tinged with an underlying fury that seemed ready to boil to the surface. Anything could set him off. In the blink of an eye he'd turn from being manageably irritated to downright mean.

At least in this particular matter Frank's reluctance made sense. After thirty-five years of policing, a murder case was the last thing he wanted on his plate. Lena knew that he was sick of the job, sick of the people it brought him into contact with. He had lost two of his closest friends in the last six years. The only lake he wanted to be sitting in front of right now was in sunny Florida. He should've had a fishing pole and a beer in his hands, not a dead kid's wallet.

"Looks fake," Frank said, opening the wallet. Lena agreed. The leather was too shiny. The Prada logo was plastic.

"Allison Judith Spooner," Lena told him, watching Frank try to peel apart the soaked plastic picture sleeves. "Twenty-one. Driver's license is from Elba, Alabama. Her student ID's in the back."

"College." Frank breathed out the word with something like despair. It was bad enough Allison Spooner had been found on or near state property. Add to that the fact that she was an out-of-state kid attending Grant Tech, and the case just got twenty times more political.

He asked, "Where'd you find the wallet?"

"In her jacket pocket. I guess she didn't have a purse. Or maybe whoever killed her wanted us to know her identity."

He was looking at the girl's driver's license photo.

"What is it?"

"Looks like that little waitress who works at the diner."

The Grant Diner was on the opposite end of Main Street from the police station. Most of the force ate there for lunch. Lena stayed away from the place. She usually brown-bagged it, or, more often than not, didn't eat.

She asked, "Did you know her?"

He shook his head and shrugged at the same time. "She was good-looking."

Frank was right. Not many people had a flattering driver's license photo, but Allison Spooner had been luckier than most. Her white teeth showed in a big smile. Her hair was pulled back off her face, revealing high cheekbones. There was merriment in her eyes, as if someone had just made a joke. This was all in sharp contrast to the body they had pulled out of the lake. Death had erased her vibrancy.

Frank said, "I didn't know she was a student."

"They usually don't work in town," Lena allowed. Grant Tech's students tended to work on campus or not at all. They didn't mix with the town and the town did its best not to mix with them.

Frank pointed out, "The school's closed this week for Thanksgiving break. Why isn't she home with her family?"

Lena didn't have the answer. "There's forty bucks in the wallet, so this wasn't

a robbery.”

Frank checked the money compartment anyway, his thick, gloved fingers finding the twenty and two tens glued together with lake water. “She could’ve been lonely. Decided to take the knife and end it herself.”

“She’d have to be a contortionist,” Lena insisted. “You’ll see when Brock gets her on the table. She was stabbed from behind.”

He gave a bone-weary sigh. “What about the chain and cinder blocks?”

“We can try Mann’s Hardware in town. Maybe the killer bought them there.”

He tried again. “You’re sure about the knife wound?”

She nodded.

Frank kept staring at the license photo. “Does she have a car?”

“If she does, it’s not in the vicinity.” Lena pressed the point. “Unless she carried forty pounds’ worth of cinder blocks and some chains through the woods ...”

Frank finally closed the wallet and handed it back to her. “Why is it every Monday just gets shittier and shittier?”

Lena couldn’t answer him. Last week wasn’t that much better. A young mother and her daughter had been taken by a flash flood. The whole town was still reeling from the loss. There was no telling what they’d make of a pretty, young college girl being murdered.

She told Frank, “Brad’s trying to track down somebody from the college who can get into the registrar’s office and give us Spooner’s local address.” Brad Stephens had finally worked his way up from patrol to the rank of detective, but his new job didn’t have him doing much more than his old one did. He was still running errands.

Lena offered, “Once the scene is cleared, I’ll work on the death notification.”

“Alabama’s on central time.” Frank looked at his watch. “It’ll probably be better to call the parents direct instead of waking up the Elba P.D. this early in the morning.”

Lena checked her own watch. They were coming up on seven o’clock, which meant it was almost six in Alabama. If Elba was anything like Grant County, the detectives were on call during the night, but not expected to be at their desks until eight in the morning. Normally at this time of the day, Lena would be just getting out of bed and fumbling with the coffeemaker. “I’ll put in a courtesy call when we get back to the station.”

The car went quiet except for the brushing sound of rain against steel. A bolt of lightning, thin and mean, sparked in the sky. Lena instinctively flinched, but Frank just stared ahead at the lake. The divers weren’t worried about the lightning. They were taking turns with the bolt cutters, trying to disentangle the dead girl from the two cinder blocks.

Frank’s phone rang, a high-pitched warble that sounded like a bird sitting somewhere in the rain forest. He answered it with a gruff “Yeah.” He listened for a few seconds, then asked, “What about the parents?” Frank grumbled a string of curses under his breath. “Then go back inside and find out.” He snapped his phone shut. “Jackass.”

Lena gathered Brad had forgotten to get the parents’ information. “Where does Spooner live?”

“Taylor Drive. Number sixteen and a half. Brad’s gonna meet us there if he

manages to get his head out of his ass.” He put the engine in gear and slung his arm over the seat behind Lena as he backed up the car. The forest was dense and wet. Lena braced her palm against the dashboard as Frank slowly made his way back to the road.

“Sixteen and a half must mean she’s in a garage apartment,” Lena noted. Many of the local residents had converted their garages or empty toolsheds into the semblance of a living space so that they could charge exorbitant rent to the college students. Most students were so desperate to live off campus that they didn’t ask too many questions.

Frank said, “Gordon Braham’s the landlord.”

“Brad found that out?”

They hit a bump that made Frank’s teeth clamp together. “His mother told him.”

“Well.” Lena searched her mind for something positive to say about Brad. “Shows initiative that he found out who owns the house and the garage.”

“Initiative,” Frank mocked. “That kid’s gonna get his head shot off one day.”

Lena had known Brad for over ten years. Frank had known him even longer. They both still saw him as a goofy young boy, a teenager who looked out of place with his gun belt tightened high on his waist. Brad had put in his years in uniform and passed the right tests to garner his gold detective shield, but Lena had done this job long enough to know that there was a difference between a paperwork promotion and a street promotion. She could only hope that in a small town like Heartsdale, Brad’s lack of street smarts wouldn’t matter. He was good at filling out reports and talking to witnesses, but even after ten years behind the wheel of a squad car, he still tended to see the good in people instead of the bad.

Lena had been on the job less than a week when she’d realized that there was no such thing as a truly good person.

Herself included.

She didn’t want to waste time worrying about Brad right now. She flipped through the photographs in Allison Spooner’s wallet as Frank made his way through the forest. There was a picture of an orange tabby cat lying in a ray of sunshine, and a candid snapshot that showed Allison with a woman Lena assumed was her mother. The third photo showed Allison sitting on a park bench. On her right was a man who looked a few years younger than she was. He was wearing a baseball cap pulled down low and had his hands tucked deep into the pockets of his baggy pants. On Allison’s left was an older woman with stringy blond hair and heavy makeup. Her jeans were skintight. There was a hardness to her eyes. She could have been thirty or three hundred. All three of them sat close together. The boy had his arm around Allison Spooner’s shoulders.

Lena showed Frank the picture. He asked, “Family?”

She studied the photo, concentrating on the background. “Looks like this was taken on campus.” She showed Frank. “See the white building in the back? I think that’s the student center.”

“That girl don’t look like a college student to me.”

He meant the older blonde. “She looks local.” She had the unmistakably trashy, bleach-blond air of a town-bred girl. Fake wallet aside, Allison Spooner

appeared to be several rungs up on the social ladder. It didn't jibe that the two would be friends. "Maybe Spooner had a drug problem?" Lena guessed. Nothing crossed class lines like methamphetamine.

They'd finally made it to the main road. The back wheels of the car gave one final spin in the mud as Frank pulled onto asphalt. "Who called it in?"

Lena shook her head. "The 911 call was made from a cell phone. The number was blocked. Female voice, but she wouldn't leave her name."

"What'd she say?"

Lena carefully thumbed back through her notebook so the damp pages would not tear. She found the transcription and read aloud, " 'Female voice: My friend has been missing since this afternoon. I think she killed herself. 911 Operator: What makes you think she killed herself? Female voice: She got into a fight last night with her boyfriend. She said she was going to drown herself up by Lover's Point.' The operator tried to keep her on the line, but she hung up after that."

Frank was quiet. She saw his throat work. His shoulders were slumped so low that he looked like a gangbanger holding on to the steering wheel. He'd been fighting the possibility that this was a murder since Lena got into the car.

She asked, "What do you think?"

"Lover's Point," Frank repeated. "Only a townie would call it that."

Lena held the notebook in front of the heating vents, trying to dry the pages. "The boyfriend is probably the kid in the picture."

Frank didn't pick up on her train of thought. "So, the 911 call came in, and Brad drove out to the lake and found what?"

"The note was under one of the shoes. Allison's ring and watch were inside." Lena bent down again to the plastic evidence bags buried in the deep pockets of her parka. She shifted through the victim's belongings and found the note, which she showed to Frank. " 'I want it over.' "

He stared at the writing so long she was worried he wasn't minding the road.

"Frank?"

One of the wheels grazed the edge of the asphalt. Frank jerked the steering wheel. Lena held on to the dash. She knew better than to say anything about his driving. Frank wasn't the type of man who liked to be corrected, especially by a woman. Especially by Lena.

She said, "Strange note for a suicide. Even a fake suicide."

"Short and to the point." Frank kept one hand on the wheel as he searched his coat pocket. He slid on his reading glasses and stared at the smeared ink. "She didn't sign it."

Lena checked the road. He was riding the white line again. "No."

Frank glanced up and steered back toward the center line. "Does this look like a woman's handwriting to you?"

Lena hadn't considered the possibility. She studied the single sentence, which was written in a wide, round print. "It looks neat, but I couldn't say if a man or woman wrote it. We could get a handwriting expert. Allison's a student, so there are probably notes she took from classes or essays and tests. I'm sure we could find something to compare it with."

Frank didn't address any of her suggestions. Instead, he said, "I remember when my daughter was her age." He cleared his throat a few times. "She used to draw circles over her *i*'s instead of dots. I wonder if she still does that."

Lena kept quiet. She had worked with Frank her entire career, but she didn't know much about his personal life beyond what most everyone else in town knew. He had two children by his first wife, but that was many wives ago. They'd moved out of town. He didn't seem to have contact with any of them. The subject of his family was one he never broached, and right now Lena was too cold and too wired to start sharing.

She put the focus back on the case. "So, someone stabbed Allison in the neck, chained her to some cinder blocks, threw her in the lake, then decided to make it look like a suicide." Lena shook her head at the stupidity. "Another criminal mastermind."

Frank gave a snort of agreement. She could tell his mind was on other things. He took off his glasses and stared at the road ahead.

She didn't want to, but she asked, "What's going on?"

"Nothing."

"How many years have I been riding with you, Frank?"

He made another grunting noise, but he relented easily enough. "Mayor's been trying to track me down."

Lena felt a lump rise in her throat. Clem Waters, the mayor of Heartsdale, had been trying for some time to make Frank's job as interim chief a more permanent position.

Frank said, "I don't really want the job, but there's nobody else lining up to take it."

"No," she agreed. No one wanted the job, not least of all because they would never in a million years match the man who'd held it before.

"Benefits are good," Frank said. "Nice retirement package. Better health care, pension."

She managed to swallow. "That's good, Frank. Jeffrey would want you to take it."

"He'd want me to retire before I have a heart attack chasing some junkie across the campus quad." Frank took out his flask and offered it to Lena. She shook her head and watched him take a long pull, one eye on the road as he tilted back his head. Lena's focus stayed on his hand. There was a slight tremor to it. His hands had been shaking a lot lately, especially in the morning.

Without warning, the rain's steady beat turned into a harsh staccato. The noise echoed in the car, filling up the space. Lena pressed her tongue to the roof of her mouth. She should tell Frank now that she wanted to resign, that there was a job in Macon waiting for her if she could bring herself to make the leap. She had moved to Grant County to be near her sister, but her sister had died almost a decade ago. Her uncle, her only living relative, had retired to the Florida Panhandle. Her best friend had taken a job at a library up North. Her boyfriend lived two hours away. There was nothing keeping Lena here except inertia and loyalty to a man who had been dead for four years and probably hadn't thought she was a good cop anyway.

Frank used his knees to hold the steering wheel steady as he screwed the cap back on the flask. "I won't take it unless you say it's okay."

She turned her head in surprise. "Frank—"

"I mean it," he interrupted. "If it's not okay with you, then I'll tell the mayor to shove it up his ass." He gave a harsh chuckle that rattled the phlegm in his

chest. "Might let you come along to see the look on the little prick's face."

She made herself say, "You should take the job."

"I don't know, Lee. I'm gettin' so damn old. Children are all grown up. Wives have moved on. Most days, I wonder why I even get out of bed." He gave another raspy chuckle. "Might find me in the lake one day with my watch in my shoes. But for real."

She didn't want to hear the tiredness in his voice. Frank had been on the job twenty years longer than Lena, but she could feel the weariness in his tone like it was her own. This was why she had been spending every free minute of her time taking classes at the college, trying to get a bachelor's degree in forensic science so she could work on the crime scene investigation end instead of enforcement.

Lena could handle the early morning calls that yanked her from sleep. She could handle the carnage and the dead bodies and the misery that death brought to each and every moment of your life. What she could not take anymore was being on the front lines. There was too much responsibility. There was too much risk. You could make one mistake and it could cost a life—not your own, but another person's. You could end up getting someone's son killed. Someone's husband. Someone's friend. You found out fairly quickly that another person dying on your watch was far worse than the specter of your own death.

Frank said, "Listen, I need to tell you something."

Lena glanced at him, wondering at his sudden openness. His shoulders had slumped even more and his knuckles were white from gripping the steering wheel. She ran through the catalogue of things she might be in trouble for at work, but what came out of his mouth took her breath away. "Sara Linton's back in town."

Lena tasted whisky and bile in the back of her throat. For a brief, panicked moment, she thought she was going to throw up. Lena could not face Sara. The accusations. The guilt. Even the thought of driving down her street was too much. Lena always took the long way to work, bypassing Sara's house, bypassing the misery that churned up every time she thought of the place.

Frank kept his voice low. "I heard it in town, so I gave her dad a call. He said she was driving down for Thanksgiving today." He cleared his throat. "I wouldn't'a told you, but I've stepped up patrols outside their house. You'd see it on the call sheet and wonder—so, now you know."

Lena tried to swallow the sour taste in her mouth. It felt like glass going down her throat. "Okay," she managed. "Thanks."

Frank took a sharp turn onto Taylor Road, blowing through a stop sign. Lena grabbed the side of the door to brace herself, but the movement was automatic. Her mind was caught up in how to ask Frank for time off during the middle of a case. She would take the week and drive over to Macon, maybe scope out some apartments until the holiday was past and Sara was back in Atlanta where she belonged.

"Look at this dumbass," Frank mumbled as he slowed the car.

Brad Stephens was standing outside his parked patrol car. He was wearing a tan suit pressed to within an inch of its life. His white shirt almost glowed against the blue striped tie that his mama had probably laid out for him with the rest of his clothes this morning. What was obviously bothering Frank was the

umbrella in Brad's hand. It was bright pink except for the Mary Kay logo stitched in yellow.

"Go easy on him," Lena tried, but Frank was already getting out of the car. He wrestled with his own umbrella—a large black canopy that he'd gotten from Brock at the funeral home—and stomped over to Brad. Lena waited in the car, watching Frank berate the young detective. She knew what it felt like to be on the other end of Frank's tirades. He had been her trainer when she first entered patrol, then her partner when she made detective. If not for Frank, Lena would've washed out of the job the first week. The fact that he didn't think women belonged on the force made her damned determined to prove him otherwise.

And Jeffrey had been her buffer. Lena had come to the realization some time ago that she had a tendency to be mirror to whoever was in front of her. When Jeffrey was in charge, they did everything the right way—or at least as right as they could. He was a solid cop, the kind of man who had the trust of the community because his character came through in everything he did. That was why the mayor had hired him in the first place. Clem wanted to break the old ways, to pull Grant County into the twenty-first century. Ben Carver, the outgoing chief of police, was as crooked as a stick in water. Frank had been his right-hand man and just as jagged. Under Jeffrey, Frank had changed his ways. They all had. Or at least they had as long as Jeffrey was alive.

Within the first week of Frank being put in charge, things had started to slip. It was slow at first, and hard to spot. A Breathalyzer result had gone missing, freeing one of Frank's hunting buddies from a DUI. An unusually careful pot dealer at the college was suddenly caught with a huge stash in the trunk of his car. Tickets disappeared. Cash was missing from the evidence locker. Requisitions turned iffy. The service contract for the county cars went to a garage Frank had part ownership in.

Like a dam breaking, these small cracks had led to larger issues until the whole thing burst open and every cop on the force was doing something they shouldn't do. Which was one of the biggest reasons Lena had to get out. Macon didn't do things the easy way. The city was bigger than the three cities of Grant County combined, topping out at a population of around a hundred thousand. People sued if they were wronged by the police, and they tended to win. Macon's murder rate was one of the highest in the state. Burglaries, sex crimes, violent crimes—there was plenty of opportunity for a detective, but even more work for a crime scene tech. Lena was two courses away from getting her criminal science degree. There were no shortcuts in evidence collection. You dusted for prints. You vacuumed the carpets for fibers. You photographed the blood and other fluids. You catalogued the evidence. Then you handed it all off to someone else. The lab techs were responsible for doing the science. The detectives were responsible for catching the bad guys. All Lena would be was a glorified cleaner with a badge and state benefits. She could spend the rest of her life processing crime scenes, then retire young enough to supplement her pension with private investigation work.

She would end up being one of those asshole private detectives who were always putting their noses where they didn't belong.

"Adams!" Frank slammed his hand on the hood of the car. Water splashed up

like a dog shaking itself. He was finished yelling at Brad and was spoiling for someone else to rip into.

Lena took the dripping wet parka off the floor and put it on, tightening the strings on the hood so her hair wouldn't get soaked. She caught a look at herself in the rearview mirror. Her hair had started to twist into curls. The rain had brought out her Irish Catholic father's roots and managed to suppress her Mexican grandmother's.

"Adams!" Frank yelled again.

By the time she got out of the car, he was concentrating another tirade on Brad, yelling at him about how he was wearing his gun holster too low on his belt.

Lena forced her lips into a tight smile, trying to give Brad some silent support. She had been a dumb cop herself many years ago. Maybe Jeffrey had thought she was worthless, too. The fact that he had tried to turn her into something worthwhile was a testament to his determination. One of the few reasons Lena could give herself for not taking the job in Macon was thinking that she could do something to help Brad be a better cop. She could keep him away from the corruption, train him to do things the right way.

Do as I say, not as I do.

"Are you sure this is it?" Frank demanded. He meant the house.

Brad's throat worked. "Yes, sir. That's what the college had on file. Sixteen and a half Taylor Drive."

"Did you knock on the door?"

Brad seemed unsure of which answer was the right one. "No, sir. You said to wait for you."

"You got a phone number for the owner?"

"No, sir. His name is Mr. Braham, but—"

"Christ," Frank muttered, stalking up the driveway.

Lena couldn't help but feel sorry for Brad. She thought about reaching up and patting him on the shoulder, but he tilted his bright pink umbrella the wrong way and ended up sending a sheet of rain down on her head.

"Oh," Brad breathed. "Gosh, I'm sorry, Lena."

She pressed down some expletives that wanted to come and walked ahead of him, joining Frank.

Sixteen and a half Taylor Drive was a one-story garage that was slightly deeper than a minivan and twice as wide. "Converted" was a loose term, because the structure had not been altered well on the outside. The roll-up metal door was still in place, black construction paper covering the windows. Because of the overcast day, the lights inside the apartment showed through the cracks in the aluminum siding. Tufts of pink fiberglass insulation were matted down by rain. The tin roof was rusted red, a blue tarp covering the back corner.

Lena stared at the structure, wondering why any woman in her right mind would live here.

"Scooter," Frank noted. There was a purple Vespa parked by the garage. A bike chain attached the back wheel to an eyebolt screwed into the concrete drive. He asked, "Same chain as what was on the girl?"

She saw a flash of bright yellow under the wheel. "Looks like the same padlock."

Lena glanced toward the main house, a split ranch with a sloping gable on the front. The windows were dark. There was no car by the house or on the street. They would have to find the landlord for permission to go into the garage. She flipped open her cell phone to call Marla Simms, the station's elderly secretary. Between Marla and her best friend, Myrna, they represented a combined Rolodex of every person in town.

Brad pressed his face up to one of the windows in the garage door. He squinted, trying to see past a rip in the construction paper. "Jeesh," he whispered, backing up so quickly that he almost tripped over his feet. He drew his gun and went into a crouch.

Lena's Glock was in her hand before she thought about putting it there. Her heart had jumped into her throat. Adrenaline made her senses sharpen. A quick look over her shoulder showed Frank had drawn his weapon, too. They all stood there, guns pointed toward the closed garage door.

Lena motioned for Brad to move back. She kept a low crouch as she walked up to the garage window. The tear in the construction paper seemed larger now, more like a target she was about to put her face in front of. Quickly, she glanced inside. There was a man standing at a folding table. He was wearing a black mask. He looked up as if he heard a noise, and Lena ducked down again, her heart racing. She stood still, counting off the seconds as her ears strained to hear footsteps, a gun loading. There was nothing, and she slowly let out the breath she'd been holding.

She held up one finger to Frank: one person. She mouthed the word "mask," and saw his eyes widen in surprise. Frank indicated his gun and she shrugged as she shook her head. She hadn't been able to see whether or not the man was holding a weapon.

Without being told, Brad walked toward the side of the building. He went around the back, obviously checking for exits. Lena counted the seconds, reaching twenty-six by the time he showed up on the other side of the building. Brad shook his head. No back door. No windows. Lena indicated that he should go down the driveway and serve as backup. Let her and Frank handle this. Brad started to protest, but she cut him with a look. Finally, he hung his head in surrender. She waited until he was at least fifteen feet away before nodding to Frank that she was ready to go.

Frank walked toward the garage and leaned down, wrapping his hand around the steel handle at the base of the roll-up door. He checked with Lena, then yanked up on the handle hard and fast.

The man inside was startled, his eyes going wide behind the black ski mask covering his face. He had a knife in his gloved hand, raised as if to charge. The blade was long and thin, at least eight inches. What looked very much like dried blood was caked around the handle. The concrete beneath his feet was stained a dark brown. More blood.

"Drop it," Frank said.

The intruder didn't comply. Lena took a few steps to her right, closing any escape routes. He was standing behind a large cafeteria table with paperwork strewn across it. A twin bed was angled out from the wall so that between the bed frame and the table, the entire room was cut down the middle.

"Put down the knife," Lena told him. She had to turn sideways to get past the

bed. There was another dark stain on the concrete under the bed. A bucket with brown water and a filthy-looking sponge was beside it. She kept her gun trained at the man's chest, stepping carefully around boxes and scattered pieces of paper. He glanced nervously between Lena and Frank, the knife still raised in his fist.

"Drop it," Frank repeated.

The man's hands started to lower. Lena let herself exhale, thinking this was going to go easy. She was wrong. Without warning, the man shoved the table violently to the side, slamming it into Lena's legs, sending her back onto the bed. Her head grazed the frame as she rolled onto the concrete floor. A shot rang out. Lena didn't think it was from her gun, but her left hand felt hot, almost on fire. Someone shouted. There was a muffled groan. She scrambled to stand. Her vision blurred.

Frank was lying on his side in the middle of the garage. His gun lay on the ground beside him. His fist was clamped around his arm. She thought at first that he was having a heart attack. The blood seeping between his fingers showed that he had been cut.

"Go!" he yelled. "Now!"

"Shit," Lena hissed, pushing away the table. She felt nauseated. Her vision was still blurred, but it sharpened on the black-clad suspect bolting down the driveway. Brad was standing stock-still, mouth open in surprise. The intruder ran right past him.

"Stop him!" she screamed. "He stabbed Frank!"

Brad jerked around, giving chase. Lena ran after them, sneakers slapping against the wet ground, water flying up into her face. She rounded the end of the driveway and flew down the street. Ahead, she saw Brad gaining on the suspect. He was taller, fitter, every stride closing the gap between him and the intruder.

Brad yelled, "Police! Stop!"

Everything slowed. The rain seemed to freeze in midair, tiny droplets trapped in time and space.

The suspect stopped. He reared around, slicing the knife through the air. Lena reached for her gun, felt the empty holster. There was a popping sound of metal breaking through flesh, then a loud groan. Brad crumpled to the ground.

"No," Lena gasped, running to Brad, falling to her knees. The knife was still in his belly. Blood seeped into his shirt, turning the white to crimson. "Brad—"

"It hurts," he told her. "It hurts so bad."

Lena dialed her cell phone, praying the ambulance team was still at the lake and not making the half-hour trip back to the station. Behind her, she heard loud footsteps, shoes pounding pavement. With startling speed, Frank sprinted past her, yelling with uncontrolled rage. The suspect turned around to see what hell was about to be unleashed upon him just as Frank tackled him to the asphalt. Teeth shattered. Bones snapped. Frank's fists were flying, a windmill of pain raining down on the suspect.

Lena pressed the phone to her ear. She listened to the rings that were going unanswered at the station.

"Lena ..." Brad whispered. "Don't tell my mom I messed up."

"You didn't mess up." She used her hand to shield the rain from his face. His

eyelids fluttered, trying to close. “No,” she begged. “Please don’t do this to me.”

“I’m sorry, Lena.”

“No!” she yelled.

Not again.

CHAPTER THREE

Sara Linton no longer thought of Grant County as her home. It was of another place, another time, as tangible to her as Rebecca's Manderley or Heathcliff's moors. As she drove through the outskirts of town, she couldn't help but notice that everything looked the same, yet nothing was quite real. The closed military base that was slowly reverting to nature. The trailer parks on the bad side of the railroad tracks. The abandoned box store that had been converted into a storage center.

Three and a half years had passed since Sara had been home, and she wanted to think that her life was okay now, getting closer to a new normal. Actually, her current life in Atlanta looked a lot like it would have if she had stayed there after medical school instead of moving back to Grant County. She was the chief pediatric attending in Grady Hospital's emergency room, where students followed her around like puppy dogs and the security guards carried multiple clips on their belts in case the gangbangers tried to finish the job they started on the streets. An epidemiologist who worked for the Centers for Disease Control on Emory's campus had started asking her out. She went to dinner parties and grabbed coffee with friends. Occasionally, on the weekends, she would take the dogs to Stone Mountain Park to give the greyhounds space to run. She read a lot. She watched more television than she should. She was living a perfectly normal, perfectly boring life.

And yet, the minute she saw the sign announcing that she had officially entered Grant County, her carefully constructed façade started to crack. She pulled over to the side of the road, feeling a constriction in her chest. The dogs stirred in the back seat. Sara forced herself not to give in. She was stronger than this. She had fought tooth and nail to climb out of the depression she'd spiraled into after her husband's death, and she was not going to allow herself to fall back in just because of a stupid road sign.

"Hydrogen," she said. "Helium, lithium, beryllium." It was an old trick from her childhood, listing out the elements from the periodic table to take her mind off the monsters that might be lurking under her bed. "Neon, sodium, magnesium ..." She recited from memory until her heart stopped racing and her breathing returned to normal.

Finally, the moment passed, and she found herself laughing at the thought of Jeffrey finding out she was chanting the periodic table on the side of the road. He'd been a jock in high school—handsome, charming, and effortlessly cool. It had tickled him no end to see Sara's geeky side.

She reached around and gave the dogs some attention so they would settle back down. Instead of starting the car again, she sat for a while, staring out the window at the empty road leading into town. Her fingers went to the collar of her shirt, then lower to the ring she wore on a necklace. Jeffrey's Auburn class ring. He'd been on the football team until he got tired of warming the bench.

The ring was bulky, too big for her finger, but touching it was the closest she could come to touching him. It was a talisman. Sometimes, she found herself touching it without remembering putting her hand there.

Her only consolation was that there was nothing left unsaid between them. Jeffrey knew that Sara loved him. He knew there was no part of her that did not belong wholly and completely to him, just as she knew that he felt the same. When he died, his last words were to her. His last thoughts, his last memories, all were of Sara. Just as she knew that her last thoughts would always be of him.

She kissed the ring before tucking it back into her shirt. Carefully, Sara pulled the car off the shoulder and back onto the road. The overwhelming feeling threatened to come back as she drove farther into town. It was so much easier to push away the things that she had lost when they weren't staring her right in the face. The high school football stadium where she had first met Jeffrey. The park where they had walked the dogs together. The restaurants where they ate. The church that Sara's mother had occasionally guilted them into attending.

There had to be one place, one memory, that was untouched by this man. Long before Jeffrey Tolliver even knew there was such a thing as Grant County, she'd had a life here. Sara had grown up in Heartsdale, gone to the high school, joined the science club, helped out at the women's shelter where her mother volunteered, done the occasional odd job with her father. Sara had lived in a house Jeffrey had never stepped foot in. She'd driven a car he'd never seen. She had shared her first kiss with a local boy whose father owned the hardware store. She had gone to dances at the church and attended potlucks and football games.

All without Jeffrey.

Three years before he entered her life, Sara had taken the part-time job of county medical examiner in order to buy out her partner at the children's clinic. She had kept the job long after her loan had been paid off. She was surprised to find out that helping the dead was sometimes more rewarding than saving the living. Every case was a puzzle, every body riddled with clues to a mystery that only Sara could solve. A different part of her brain that she hadn't even known existed was engaged by the coroner's job. She had loved both her jobs with equal passion. She had worked countless cases, given testimony in court on countless suspects and circumstances.

Now, Sara could not remember one detail from any of them.

What she could vividly recall was the day that Jeffrey Tolliver had strolled into town. The mayor had wooed him away from the Birmingham police force to take over for the retiring chief of police. Every woman Sara knew practically tittered with joy whenever Jeffrey's name was mentioned. He was witty and charming. He was tall, dark, and handsome. He'd played college football. He drove a cherry red Mustang, and when he walked, he had the athletic grace of a panther.

That Jeffrey set his sights on Sara had shocked the entire town, Sara included. She wasn't the type of girl who got the good-looking guy. She was the type of girl who watched her sister or her best friend get the good-looking guy. And yet, their casual dates turned into something deeper, so that a few years later, no one was surprised when Jeffrey asked her to marry him. Their relationship had been hard work, and God knew there had been ups and downs, but in the end, she

had known with every fiber of her being that she belonged to Jeffrey and, more important, that he belonged completely to her.

Sara wiped her tears with the back of her hand as she drove. The longing was the hardest part, the physical ache her body felt at the memory of him. There was no part of town that didn't slap her in the face with what she had lost. These roads had been kept safe by him. These people had called him friend. And Jeffrey had died here. The town he'd loved so much had become his crime scene. There was the church where they mourned his death. There was the street where a long line of cars had pulled over as his casket was driven out of town.

She would only be here for four days. She could do anything for four days.

Almost anything.

Sara took the long way to her parents' house, bypassing Main Street and the children's clinic. The bad storms that had followed her all the way from Atlanta had finally subsided, but she could tell from the dark clouds in the sky that this was only a temporary reprieve. The weather seemed to fit her mood lately—sudden, violent storms with fleeting rays of sunshine.

Because of the coming Thanksgiving holiday, lunchtime traffic was nonexistent. No cars were snaking a long line toward the college. No noontime shoppers were heading into downtown. Still, she took a left instead of a right at Lakeshore Drive, going two miles out of her way around Lake Grant so that she would not drive past her old house. Her old life.

The Linton family home, at least, was welcoming in its familiarity. The house had been tinkered with over the years—additions tacked on, bathrooms added and updated. Sara's father had built out the apartment space over the garage when she went away to college so that she would have a place to stay during summer break. Tessa, Sara's younger sister, had lived there for almost ten years while she waited for her life to start. Eddie Linton was a plumber by trade. He had taught both his girls the business, but only Tessa had stuck around long enough to do anything with it. That Sara had chosen medical school instead of a life navigating dank crawl spaces with her sister and father was a disappointment Eddie still tried his best to cover. He was the kind of father who was most happy when his daughters were close by.

Sara didn't know how Eddie felt about Tessa leaving the family business. Around the time Sara had lost Jeffrey, Tessa had gotten married and moved her life eight thousand miles away to work with children in South Africa. She was as impulsive as Sara was steady, though no one would have guessed when the girls were teenagers that either of them would be where they were today. The idea of Tessa as a missionary was still hard for Sara to believe.

"Sissy!" Tessa bounded out of the house, her pregnant belly swaying as she angled herself down the front stairs. "What took you so long? I'm starving!"

Sara was barely out of the car when her sister threw her arms around her. The hug turned from a greeting into something deeper, and Sara felt the darkness coming back. She was no longer certain that she could do this for four minutes, let alone four days.

Tessa mumbled, "Oh, Sissy, everything's changed."

Sara blinked back tears. "I know."

Tessa pulled away. "They got a pool."

Sara laughed in surprise. "A what?"

"Mama and Daddy put in a pool. With a hot tub."

Sara wiped her eyes, still laughing, loving her sister more than words could ever convey. "You're kidding me?" Sara and Tessa had spent most of their childhood begging their parents to put in a pool.

"And Mama took the plastic off the couch."

Sara gave her sister a stern look, as if to ask when the punch line was coming.

"They redecorated the den, changed all the light fixtures, redid the kitchen, painted over the pencil marks Daddy made on the door ... It's like we never even lived there."

Sara couldn't say she mourned the loss of the pencil marks, which had recorded their height until the eighth grade, when she had officially become the tallest person in her family. She grabbed the dog leashes from the passenger seat. "What about the den?"

"All the paneling's down. They even put up crown molding." Tessa tucked her hands into her expansive hips. "They got new lawn furniture. The nice wicker—not the kind that pinches your ass every time you sit down." Thunder made a distant clapping sound. Tessa waited for it to pass. "It looks like something out of *Southern Living*."

Sara blocked the back door of the SUV as she wrangled with her two greyhounds, trying to snap on their leashes before they bolted off into the street. "Did you ask Mama what made her change everything?"

Tessa clicked her tongue as she took the leashes from Sara. Billy and Bob jumped down, heeling beside her. "She said that she could finally have nice things now that we were gone."

Sara pursed her lips. "I'm not going to pretend that doesn't sting." She walked around the car and opened the trunk. "When's Lemuel coming?"

"He's trying to get a flight out, but those bush pilots won't take off unless every chicken and goat in the village buys a ticket." Tessa had come home a few weeks ago to have the baby in the States. Her last pregnancy had ended badly, the child lost. Understandably, Lemuel didn't want Tessa to take any chances, but Sara found it odd that he hadn't yet joined his wife. Her due date was less than a month away.

Sara said, "I hope I get to see him before I leave."

"Oh, Sissy, that's so sweet. Thank you for lying."

Sara was about to respond with what she hoped was a more artful lie when she noticed a patrol car driving down the street at a slow crawl. The man behind the wheel tipped his hat at Sara. Their eyes met, and she felt herself tearing up again.

Tessa stroked the dogs. "They've been driving by like that all morning."

"How did they know I was coming?"

"I might've let it slip at the Shop 'n Save the other day."

"Tess," Sara groaned. "You know Jill June got on the phone as soon as you left. I wanted to keep this quiet. Now everybody and their dog'll be dropping by."

Tessa kissed Bob with a loud smack. "Then you'll get to see your friends, too, won't you, boy?" She gave Bill a kiss to even things out. "You've gotten two calls already."

Sara pulled out her suitcase and closed the lift gate. "Let me guess. Marla at

the station and Myrna from down the street, both trying to milk every ounce of gossip."

"No, actually." Tessa walked alongside Sara back to the house. "A girl named Julie something. She sounded young."

Sara's patients had often called her at home, but she didn't remember anyone named Julie. "Did she leave a number?"

"Mama took it down."

Sara lugged her suitcase up the porch stairs, wondering where her father was. Probably rolling around on the plastic-free couch. "Who else called?"

"It was the same girl both times. She said she needed your help."

"Julie," Sara repeated, the name still not ringing any bells.

Tessa stopped her on the porch. "I need to tell you something."

Sara felt a creeping dread, instinctively knowing bad news was coming. Tessa was about to speak when the front door opened.

"You're nothing but skin and bones," Cathy chided. "I knew you weren't eating enough up there."

"It's good to see you, too, Mother." Sara kissed her cheek. Eddie came up behind her, and she kissed his cheek, too. Her parents petted the dogs, cooing at them, and Sara tried not to notice that the greyhounds were getting a warmer welcome.

Eddie grabbed Sara's suitcase. "I got this." Before she could say anything else, he headed up the stairs.

Sara took off her sneakers as she watched her father leave. "Is something—"

Cathy shook her head in lieu of an explanation.

Tessa kicked off her sandals. The freshly painted wall was scuffed where she had obviously done this many times before. She said, "Mama, you need to tell her."

Cathy exchanged a look with Tessa that raised the hair on the back of Sara's neck.

"Tell me what?"

Her mother started off with an assurance. "Everybody's fine."

"Except?"

"Brad Stephens got hurt this morning."

Brad had been one of her patients, then one of Jeffrey's cops. "What happened?"

"He got stabbed trying to arrest somebody. He's at Macon General."

Sara leaned against the wall. "Stabbed where? Is he all right?"

"I don't know the details. His mama's at the hospital with him now. I guess we'll get a phone call one way or another tonight." She rubbed Sara's arm. "Now, let's not worry until it's time to worry. It's in the Lord's hands now."

Sara felt blindsided. "Why would anyone hurt Brad?"

Tessa supplied, "They think it had something to do with the girl they pulled out of the lake this morning."

"What girl?"

Cathy cut off any further conversation on the matter. "*They* don't know anything, and we are not going to add to these rampant rumors."

Sara pressed, "Mama—"

"No more." Cathy squeezed her arm before letting go. "Let's remember the

things we have to be thankful for, like both of my girls being home at the same time.”

Cathy and Tessa walked down the hall toward the kitchen, the dogs following them. Sara stayed in the foyer. The news about Brad had been brushed over so quickly that she hadn’t had time to process it. Brad Stephens had been one of Sara’s first patients at the children’s clinic. She had watched him grow from a gawky teenager into a clean-cut young man. Jeffrey had kept him on a tight leash. He was more like a puppy than a cop—a sort of mascot at the station. Of course, Sara knew better than anyone else that being a cop, even in a small town, was a dangerous job.

She fought the urge to call the hospital in Macon and find out about Brad. An injured cop always brought a crowd. Blood was donated. Vigils were started. At least two fellow police officers stayed with the family at all times.

But Sara wasn’t part of that community anymore. She wasn’t the police chief’s wife. She had resigned as the town’s medical examiner four years ago. Brad’s condition was none of her business. Besides, she was supposed to be on vacation right now. She had worked back-to-back shifts in order to get the time off, trading weekends and full moons in exchange for the Thanksgiving holiday. This week was going to be hard enough without Sara sticking her nose into other people’s problems. She had enough problems of her own.

Sara looked at the framed photographs that lined the hallway, familiar scenes from her childhood. Cathy had put a fresh coat of paint on everything, but if the paint had not been recent, there would have been a large rectangle near the door that was lighter in color than the rest of the wall: Jeffrey and Sara’s wedding picture. Sara could still see it in her head—not the picture, but the actual day. The way the breeze stirred her hair, which miraculously had not frizzed in the humidity. Her pale blue dress and matching sandals. Jeffrey in dark pants and a white dress shirt, ironed so crisp that he hadn’t bothered to button the cuffs. They had been in the backyard of her parents’ house, the lake offering a spectacular sunset. Jeffrey’s hair was still damp from the shower, and when she put her head on his shoulder, she could smell the familiar scent of his skin.

“Hey, baby.” Eddie was standing on the bottom stair behind her. Sara turned around. She smiled, because she wasn’t used to having to look up to see her father.

He asked, “You get bad weather coming down?”

“Not too bad.”

“I guess you took the bypass?”

“Yep.”

He stared at her, a sad smile on his face. Eddie had loved Jeffrey like a son. Every time he spoke to Sara, she felt his loss in double measure.

“You know,” he began, “you’re getting to be just as beautiful as your mother.”

She could feel her cheeks redden from the compliment. “I’ve missed you, Daddy.”

He took her hand in his, kissed her palm, then pressed it over his heart. “You hear about the two hats hanging on a peg by the door?”

She laughed. “No. What about them?”

“One says to the other, ‘You stay here. I’ll go on a head.’ ”

Sara shook her head at the bad pun. "Daddy, that's awful."

The phone rang, the old-fashioned sound of an actual ringing bell filling the house. There were two telephones in the Linton home: one in the kitchen and one upstairs in the master bedroom. The girls were only allowed to use the one in the kitchen, and the cord was so long from being stretched into the pantry or outside, or anywhere else there might be an infinitesimal bit of privacy, that it had lost all of its curl.

"Sara!" Cathy called. "Julie is on the phone for you."

Eddie patted her arm. "Go."

She walked down the hall and into the kitchen, which was so beautiful that she froze mid-stride. "Holy crap."

Tessa said, "Wait till you see the pool."

Sara ran her hand along the new center island. "This is marble." Previously, the Linton décor had favored Brady Bunch orange tiles and knotty pine cabinetry. She turned around and saw the new refrigerator. "Is that Sub-Zero?"

"Sara." Cathy held out the phone, the only thing in the kitchen that had not been updated.

She exchanged an outraged look with Tessa as she put the phone to her ear. "Hello?"

"Dr. Linton?"

"Speaking." She opened the door on the cherry wall cabinet, marveling at the antique glass panels. There was no answer on the phone. She said, "Hello? This is Dr. Linton."

"Ma'am? I'm sorry. This is Julie Smith. Can you hear me okay?"

The connection was bad, obviously a cell phone. It didn't help matters that the girl was speaking barely above a whisper. Sara didn't recognize the name, though she guessed from the twangy accent that Julie had grown up in one of the poorer areas of town. "What can I do for you?"

"I'm sorry. I'm calling from work and I gotta be quiet."

Sara felt her brow furrow. "I can hear you fine. What do you need?"

"I know you don't know me, and I'm sorry to be calling you like this, but you have a patient named Tommy Braham. You know Tommy, don't you?"

Sara ran through all the Tommys she could think of, then came up not with a face, but with a disposition. He was just another young boy who'd had myriad office visits for the sorts of things you would expect: a bead shoved up his nose. A watermelon seed in his ear. Unspecified belly aches on important school days. He stuck out mostly because his father, not his mother, had always brought him to the clinic, an unusual occurrence in Sara's experience.

Sara told the girl, "I remember Tommy. How's he doing?"

"That's the thing." She went quiet, and Sara could hear water running in the background. She waited it out until the girl continued, "Sorry. Like I was saying, he's in trouble. I wouldn't have called, but he told me to. He texted me from prison."

"Prison?" Sara felt her heart sink. She hated to hear when one of her kids turned out bad, even if she couldn't quite recall what he looked like. "What did he do?"

"He didn't do anything, ma'am. That's the point."

"Okay." Sara rephrased the question. "What was he convicted of?"

"Nothing as far as I know. He doesn't even know if he's arrested or what."

Sara assumed the girl had confused prison with jail. "He's at the police station on Main Street?" Tessa shot her a look and Sara shrugged, helpless to explain.

Julie told her, "Yes, ma'am. They got him downtown."

"Okay, what do they think he did?"

"I guess they think he killed Allison, but there ain't no way he—"

"Murder." Sara did not let her finish the sentence. "I'm not sure what he wants me to do." She felt compelled to add, "For this sort of situation, he needs a lawyer, not a doctor."

"Yes, ma'am, I know the difference between a doctor and a lawyer." Julie didn't sound insulted by Sara's clarification. "It's just that he said he really needed someone who would listen to him, because they don't believe that he was with Pippy all night, and he said that you were the only one who ever listened to him, and that one cop, she's been really hard on him. She keeps staring at him like—"

Sara put her hand to her throat. "What cop?"

"I'm not sure. Some lady."

That narrowed things down enough. Sara tried not to sound cold. "I really can't get involved in this, Julie. If Tommy has been arrested, then by law, they have to provide him with a lawyer. Tell him to ask for Buddy Conford. He's very good at helping people in these sorts of situations. All right?"

"Yes, ma'am." She sounded disappointed, but not surprised. "Okay, then. I told him I'd try."

"Well ..." Sara did not know what else to say. "Good luck. To both of you."

"Thank you, ma'am, and like I said, I'm sorry to bother you'uns over the holiday."

"It's all right." Sara waited for the girl to respond, but there was only the sound of a flushing toilet, then a dead line.

Tessa asked, "What was that about?"

Sara hung up the phone and sat down at the table. "One of my old patients is in jail. They think he killed somebody. Not Brad—someone named Allison."

Tessa asked, "Which patient was she calling about? I bet it's the boy who stabbed Brad."

Cathy slammed the refrigerator door to express her disapproval.

Still, Tessa pressed, "What's his name?"

Sara studiously avoided her mother's disapproving gaze. "Tommy Braham."

"That's the one. Mama, didn't he used to cut our grass?"

Cathy gave a clipped "Yes," not adding anything else to the conversation.

Sara said, "For the life of me, I can't remember what he looks like. Not too bright. I think his father is an electrician. Why can't I remember his face?"

Cathy tsked her tongue as she spread Duke's mayonnaise onto slices of white bread. "Age will do that to you."

Tessa smiled smugly. "You should know."

Cathy made a biting retort, but Sara tuned out the exchange. She strained to remember more details about Tommy Braham, trying to place him. His father stuck out more than the son; a gruff, muscled man who was uncomfortable being at the clinic, as if he found the public act of caring for his son to be emasculating. The wife had run off—Sara remembered that at least. There had

been quite a scandal around her departure, mostly because she had left in the middle of the night with the youth minister of the Primitive Baptist church.

Tommy must have been around eight or nine when Sara first saw him as a patient. All boys looked the same at that age: bowl hair cuts, T-shirts, blue jeans that looked impossibly small and bunched up over bright white tennis shoes. Had he had a crush on her? She couldn't remember. What stuck out the most was that he had been silly and a bit slow. She imagined if he'd committed murder, it was because someone else had put him up to it.

She asked, "Who is Tommy supposed to have killed?"

Tessa answered, "A student from the college. They pulled her out of the lake at the crack of dawn. At first they thought it was a suicide, then they didn't, so they went to her house, which happens to be that crappy garage Gordon Braham rents out to students. You know the one?"

Sara nodded. She had once helped her father pump the septic tank outside the Braham house while she was on a holiday break from college, an event that had spurred her to work doubly hard to get into medical school.

Tessa supplied, "So, Tommy was there in the garage with a knife. He attacked Frank and ran out into the street. Brad chased after him and he stabbed Brad, too."

Sara shook her head. She had been thinking something small—a convenience store holdup, an accidental discharge of a gun. "That doesn't sound like Tommy."

"Half the neighborhood saw it," Tessa told her. "Brad was chasing him down the street and Tommy turned around and stabbed him in the gut."

Sara thought it through to the next step. Tommy hadn't stabbed a civilian. He had stabbed a cop. There were different rules when a police officer was involved. Assault turned into attempted murder. Manslaughter turned into murder in the first.

Tessa mumbled, "I hear Frank got a little rough with him."

Cathy voiced her disapproval as she took plates down from the cabinets. "It's very disappointing when people you respect behave badly."

Sara tried to imagine the scene: Brad running after Tommy, Frank bringing up the rear. But it wouldn't have just been Frank. He wouldn't waste his time pounding on a suspect while Brad was bleeding out. Someone else would have been there. Someone who had probably caused the whole takedown to go bad in the first place.

Sara felt anger spread like fire inside her chest. "Where was Lena during all of this?"

Cathy dropped a plate on the floor. It shattered at her feet, but she did not bend to pick up the pieces. Her lips went into a thin line and her nostrils flared. Sara could tell she was struggling to speak. "Don't you dare say that hateful woman's name in my house ever again. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, ma'am." Sara looked down at her hands. Lena Adams. Jeffrey's star detective. The woman who was supposed to have Jeffrey's back at all times. The woman whose cowardice and fear had gotten Jeffrey murdered.

Tessa struggled to kneel down and help her mother clean up the broken dish. Sara stayed where she was, frozen in place.

The darkness was back, a suffocating cloud of misery that made her want to

curl into a ball. This kitchen had been filled with laughter all of Sara's life—the good-natured bickering between her mother and sister, the bad puns and practical jokes from her father. Sara did not belong here anymore. She should find an excuse to leave. She should go back to Atlanta and let her family enjoy their holiday in peace rather than dredging up the collective sorrow of the last four years.

No one spoke until the phone rang again. Tessa was closest. She picked up the receiver. "Linton residence." She didn't make small talk. She handed the phone to Sara.

"Hello?"

"I'm sorry to be bothering you, Sara."

Frank Wallace always seemed to be making an effort when he said Sara's name. He had played poker with Eddie Linton since Sara was in diapers, and had called her "Sweetpea" until he realized that it was inappropriate to address his boss's wife with such familiarity.

Sara managed a "Hi" as she opened the French door leading onto the back deck. She hadn't realized how hot her face was until the cold hit her. "Is Brad all right?"

"You heard about that?"

"Of course I heard." Half the town probably knew about Brad before the ambulance had arrived on the scene. "Is he still in surgery?"

"Got out an hour ago. Surgeons say he's got a shot if he makes it through the next twenty-four hours." Frank said more, but Sara couldn't concentrate on his words, which were meaningless anyway. The twenty-four-hour mark was the gold standard for surgeons, the difference between explaining a death at the weekly morbidity and mortality meeting or passing off an iffy patient to another doctor to manage their care.

She leaned against the house, cold brick pressing into her back, as she waited for Frank to get to the point. "Do you remember a patient named Tommy Braham?"

"Vaguely."

"I hate to pull you into this, but he's been asking for you."

Sara listened with half an ear, her mind whirring with possible excuses to answer the question she knew that he was going to ask. She was so caught up in the task that she hadn't realized Frank had stopped talking until he said her name. "Sara? You still there?"

"I'm here."

"It's just that he won't stop crying."

"Crying?" Again, she had the sensation of missing an important part of the conversation.

"Yeah, crying," Frank confirmed. "I mean, a lot of them cry. Hell, it's jail. But he's seriously not right. I think he needs a sedative or something to calm him down. We got three drunks and a wife beater in here gonna break through the walls and strangle him if he don't shut up."

She repeated his words in her head, still not sure she'd heard right. Sara had been married to a cop for many years, and she could count on one hand the number of times Jeffrey had worried about a criminal in his cells—and never a murderer, especially a murderer who had harmed a fellow officer. "Isn't there a

doctor on call?"

"Honey, there's barely a cop on call. The mayor's cut half our budget. I'm surprised every time I flip a switch that the lights still come on."

She asked, "What about Elliot Felteau?" Elliot had bought Sara's practice when she left town. The children's clinic was right across the street from the station.

"He's on vacation. The nearest doc is sixty miles away."

She gave a heavy sigh, annoyed with Elliot for taking a week off, as if children would wait until after the holiday to get sick. She was also annoyed with Frank for trying to drag her into this mess. But mostly, she was annoyed with herself that she had even taken the call. "Can't you just tell him that Brad's going to be okay?"

"It's not that. There was this girl we pulled out of the lake this morning."

"I heard."

"Tommy confessed to killing her. Took him a while, but we broke him. He was in love with the girl. She didn't want to give him the time of day. You know the kind of thing."

"Then it's just remorse," she said, though she found the behavior strange. In Sara's experience, the first thing most criminals did after they confessed was fall into a deep sleep. Their bodies had been so shot through with adrenaline for so long that they collapsed in exhaustion when they finally got the weight off their chests. "Give him some time."

"It's more than that," Frank insisted. He sounded exasperated and slightly desperate. "I swear to God, Sara, I really hate asking you this, but something's gotta help him get through. It's like his heart's gonna break if he doesn't see you."

"I barely remember him."

"He remembers you."

Sara chewed her lip. "Where's his daddy?"

"In Florida. We can't get hold of him. Tommy's all alone, and he knows it."

"Why is he asking for me?" There were certainly patients she had bonded with over the years, but, to her recollection, Tommy Braham had not been one of them. Why couldn't she remember his face?

Frank said, "He says you'll listen to him."

"You didn't tell him I'd come, did you?"

"Course not. I didn't even want to ask, but he's just bad off, Sara. I think he needs to see a doctor. Not just you, but a doctor."

"It's not because—" She stopped, not knowing how to finish the question. She decided to be blunt. "I heard you took him down hard."

Frank coughed his language. "He fell down a lot while I was trying to arrest him."

Sara was familiar with the euphemism, code for the nastier side of law enforcement. Abuse of prisoners in custody was a subject she never broached with Jeffrey, mostly because she did not want to know the answer. "Is anything broken?"

"A couple of teeth. Nothing bad." Frank sounded exasperated. "He's not crying over a split lip, Sara. He needs a doctor."

Sara looked through the window into the kitchen. Her mother was sitting at

the table beside Tessa. Both of them stared back at her. One of the reasons Sara had moved back to Grant County after medical school was because of the paucity of doctors serving rural areas. With the hospital downtown closed, the sick were forced to travel almost an hour away to get help. The children's clinic was a blessing for the local kids, but, apparently, not during holidays.

"Sara?"

She rubbed her eyes with her fingers. "Is she there?"

He hesitated a moment. "No. She's at the hospital with Brad."

Probably concocting a story in her head where she was the hero and Brad was just a careless victim. Sara's voice shook. "I can't see her, Frank."

"You won't have to."

She felt grief tighten her throat. To be at the station house, to be where Jeffrey was most at home.

Lightning crackled high up in the clouds. She could hear rain, but not see it yet. Out on the lake, waves crashed and churned. The sky was dark and ominous with the promise of another storm. She wanted to take it as a sign, but Sara was a scientist at heart. She had never been good at relying on faith.

"All right," she relented. "I think I have some diazepam in my kit. I'll come through the back." She paused. "Frank—"

"You have my word, Sara. She won't be here."

Sara did not want to admit to herself that she was glad to leave her family, even if it meant going to the station house. She felt awkward around them, a piece of a puzzle that didn't quite fit. Everything was the same, yet everything was different.

She took the back way around the lake again, avoiding her old house that she had shared with Jeffrey. There was no way to get to the station without driving down Main Street. Thankfully, the weather had turned, rain dripping down in a thick, hazy curtain. This made it impossible for people to sit on the benches that lined the road or stroll up the cobblestone sidewalks. All the shop doors were tightly closed against the cold. Even Mann's Hardware had taken down their porch swing display.

She turned down a back alley that ran behind the old pharmacy. The paved road gave way to gravel, and Sara was glad that she was in an SUV. She had always driven sedans while she lived in Heartsdale, but Atlanta's streets were far more treacherous than any country road. The potholes were deep enough to get lost in and the constant flooding during the rainy season made the BMW a necessity. Or at least that's what she told herself every time she paid sixty dollars to fill up her gas tank.

Frank must have been waiting for her, because the back door to the station opened before Sara put the car in park. He unfolded a large black umbrella and came out to the car to walk her back to the station. The rain was so loud that Sara did not speak until they were inside.

She asked, "Is he still upset?"

Frank nodded, fiddling with the umbrella, trying to get it closed. Sutures crisscrossed the knuckles of his right hand. There were three deep scratches on the back of his wrist. Defensive wounds.

"Christ." Frank winced from pain as he tried to get his stiff fingers to move.

Sara took the umbrella from him and closed it. "Do they have you on antibiotics?"

"Got a prescription for something. Not sure what it is." He took the umbrella from her and tossed it into the broom closet. "Tell your mama I'm sorry for taking you away your first day back."

Frank had always seemed old to Sara, mostly because he was a contemporary of her father's. Looking at him now, she thought Frank Wallace had aged a hundred years since the last time she had seen him. His skin was sallow, his face etched with deep lines. She looked at his eyes, noticing the yellow. Obviously, he was not well.

"Frank?"

He forced a smile. "Good to see you, Sweetpea."

The name was meant to put up a barrier, and it worked. She let him kiss her cheek. His dominant odor had always been cigarette smoke, but today she smelled whiskey and chewing gum on his breath. Instinctively, she looked at her watch. Eleven-thirty in the morning, the time of day when a drink meant that you were biding time until your shift ended. On the other hand, this wasn't like a usual day for Frank. One of his men had been stabbed. Sara probably would have had her share of alcohol in the same situation.

He asked, "How you been holding up?"

She tried to look past the pity in his eyes. "I'm doing great, Frank. Tell me what's going on."

He quickly shifted gears. "Kid thought the girl was into him. He finds out she's not and sticks her with a knife." He shrugged. "Did a real bad job covering it up. Led us right to his doorstep."

Sara was even more confused. She must be mixing up Tommy with one of her other kids.

Frank picked up on this. "You really don't remember him?"

"I thought I did, but now I'm not so sure."

"He seems to think y'all have some kind of bond." He saw Sara's expression and amended, "Not in a weird way or anything. He's kind of young." Frank touched the side of his head. "Not a lot going on up there."

Sara felt a flash of guilt that this boy she barely remembered had felt such a connection to her. She had seen thousands of patients over the years. There were certainly names that stuck out, kids whose graduations and wedding days she had witnessed, a couple whose funerals she had attended. Other than a few stray details, Tommy Braham was a blank.

"It's this way," Frank said, as if she had not been in the station a thousand times. He used his plastic badge to open the large steel door that led to the cells. A blast of hot air met them.

Frank noticed her discomfort. "Furnace is acting up."

Sara took off her jacket as she followed him through the door. When she was a child, the local school had sent kids on field trips to the jail as a way of scaring them away from a life of crime. The Mayberry motif of open cells with steel bars had changed over long ago. There were six steel doors on either side of a long hallway. Each had a wire-mesh glass window and a slot at the bottom through which food trays could be passed. Sara kept her focus straight ahead as she

followed Frank, though out of the corner of her eye, she could see men standing at their cell doors, watching her progress.

Frank took out his keys. "I guess he stopped crying."

She wiped away a bead of sweat that had rolled down her temple. "Did you tell him I was coming?"

He shook his head, not stating the obvious: he hadn't been sure that Sara would show up.

He found the right key and glanced through the window to make sure Tommy wasn't going to be any trouble. "Oh, shit," he muttered, dropping the keys. "Oh, Christ."

"Frank?"

He snatched up the keys off the floor, uttering more curses. "Christ," he murmured, sliding the key into the lock, turning back the bolt. He opened the door and Sara saw the reason for his panic. She dropped her coat, the bottle of pills she'd shoved in the pocket before she left the house making a rattling sound as they hit the concrete.

Tommy Braham lay on the floor of his cell. He was on his side, both arms reaching out to the bed in front of him. His head was turned at an awkward angle as he stared blankly up at the ceiling. His lips were parted. Sara recognized him now, the man he had become not much different from the little boy he'd once been. He'd brought her a dandelion once, and turned the color of a turnip when she'd kissed his forehead.

She went to him, pressing her fingers to his neck, doing a cursory check for a pulse. He had obviously been beaten—his nose broken, his eye blackened—but that was not the reason for his death. Both his wrists were cut open, the wounds gaping, flesh and sinew exposed to the stale air. There seemed to be more blood on the floor than there was inside of his body. The smell was sickly sweet, like a butcher's shop.

"Tommy," she whispered, stroking his cheek. "I remember you."

Sara closed his eyelids with her fingers. His skin was still warm, almost hot. She had driven too slowly getting here. She shouldn't have used the restroom before leaving the house. She should have listened to Julie Smith. She should have agreed to come without a fight. She should have remembered this sweet little boy who'd brought her a weed he'd picked from the tall grass growing outside the clinic.

Frank bent down and used a pencil to drag a thin, cylindrical object out of the blood.

Sara said, "It's an ink cartridge from a ballpoint pen."

"He must have used it to ..."

Sara looked at Tommy's wrists again. Blue lines of ink crossed the pale skin. She had been the coroner for Grant County before she'd left for Atlanta, and she knew what a repetitive injury looked like. Tommy had scraped and scraped with the metal ink cartridge, digging into his flesh until he found a way to open a vein. And then he had done the same thing to his other wrist.

"Shit." Frank was staring over her shoulder.

She turned around. On the wall, written in his own blood, Tommy had scrawled the words *Not me*.

Sara closed her eyes, not wanting to see any of this, not wanting to be here.

“Did he try to recant?”

Frank said, “They all do.” He hesitated, then added, “He wrote out a confession. He had guilty knowledge of the crime.”

Sara recognized the term “guilty knowledge.” It was used to describe details that only the police and the criminal knew. She opened her eyes. “Is that why he was crying? He wanted to take back his confession?”

Frank gave a tight nod. “Yeah, he wanted to take it back. But they all—”

“Did he ask for a lawyer?”

“No.”

“How did he get the pen?”

Frank shrugged, but he wasn’t stupid. He could guess what had happened.

“He was Lena’s prisoner. Did she give him the pen?”

“Of course not.” Frank stood up, walked to the cell door. “Not on purpose.”

Sara touched Tommy’s shoulder before standing. “Lena was supposed to frisk him before she put him in the cell.”

“He could’ve hidden it in—”

“I’m assuming she gave him the pen to write his confession.” Sara felt a deep, dark hate burning in the pit of her stomach. She had been back in town for less than an hour and already she was in the middle of yet another one of Lena’s epic screwups. “How long did she interrogate him?”

Frank shook his head again, like she had it all wrong. “Couple’a three hours. Not that long.”

Sara pointed to the words Tommy had written in his own blood. “‘Not me,’ ” she read. “He says he didn’t do it.”

“They all say they didn’t do it.” Frank’s tone told her his patience was running thin. “Look, honey, just go home. I’m sorry about all this, but ...” He paused, his mind working. “I gotta call the state, start the paperwork, get Lena back in ...” He rubbed his face with his hands. “Christ, what a nightmare.”

Sara picked her coat up off the floor. “Where is his confession? I want to see it.”

Frank dropped his hands. He seemed stuck in place. Finally, he relented, leading her toward the door at the opposite end of the hall. The fluorescent lights of the squad room were harsh, almost blinding, compared to the dark cells. Sara blinked to help her eyes adjust. There was a group of uniformed patrolmen standing by the coffeemaker. Marla was at her desk. They all stared at her with the same macabre curiosity they had shown four years ago: *How awful, how tragic, how long before I can get on the phone and tell somebody I saw her?*

Sara ignored them because she did not know what else to do. Her skin felt hot, and she found herself looking down at her hands so that she would not see Jeffrey’s office. She wondered if they had left everything as it was: his Auburn memorabilia, his shooting trophies and family photographs. Sweat rolled down her back. The room was so stifling that she thought she might be sick.

Frank stopped at his desk. “Allison Spooner is the girl he killed. Tommy tried to make it look like a suicide—wrote a note, stuck Spooner’s watch and ring in her shoes. He would’ve gotten away with it but Le—” He stopped. “Allison was stabbed in the neck.”

“Has an autopsy been performed?”

“Not yet.”

“How do you know the stab wasn’t self-inflicted?”

“It looked—”

“How deep did it penetrate? What was the trajectory of the blade? Was there water in her lungs?”

Frank talked over her, an air of desperation to his voice. “She had ligature marks around her wrists.”

Sara stared at him. She had always known Frank to be an honorable man, yet she would have sworn on a stack of Bibles that he was lying through his teeth. “Brock confirmed this?”

He hesitated before shaking his head and shrugging at the same time.

Sara could feel herself getting angrier. She knew somewhere in the back of her mind that her anger was unreasonable, that it was coming from that dark place she had ignored for so many years, but there was no stopping it now—even if she wanted to. “Was the body weighted down in the water?”

“She had two cinder blocks chained to her waist.”

“If she floated with both hands hanging down, livor mortis could have settled into her wrists, or her hands could have rested at an angle on the bottom of the lake, making it look to the untrained eye as if she’d been tied up.”

Frank looked away. “I saw them, Sara. She was tied up.” He opened a file on his desk and handed her a piece of yellow legal paper. The top was torn where it had been ripped away from the pad. Both sides were filled. “He copped to everything.”

Sara’s hands shook as she read Tommy Braham’s confession. He wrote in the exaggerated cursive of an elementary school student. His sentence construction was just as immature: *Pippy is my dog. She was sick. She ate a sock. She needed a picture took of her insides. I called my dad. He is in Florida.* Sara turned the page over and found the meat of the narrative. Allison had spurned a sexual advance. Tommy had snapped. He’d stabbed her and taken her to the lake to help cover his crime.

She looked at both sides of the paper. Two pages. Tommy had ended his life in less than two pages. Sara doubted he’d understood half of it. The only time he’d used a comma was right before a big word. These, he printed in block letters, and she could see small dots where he had pressed the pen under each letter to make sure he’d spelled it correctly.

Sara could barely speak. “She coached him.”

“It’s a confession, Sara. Most cons have to be told what to write.”

“He doesn’t even understand what he’s saying.” She skimmed the letter, reading, “‘I punched Allison to *subdude*.’” She stared at Frank, disbelieving. “Tommy’s IQ is barely above eighty. You think he masterminded this fake suicide? He’s less than one standard deviation from being classified as mentally disabled.”

“You got that from reading two paragraphs?”

“I got that from treating him,” Sara snapped. It had all come flooding back to her as she read the confession: Gordon Braham’s face when Sara suggested his son might be developing too slowly for his age, the tests Tommy had endured, Gordon’s devastation when Sara told him his son would never mature past a certain level. “Tommy was slow, Frank. He didn’t know how to count change. It took him two months to learn how to tie his shoes.”

Frank stared back at her, exhaustion seeping from every pore. “He stabbed Brad, Sara. He cut me in the arm. He ran from the scene.”

Her hands started shaking. Her body surged with anger. “Did you think to ask Tommy why?” she demanded. “Or were you too busy beating his face to a pulp?”

Frank glanced back at the officers by the coffee machine. “Keep your voice down.”

Sara was not going to be silenced. “Where was Lena when all this happened?”

“She was there.”

“I bet she was. I bet she was right there pulling everybody’s strings. ‘The victim was tied up. She must have been murdered. Let’s go to her apartment. Let’s get everybody around me hurt while I walk away without so much as a scratch.’” Sara could feel her heart shaking in her chest. “How many people does Lena have to get injured—killed—before somebody stops her?”

“Sara—” Frank rubbed his hands over his face. “We found Tommy in the garage with—”

“His father owns the property. He had every right to be in that garage. Did you? Did you have a warrant?”

“We didn’t need a warrant.”

“Have the laws changed since Jeffrey was alive?” Frank winced at the name. “Did Lena identify herself as a cop or just start waving her gun around?”

Frank didn’t answer her question, which was answer enough. “It was a tense situation. We did everything by the book.”

“Does Tommy’s handwriting match the suicide note?”

Frank blanched, and she realized he hadn’t asked the question himself. “He probably forged it, made it look like the girl’s.”

“He didn’t have the intelligence to forge anything. He was slow. Is that not getting through to you? There’s no way in hell Tommy could’ve done any of this. He wasn’t mentally capable of plotting out a trip to the store, let alone a fake suicide. Are you being willfully blind? Or just covering for Lena like you always do?”

“Mind your tone,” Frank warned.

“This is going to catch her.” Sara held up the confession like a trophy. The shaking in her hands had gotten worse. She felt hot and cold at the same time. “Lena tricked him into writing this. All Tommy wanted to do was please people. She pushed him into a confession and then she pushed him into taking his own life.”

“Now, hold on—”

“She’s going to lose her badge for this. She should go to prison.”

“Sounds to me like you care a hell of a lot more about some punk kid than a cop who’s fighting for his life.”

He could have slapped her face and the shock would have been less. “You think I don’t care about a cop?”

Frank sighed heavily. “Listen, Sweetpea. Just calm down, okay?”

“Don’t you *dare* tell me to calm down. I’ve been calm for the last four *years*.” She took her cell phone out of her back pocket and scrolled through the contacts, looking for the right number.

Frank sounded scared. “What are you going to do?”

Sara listened to the phone ring at the Georgia Bureau of Investigation's headquarters in Atlanta. A secretary answered. She told the woman, "This is Sara Linton calling for Amanda Wagner."

CHAPTER FOUR

Sara sat in her car in the hospital parking lot, staring out at Main Street. The facility had stopped accepting patients a year ago, but the building had looked abandoned long before that. Weeds sprouted in the ambulance bay. Windows on the upper floors were broken. The metal door that used to be propped open for smokers was bolted shut with a steel bar.

Guilt about Tommy Braham still weighed heavily on her—not just because she hadn’t remembered him, but because in the space of a few seconds, she had taken his death and used it as a launching pad for her own revenge fantasy against Lena Adams. Sara realized now that she should have just let it play out on its own instead of inserting herself into the middle. A suicide in police custody automatically triggered an investigation by the state. Frank would have followed the chain of command, calling in Nick Shelton, Grant County’s local field agent for the Georgia Bureau of Investigation. Nick would have talked to all the officers and witnesses involved. He was a good cop. In the end, he would have come to the same conclusion as Sara: that Lena had been negligent.

Unfortunately, Sara hadn’t been patient enough to trust the process. She had unilaterally decided to be town coroner again, elbowing poor Dan Brock out of the way, taking her own photographs of the scene, doing sketches of Tommy’s cell, before she allowed the body to be removed. She’d made copies of every sheet of paper she could find in the station house that referred to Tommy Braham. Even with all of this, calling Amanda Wagner, a deputy director with the GBI, was the worst of her transgressions. It was like swinging a sledgehammer at a thumbtack.

“Stupid,” she whispered, leaning her head into the steering wheel. She should be home right now looking at the marble tile her father had installed in the master bathroom, not waiting for someone straight from GBI headquarters to show up so she could unduly influence an investigation.

She leaned back against the seat, checking the clock on the dashboard. Special Agent Will Trent was almost an hour late, but she had no way of calling him. The trip from Atlanta was four hours—less if you knew you could flash your badge and talk your way out of a speeding ticket. She looked at the clock again, waiting out the flicker of 5:42 changing to 5:43.

Sara had no idea what she was going to say to him. She had talked to Will Trent probably a half dozen times while he worked a case involving one of Sara’s patients at Grady’s ER. She had shamelessly inserted herself into the investigation then, much as she was doing now. Will would probably start to wonder if she was some kind of crime scene voyeur. At the very least, he would question her obsession with Lena Adams. He would probably think that she was crazy.

“Oh, Jeffrey,” Sara whispered. What would he think of the mess she was getting herself into? What would he say about how awful being back in his

adoptive town, the town he loved, made her feel? Everyone was so careful around her, so respectful. She should be grateful, but on some level, her skin crawled when she saw the pity in their eyes.

She was so damn tired of being tragic.

The roar of an engine announced Will Trent's arrival. He was in a beautiful old Porsche, black on black. Even in the rain, the machine looked like an animal ready to pounce.

He took his time getting out of the car, snapping the faceplate off the radio, removing the GPS receiver from the dash, and locking them both in the glove compartment. He lived in Atlanta, where you bolted your front door even if you were just going out to get your mail. Sara knew he could leave the Porsche sitting in the parking lot with the doors wide open and the worst thing that might happen is someone would come along and close them for him.

Will smiled at her as he locked the door. Sara had only ever seen him in three-piece suits, so she was surprised to find him dressed in a black sweater and jeans. He was tall, at least six-three, with a lean runner's body and an easy gait. His sandy blond hair had grown out, no longer the military cut he'd sported when they first met. Initially, Sara had taken Will Trent for an accountant or lawyer. Even now, she had a hard time reconciling the man with the job. He didn't walk with a cop's swagger. He didn't have that world-weary stare that let you know he carried a gun on his hip. Still, he was an excellent investigator, and suspects underestimated him at their own peril.

This was one of the reasons that Sara was glad that Amanda Wagner had sent Will Trent. Lena would hate him on sight. He was too soft-spoken, too accommodating—at least on first blush. She wouldn't know what she was getting herself into until it was too late.

Will opened the car door and got in.

Sara said, "I thought you'd gotten lost."

He gave her a half-grin as he adjusted the seat so his head wasn't hitting the roof. "I apologize. I actually *did* get lost." He looked at her face, obviously trying to get a read off her. "How are you doing, Dr. Linton?"

"I'm ..." Sara let out a long sigh. She didn't know him very well, which, oddly, made it easier for her to be honest. "Not so great, Agent Trent."

"Agent Mitchell said to tell you she's sorry she couldn't make it."

Faith Mitchell was his partner, a onetime patient of Sara's. She was currently on maternity leave, fairly close to her due date. "How is she holding up?"

"With her usual forbearance." His smile indicated the opposite. "Excuse me for changing the subject so quickly, but how can I help you?"

"Did Amanda tell you anything?"

"She told me there was a suicide in custody and to get down here as fast as possible."

"Did she tell you about ..." Sara waited for him to fill in the blank. When he didn't, she prompted, "My husband?"

"Is that relevant? I mean, to what's going on today?"

Sara felt her throat tighten.

Will asked, "Dr. Linton?"

"I don't know that it's relevant," she finally answered. "It's just history. Everyone you meet in this town is going to know about it. They're going to

assume that you do, too.” She felt tears sting her eyes for the millionth time that day. “I’m sorry. I’ve been so angry for the last six hours that I haven’t really thought about what I’m dropping you in the middle of.”

He leaned up and pulled a handkerchief out of his back pocket. “There’s no need to apologize. I get dropped in the middle of stuff all the time.”

Aside from Jeffrey and her father, Will Trent was the only man Sara knew who still carried a handkerchief. She took the neatly folded white cloth he handed her.

Will repeated, “Dr. Linton?”

She wiped her eyes, apologizing again. “I’m sorry. I’ve been tearing up like this all day.”

“It’s always hard to go back.” He said this with such certainty that Sara found herself really looking at him for the first time since he’d gotten into the car. Will Trent was an attractive man, but not in a way that you would quickly notice. If anything, he seemed eager to blend in with his surroundings, to keep his head down and do his job. Months ago, he’d told Sara that he’d grown up in the Atlanta Children’s Home. His mother had been killed when he was an infant. These were big revelations, yet Sara felt like she knew nothing about him at all.

His head turned toward her and she looked away.

Will said, “Let’s try it this way: You tell me what you think I should know. If I have more questions, I’ll try to ask them as respectfully as I can.”

Sara cleared her throat several times, trying to find her voice. She was thinking about her own recovery after Jeffrey’s death, the year of her life she had lost to sleep and pills and misery. None of that mattered right now. What she needed to convey to Will was that Lena Adams had a long-standing pattern of risking other people’s lives, of sometimes getting people killed.

She said, “Lena Adams was responsible for my husband’s death.”

Will’s expression did not change. “How so?”

“She got mixed up with someone ...” Sara cleared her throat again. “The man who killed my husband was Lena’s lover. Boyfriend. Whatever. They were together for several years.”

“They were together when your husband died?”

“No.” Sara shrugged. “I don’t know. He had this hold on her. He beat her. It’s possible that he raped her, but—” Sara stopped, not knowing how to tell Will not to feel sorry for Lena. “She goaded him. I know this sounds horrible, but it was like Lena *wanted* to be abused.”

He nodded, but she wondered if he really understood.

“They had this sick relationship where they brought out the worst in each other. She put up with it until it stopped being fun, then she called in my husband to clean up her mess and ...” Sara stopped, not wanting to sound as desperate as she felt. “Lena painted a target on his back. It was never proven, but her ex-lover is the man who killed my husband.”

Will said, “Police officers have a responsibility to report abuse.”

Sara felt a spark of anger, thinking he was blaming Jeffrey for not stepping in. “She denied it was happening. You know how hard domestic violence is to prove when—”

“I know,” he interrupted. “I’m sorry my words were unclear. I meant to say that the onus was on Detective Adams. Even when the officer is herself the

victim of abuse, by law, it's her duty to report it."

Sara tried to even out her breathing. She was getting so worked up about this that she must have seemed slightly crazy. "Lena's a bad cop. She's sloppy. She's negligent. She's the reason my husband is dead. She's the reason Tommy is dead. She's probably the reason Brad got stabbed in the street. She gets people into situations, puts them in the line of fire, then backs away and watches the carnage."

"On purpose?"

Sara's throat was so dry she could barely swallow. "Does it matter?"

"I suppose not," he admitted. "I'm guessing Detective Adams was never charged with anything in your husband's murder?"

"She's never held accountable for anything. She always manages to slither back under her rock."

He nodded, staring ahead at the rain-soaked windshield. Sara had turned off the engine. She had been cold before Will came, but now their combined body heat was warm enough to cloud the windows.

Sara chanced another look at Will, trying to guess what he was thinking. His face remained impassive. He was probably the hardest person to read that Sara had ever met in her life.

She finally said, "This all sounds like a witch hunt on my part, doesn't it?"

He took his time answering. "A suspect killed himself while in police custody. The GBI is charged with investigating that."

He was being too generous. "Nick Shelton is the Grant County field agent. I leapfrogged over about ten heads."

"Agent Shelton wouldn't have been allowed to conduct the investigation. He's got a relationship with the local force. They would've sent me or somebody like me to look into this. I've worked in small towns before. Nobody feels bad about hating the pencil pusher from Atlanta." He smiled, adding, "Of course, if you hadn't called Dr. Wagner directly, it might've taken another day to get somebody down here."

"I'm so sorry that I dragged you away this close to a holiday. Your wife must be furious."

"My ...?" He seemed puzzled for a second, as if he'd forgotten about the ring on his finger. He covered for it badly, saying, "She doesn't mind."

"Still, I'm sorry."

"I'll live." He turned her back to the matter at hand. "Tell me what happened today."

This time the words came much more easily—Julie's phone call, the rumors about Brad's stabbing, Frank's plea for her help. She finished with finding Tommy in the cell, seeing the words he had scrawled on the wall. "They arrested him for Allison Spooner's murder."

Will's eyebrows furrowed. "They charged Braham with murder?"

"Here's the worst part." She handed him the photocopy she'd made of Tommy's confession.

Will seemed surprised. "They gave this to you?"

"I have a relationship—a past relationship." She didn't really know how to explain why Frank had let her bulldoze her way through. "I was the town coroner. I was married to the boss. They're used to showing me evidence."

Will patted his pockets. "I think my reading glasses are in my suitcase."

She dug around in her purse and pulled out her own pair.

Will frowned at the glasses, but slid them on. He blinked several times as he scanned the page, asking, "Tommy is local?"

"Born and raised."

"How old is he?"

Sara couldn't keep the outrage out of her tone. "Nineteen."

He looked up. "Nineteen?"

"Exactly," she said. "I don't know how they think he masterminded this. He can barely spell his own name."

Will nodded as he turned back to the confession, his eyes going back and forth across the page. Finally, he looked at Sara. "Did he have some kind of reading problem, like dyslexia?"

"Dyslexia is a language disorder. But, no, Tommy wasn't dyslexic. His IQ was around eighty. Intellectually disabled people test out at seventy or below—what used to be called retarded. Dyslexia has nothing to do with IQ. Actually, I had a couple of kids with it who ran circles around me."

He gave his half-grin. "I find that very hard to believe."

She smiled back, thinking he didn't know the first thing about her. "Don't get hung up on a couple of spelling mistakes."

"It's more than a couple."

"Think about it this way: I could sit across from a dyslexic all day and never know it. With Tommy, he could talk about baseball or football until the cows came home, but get him into more complex areas of thinking and he'd be completely lost. Concepts that required logic, or processing cause and effect, were incredibly difficult for him to grasp. You couldn't talk a dyslexic into a false confession any more easily than you could talk someone who had green eyes or red hair into saying they did something they didn't do. Tommy was incredibly gullible. He could be talked into anything."

Will stared at her, not speaking for a moment. "You think Detective Adams elicited a false confession?"

"Yes, I do."

"Do you think she's criminally negligent?"

"I don't know the legal threshold. I just know that her actions led to his death."

He spoke carefully, and she finally realized that he was interviewing her. "Can you tell me how you reached that conclusion?"

"Other than the fact that he scrawled 'Not me' in his own blood before he died?"

"Other than that."

"Tommy is—was—very suggestible. It goes hand in hand with his low IQ. He didn't test low enough to be classified as severely disabled, but he had some of the same attributes: the desire to please, the innocence, the gullibility. What happened today—the note, the shoes, the botched cover-up. On the surface, it seems like the kind of thing a person who is slow or stupid might do, but it's all too complicated for Tommy." She tried to listen to herself from Will's perspective. "I know this sounds like I'm hell-bent on going after Lena, and obviously I am, but that doesn't mean that what I'm saying isn't scientific fact. I

had a hard time treating Tommy because he would always say he had whatever symptom I asked him about, whether it was a headache or a cough. If I put it into his head the right way, he would've told me he had the bubonic plague."

"So you're saying Lena should have recognized that Tommy was slow and ...?"

"Not badgered him into killing himself, for one."

"And two?"

"Sought proper medical care for him. He was obviously stricken. He wouldn't stop crying. He wouldn't talk to anybody ..." Her voice trailed off as she saw the hole in her argument. Frank had called Sara for help.

Instead of pointing out the obvious, Will asked, "Isn't the prisoner the responsibility of the booking officer?"

"Lena is the one who put him there. She didn't frisk him—or at least didn't frisk him well enough to find the ink cartridge he used to kill himself with. She didn't alert the guards to keep a close eye on him. She just got the confession and walked away." Sara could feel herself getting angrier by the second. "Who knows how she left him emotionally. She probably talked him into thinking his life wasn't worth living. This is what she does over and over again. She creates these shitstorms and someone else always pays the price."

Will stared out at the parking lot, his hands resting lightly on his knees. Though the hospital had closed, the electricity was still working. The parking lot lights flickered on. In their yellow glow, Sara could see the scar that ran down the side of Will's face and into his collar. It was old, probably from his childhood. The first time she'd seen it, she'd thought maybe he'd ripped the skin sliding into first base or failing at some daring feat on a bicycle. That was before she'd found out that he'd grown up in an orphanage. Now, she wondered if there was more to the story.

Certainly, it wasn't Will Trent's only scar. Even in profile, she could see the spot between his nose and lip where someone or something had repeatedly busted the skin apart. Whoever had stitched the flesh back together hadn't done a very good job. The scar was slightly jagged, giving his mouth an almost raffish quality.

Will exhaled a breath of air. When he finally spoke, he was all business. "They charged Tommy Braham with murder? Nothing else?"

"No, just murder."

"Not attempted murder for Detective Stephens?" Will asked. Sara shook her head. "Wasn't Chief Wallace also injured?"

Sara felt a blush work its way up her chest. She imagined Frank was calling it that even after the beating he gave Tommy in the middle of the street. "The arrest report said murder. Nothing else."

"The way I see it is that I have two issues here. One is that a suspect killed himself while he was in Detective Adams's custody, and two is that I'm not sure why she arrested Tommy Braham for murder based on his confession. And not just his confession, but any confession."

"Meaning?"

"You don't just arrest someone for murder based solely on their confession. There has to be corroborative evidence. The sixth amendment gives a defendant the right to confront his accuser. If you're your own accuser and you recant your

confession ...” He shrugged. “It’s like a dog chasing its tail.”

Sara felt stupid for not making this connection hours ago. She had been the county medical examiner for almost fifteen years. The police didn’t necessarily need a cause of death to hold someone for suspicion of murder, but they needed the official finding that a murder had been committed before an arrest warrant was issued.

Will said, “They had plenty of reason to hold Braham without the murder charge: assault with a deadly weapon, attempted murder, assault on a police officer during the course of duty, assault during the course of arrest, evading arrest, trespassing. These are serious felonies. They could hold him on any combination for the next year and no one would complain.” He shook his head, as if he couldn’t grasp the logic. “I’ll need to get their reports.”

Sara turned around to the back seat and retrieved the copies she’d made. “I’ll have to wait for the drugstore to open in the morning so I can print the photographs.”

Will marveled at her access as he flipped through the pages. “Wow. All right.” He skimmed the pages as he talked. “I know you’re convinced Tommy didn’t kill this girl, but it’s my job to prove it one way or another.”

“Of course. I didn’t mean to ...” Sara let her voice trail off. She *had* meant to influence him. That was the point of them being here. “You’re right. I know you have to be impartial.”

“I just need you to be prepared, Dr. Linton. If I find out Tommy did it, or can’t find solid proof that he didn’t, no one is going to care how he was treated in jail. They’re going to think your Detective Adams saved them a lot of their tax dollars by avoiding a trial.”

Sara felt her heart sink. He was right. She had seen people in this town make assumptions before that weren’t necessarily rooted in fact. They didn’t embrace nuance.

He gave her an alternate scenario. “On the other hand, if Tommy didn’t kill this girl, then there’s a murderer out there who’s either very lucky or very clever.”

Again, Sara hadn’t let herself think this far. She had been so concerned with Lena’s involvement that it hadn’t occurred to her that Tommy’s innocence would point to another killer.

Will asked, “What else did you find out?”

“According to Frank, both he and Lena saw marks on Spooner’s wrists that indicated she was tied up.”

Will made a skeptical noise. “That’s really hard to tell when a body’s been in the water that long.”

Sara did not revel in her feelings of vindication. “There’s a stab wound, or what they think is a stab wound, in her neck.”

“Is it possible that it was self-inflicted?”

“I haven’t seen it, but I can’t imagine anyone would kill themselves with a stab to the back of the neck. And there would’ve been a lot of blood, especially if her carotid was hit. We’re talking high velocity, up and back, like a hose turned on full blast. I would guess you’d find anywhere from four to five pints of blood at the scene.”

“What about Spooner’s suicide note?”

“ ‘I want it over,’ ” Sara recalled.

“That’s strange.” He closed the folder. “Is the local coroner any good?”

“Dan Brock. He’s a funeral director, not a doctor.”

“I’ll take that as a no.” Will stared at her. “If I transfer Spooner and Braham up to Atlanta, we lose another day.”

She was already a step ahead of him. “I talked to Brock. He’s happy to let me do the autopsies, but we’ll have to start after eleven so we don’t disturb anyone. He’s got a funeral tomorrow morning. He’s supposed to call me later with the exact time so we can coordinate the procedures.”

“Autopsies are done at the funeral home?”

She indicated the hospital. “We used to do them here, but the state cut funding and they couldn’t stay open.”

“Same story, different town.” He looked at his cell phone. “I guess I should go introduce myself to Chief Wallace.”

“Interim Chief,” she corrected, then, “Sorry, it doesn’t matter. Frank’s not at the station right now.”

“I’ve already left two messages for him about meeting up with me. Did he get called out?”

“He’s at the hospital with Brad. And Lena, I imagine.”

“I’m sure they’re taking some time to get their stories straight.”

“Will you go to the hospital?”

“They’re going to hate me enough without me trampling into the hospital room of an injured cop.”

Sara silently conceded the point. “So, what are you going to do now?”

“I want to go to the station and see where they were keeping Tommy. I’m sure they’ll have an extremely hostile patrolman there who’s going to tell me he just got on shift, doesn’t know anything, and Tommy killed himself because he was guilty.” He tapped the file. “I’ll talk to the other prisoners if they haven’t already let them go. I imagine Interim Chief Wallace won’t show up until the morning, which will give me some time to go over these files.” He leaned up to get his wallet out of his back pocket. “Here’s my business card. It’s got my cell number on the back.”

Sara read Will’s name next to the GBI logo. “You have a doctorate?”

He took the card back from her and stared at the printing. Instead of answering her question, he said, “The numbers are good. Can you tell me where I can find the closest hotel?”

“There’s one over by the college. It’s not very nice, but it’s fairly clean. It’ll be quiet since the kids are on break.”

“I’ll get supper there and—”

“They don’t have a restaurant.” Sara felt a flash of shame for her small town. “Everything’s closed this time of night except the pizza place, and they’ve been shut down by the health department so many times that only the students will eat there.”

“I’m sure there are some snack machines at the hotel.” He put his hand on the door handle, but Sara stopped him.

“My mother made a huge dinner and there’s plenty left over.” She took the file from him and wrote her address on the front. “Crap,” she muttered, scratching through the street number. She had given her old address, not her parents’.

"Lakeshore," she said, pointing at the street directly across from the hospital. "Go right. Or left if you want the scenic route. It's just a big circle around the lake." She wrote down her cell number. "Call if you get lost."

"I couldn't impose on your family."

"I've dragged you all the way down here. You could at least let me feed you. Or let my mother feed you, which would be far better for your health." Then, because she knew he was not a stupid man, she added, "And you know I want to know what's happening on the case."

"I don't know how late I'll be."

"I'll wait up."

CHAPTER FIVE

Will Trent pressed his face to the closed glass door of the station house. The lights were out. There was no one at the front desk. He rapped his keys on the door for a third time, thinking if he used any more pressure, the glass would break. The building overhang wasn't doing much to keep the rain off his head. His stomach was grumbling from hunger. He was cold and wet, and extremely irritated that he had been ordered to this small-town hellhole during his vacation.

The worst part about this particular assignment was that this was the first time in his working life that Will had ever asked for a whole week off from work. Back home, his front yard was torn up where he had been digging a trench around the sewer line from his house to the street. Tree roots had taken over the ninety-year-old clay pipe, and a plumber wanted eight thousand dollars to change it out to plastic. Will was digging the trench by hand, trying not to destroy the thousands of dollars worth of landscaping he'd planted in the yard over the last five years, when the phone rang. Not answering didn't seem like an option. He'd been expecting news from Faith—that her baby was finally coming or, even better, that it was already here.

But, no, it was Amanda Wagner, telling him, "We don't say no to a cop's widow."

Will had put a tarp over the trench, but something told him his two days of digging would be erased by a mudslide by the time he got back home. If he ever made it back home. It seemed like he was destined to spend the rest of his life standing in the pouring-down rain outside this Podunk police station.

He was about to tap on the glass again when a light finally came on inside the building. An elderly woman headed toward the door, taking her time as she waddled across the carpeted lobby. She was large, a bright red prairie-style dress draping over her like a tent. Her gray hair was wrapped up in a bun on the top of her head, held there by a butterfly clip. A gold necklace with a cross dangled into her ample cleavage.

She put her hand on the lock, but didn't open it. Her voice was muffled through the glass. "Help you?"

Will took out his ID and showed it to her. She leaned in, scrutinizing the photograph, comparing it with the man in front of her. "You look better with your hair longer."

"Thank you." He tried to blink away the rain pouring into his eyes.

She waited for him to say something else, but Will held his tongue. Finally, she relented, unlocking the door.

The temperature inside was negligibly warm, but at least he was out from the rain. Will ran his fingers through his hair, trying to get the wet out. He stamped his feet to knock off the damp.

"You're making a mess," the woman said.

"I apologize," Will told her, wondering if he could ask for a towel. He took out his handkerchief and wiped his face. He smelled perfume. Sara's perfume.

The woman gave him a steely look, as if she could read what was going through Will's mind and didn't like it. "You gonna just stand there all night sniffing your handkerchief? I got supper to make."

He folded the cloth and put it back in his pocket. "I'm Agent Trent from the GBI."

"I already read that on your ID." She looked him up and down in open appraisal, obviously not liking what she saw. "I'm Marla Simms, the station secretary."

"Nice to meet you, Ms. Simms. Can you tell me where Chief Wallace is?"

"Mrs." Her tone was cutting. "Not sure if you heard, but one of our boys was almost killed today. Struck down in the street while trying to do his job. We've been a little busy with that."

Will nodded. "Yes, ma'am, I did hear that. I hope Detective Stephens is going to be okay."

"That boy has worked here since he was eighteen years old."

"My prayers are with his family," Will offered, knowing religion paid currency in small towns. "If Chief Wallace isn't available, may I speak with the booking officer?"

She seemed annoyed that he knew such a position existed. Frank Wallace had obviously given her the task of stalling the asshole from the GBI. Will could almost see the wheels in her head turning as she tried to figure out a way around his question.

Will politely pressed, "I know that the prisoners aren't left unattended. Are you in charge of the cells?"

"Larry Knox is back there," she finally answered. "I was about to leave. I already locked up all the files, so if you want—"

Will had tucked the file Sara had given him down the front of his pants so that it wouldn't get wet. He lifted his sweater and handed Marla the file. "Can you fax these twelve pages for me?"

She seemed hesitant to take the papers. He couldn't blame her. The file was warm from being pressed against his body. "The phone number is—"

"Hold on." She extracted a pen from somewhere deep inside her hair. It was plastic, a retractable Bic that you'd find in any office setting. "Go ahead."

He gave her his partner's fax number. The woman took her time writing it down, pretending to get the numbers mixed up. Will glanced around the lobby, which looked like every other small-town police station lobby he had ever walked into. Wood paneling lined the walls. Group photographs showed patrolmen in their uniforms, shoulders squared, jaws tilted up, smiles on their faces. There was a tall counter opposite the photographs, a gate filling in the space between the front part of the building and the back, where all the desks were lined up in a row. The lights were all off.

"All right," she said. "I'll fax them before I go."

"Do you have an extra pen I can borrow?"

She offered him the Bic.

"I wouldn't want to take your last one."

"Go ahead."

"No, really," he insisted, holding up his palms. "I couldn't take—"

"There's twenty boxfuls in the closet," she snapped. "Just take it."

"Well, all right. Thanks." He tucked the pen into his back pocket. "About the fax—I've numbered the pages, so if you can make sure all twelve go in the same order?"

She grumbled as she walked toward the gate. He waited as she bent over to find the release. There was a loud buzz and the click of a lock. Will found it strange that there was such a high level of security in the station, but small towns had found lots of inventive ways to spend Homeland Security money after 9/11. He had visited a jail once that had Kohler toilets in all the cells and nickel-plated fixtures on the sinks.

Marla busied herself in front of the row of office machines by the coffeemaker. Will took in the space. Three rows of three desks were in the center of the room. Tables with folding chairs lined the back wall. On the side of the building facing the street was a closed office door. There was a window looking out onto the squad room, but the blinds were tightly shut.

"Jail's in the back," Marla advised. She stacked the pages on the table, giving him a careful eye. Will looked back at the office and something like panic seemed to take hold of Marla, as if she was afraid he would open the door.

"Through here?" he said, indicating a metal door in the back of the room.

"That's the back, isn't it?"

"Thank you," he told her. "I appreciate your help."

Will let the door close before taking out Marla's pen and unscrewing the barrel. As he suspected, the ink cartridge inside was plastic. Sara had said the cartridge Tommy Braham used to cut open his wrists was metal. Will was guessing it came from a nicer pen than the Bic.

He reassembled the pen as he walked down the hall. Exit signs illuminated a tiled floor that was around sixty feet long and four feet wide. Will opened the first door he came to, a storage room. He checked over his shoulder before turning on the light. Boxes of paper clips and various office supplies lined the shelves, as did the twenty boxes of retractable Bic pens Marla had mentioned. Two tall stacks of yellow legal pads were beside the pens, and Will imagined the detectives coming into this closet, grabbing a pen and a legal pad so they could give suspects something to write their confessions with.

There were three more doors off the hallway. Two led to empty interrogation rooms. The setup was as you would expect: a long table with a metal eyebolt sticking out of the top, chairs scattered around. Two-way mirrors looked into each room. Will guessed you had to stand in the supply closet to see the first room. The other viewing room was behind the third door. He tried the knob and found it locked.

The door at the end of the hall opened and a cop in full uniform, including hat, came out. Will glanced over his shoulder, finding a camera in the corner that had tracked his progress down the hallway.

The cop asked, "What do you want?"

"Officer Knox?"

The man's eyes narrowed. "That's right."

"You're the booker?" Will asked, surprised. The position of booking officer was a necessary but tedious job. They were responsible for processing all the

newly arrested prisoners and in charge of their well-being while they were housed in the cells. Generally, this was the sort of job an old-timer was given, a light desk position that eased the transition into retirement. Sometimes it was given to a cop who was being punished. Will doubted that was the case with Knox. Frank Wallace wouldn't have left an aggrieved officer here to handle Will.

Knox was staring at him with open anger. "You just gonna stand there?"

Will took out his badge. "I'm Special Agent Trent. I'm with the GBI."

The man took off his hat, showing a shock of carrot red hair. "I know who you are."

"I'm sure your chief has briefed you. We were called in as a matter of routine to investigate the suicide of Tommy Braham."

"You were called in by Sara Linton," he countered. "I was standing right there when she did it."

Will smiled at the man, because he had found that smiling at people when they thought you should be mad was a good way of bringing down some of the tension. "I appreciate your cooperation in this investigation, Officer. I know how difficult things must be for you right now."

"Do you now?" So much for the smiling. Knox looked like he wanted to punch Will in the throat. "A good man is fighting for his life in that hospital over in Macon and you're worried about the piece of shit who stabbed him. That's what I see."

"Did you know Tommy Braham?"

He was taken aback by the question. "What does that matter?"

"I was just curious."

"Yeah, I knew him. Had a screw loose in his head from the day he was born."

Will nodded as if he understood. "Can you take me to the cell where Tommy was found?"

Knox seemed to be really trying to think of a reason to say no. Will waited him out. Any cop would tell you that the best way to get someone to talk was to be quiet. There was a natural, human inclination to fill silence with noise. What most cops didn't realize was that they were just as susceptible to the same technique.

Knox said, "All right, but I don't like you, and you don't like me, so let's not pretend anything otherwise."

"Fair enough," Will agreed, following him through the door, finding himself in a smaller hallway with yet another door. A bench was on one side with a row of gun lockers. Every jail Will had ever visited had the same setup. Rather wisely, weapons were not allowed back with the prisoners.

Knox indicated the lockers. "Be sure to take out your clip and eject the round."

"I don't have my gun on me."

From the look Knox gave him, Will might as well have said he'd left his penis at home.

The man's lip curled in disgust. He turned around, walking toward the next door.

Will asked, "You said you were here when Dr. Linton made her phone call. Were you just coming on shift?"

Knox turned. "I wasn't here when the boy killed himself, if that's what you

mean.”

“Were you on shift?” Will repeated.

He hesitated again, as if it wasn’t already clear that he didn’t want to cooperate.

Will said, “I’m assuming you’re not the regular booking officer. You’re patrol, right?”

Knox didn’t answer.

“Who was the booking officer this afternoon?”

He took his time answering. “Carl Phillips.”

“I’ll need to talk to him.”

He smiled. “Carl’s on vacation. Left this afternoon. Camping with his wife and kids. No phones.”

“When will he be back?”

“You’ll have to ask Frank about that.”

Knox took out his keys and opened the door. To Will’s relief, they were finally at the jail. Beside another large door was a viewing window showing another hallway, but this one had the familiar metal doors of jail cells. Just outside the cells was a sort of office for the officer in charge. To one side was a large filing cabinet. To the other was a built-in desk with six flat-screen monitors showing the inside of five of the cells. The sixth monitor had a game of solitaire going. Knox’s supper, a homemade sandwich with chips, was laid out in front of a computer keyboard.

Knox said, “Only got three people in here tonight,” by way of explanation.

Will checked the screens. One man was pacing his cell, the other two were curled up on their bunks. “Where’s the tape for the cameras?”

The cop rested his hand on the computer. “Stopped recording yesterday. We’ve got a call in to get it fixed.”

“That’s really strange that it stopped working right when you needed it.”

Knox shrugged. “Like I said, I wasn’t here.”

“Were any of the prisoners released after Braham was found?”

He shrugged. “I wasn’t in on that.”

Will took the answer as a tacit yes. “Do you have the visitors’ log?”

He opened up one of the filing cabinets and pulled out a sheet of paper, which he handed to Will. The form was lined with columns for names and times, the usual sort of paperwork you found in any jail in America. At the top of the page, someone had written in the date. The rest of the form was blank.

Knox said, “Guess Sara didn’t sign in.”

“Have you known her long?”

“She looked after my kids until she left town. How long have you known her?”

Will noticed a subtle change in the man’s anger. “Not long.”

“Looked like you knew her plenty well, sitting in the car with her for an hour like that in front of the hospital.”

Will hoped he didn’t look as surprised as he felt. He had forgotten how insular and incestuous small towns could be. He pressed his luck. “She’s a lovely woman.”

Knox puffed out his chest. He was at least six inches shorter than Will, obviously trying to make up for it with bravado. “Jeffrey Tolliver was the finest man I ever worked with.”

"His reputation is well known in Atlanta. It was out of respect for him that my boss sent me down here to look after his people."

Knox narrowed his eyes, and Will realized the patrolman could take his words in many different ways, not least of all as a sign that Will planned to go light on the investigation out of respect for Jeffrey Tolliver. This seemed to relax Knox, so Will did not correct him.

Knox said, "Sara just gets a little hot under the collar sometimes. Real emotional."

Will would hardly describe Sara as someone ruled by her emotions. He didn't trust his ability to pull off a cliché like "Women!" He simply nodded and shrugged at the same time, as if to say, "What are you gonna do?"

Knox kept staring at him, trying to make up his mind. "All right, then," he finally said. He used a plastic card to open the last door. His keys were still in his hand, and he jangled them as he walked. "This'n's a drunk sleeping it off. Came in about an hour ago." He indicated the next cell. "Meth head. He's coming down hard. Last time we tried to wake him, he near about knocked somebody's teeth out."

"What about door number three?" Will asked.

"Wife beater."

"I am not!" came a muffled shout from behind the door.

Knox silently nodded to Will. "Third time he's been locked up for it. She won't testify—"

"Goddamn right!" the man screamed.

"He's covered in his own puke, so I'm gonna have to hose him down if you wanna talk to him."

"I hate to ask ..." Will shrugged. "It might help expedite this so we can all get back to our lives. My wife's gonna kill me if I'm not home for the holiday."

"Know whatcha mean." Knox motioned Will to the next cell. The door was open. "This is it."

Tommy Braham's blood had been cleaned up, but the red stain on the concrete floor told the story. His feet would have been toward the door, head back. Maybe he was lying on his side, arm out in front of him. Will guessed from the circumference of the stain that Tommy had not just stopped at one wrist. He had cut open both to make sure the job was done right.

Will stepped into the cell, feeling a slight sense of claustrophobia. He took in the cinder-block-lined walls, the metal bed frame with its thin mattress. The toilet and sink were built as one stainless steel unit. The bowl looked clean, but the smell of sewage was pungent. Beside the sink was a toothbrush, a metal cup, and a small tube of toothpaste like the kind you'd get at a hotel. Will wasn't superstitious, but he was keenly aware that Tommy Braham had, in his misery, taken his life here less than eight hours ago. The feel of his death still lingered.

"'Not me,'" Knox said.

Will turned around, wondering what he meant.

Knox nodded toward the faded wall. "That's what he wrote. 'Not me.'" He took on a knowing tone. "If it wasn't you, buddy, then why'd you kill yourself?"

Will had never found it useful to ask dead men to explain their motivations, so he threw the question back to Knox. "Why do you think he kept insisting he didn't kill Allison Spooner?"

"Told you." Knox touched the side of his head. "Not right up here."

"Crazy?"

"Nah, just stupider than shit."

"Too stupid to know how to kill somebody?"

"Hell, I wish there was such a thing. Wouldn't have to keep such a close eye on the wife during that time of month." He gave a loud laugh, and Will forced himself to join in, pushing away thoughts of Tommy lying on the floor of this cell, slicing and slicing the ink cartridge across his wrist, trying to draw blood. How long would it take before the flesh opened? Would the skin get hot from the friction? Would the metal ink cartridge start to get warm? How long would it take for enough blood to leave his body so that his heart stopped?

Will turned back to the faded letters on the wall. He didn't want to break this new, if false, camaraderie with Knox. "Did you know Allison Spooner?"

"She worked at the diner. All of us knew her."

"What was she like?"

"Good girl. Got the plates out fast. Didn't stand around yapping too much." He looked down at the floor, shaking his head. "She was good-lookin', too. I guess that's what caught Tommy's eye. Poor thing. She probably thought he was harmless."

"Did she have any friends? A boyfriend?"

"I guess it was just Tommy. Never saw anybody else around her." He shrugged. "Not like I was paying attention. Wife don't like it when my eye wanders."

"Did you see Tommy at the diner a lot?"

Knox shook his head. Will could see his compliance was waning.

"Can I talk to the wife beater?"

"I didn't touch her!" the prisoner screamed back, slamming his hand against the cell door.

"Thin walls," Will noted. Knox was leaning against the door, arms crossed. His shirt pocket was bunched up, a silver pen clipped to the material. "Hey, can I borrow your pen?"

Knox touched the clip. "Sorry, this'n's the only one I got."

Will recognized the Cross logo. "Nice."

"Chief Tolliver gave 'em to us the Christmas before he passed."

"All of you?" Knox nodded. Will gave a low whistle. "That must've been expensive."

"They sure ain't cheap."

"It takes a special cartridge, right? A metal one?"

Knox opened his mouth to respond, then caught himself.

Will asked, "Who else got one?"

Knox's lip curled up in a sneer. "Fuck you."

"That's all right. I can ask Sara about it when I see her later."

Knox stood up straight, blocking the door. "You better be careful, Agent Trent. Last guy who was in this cell didn't end up too well."

Will smiled. "I think I can take care of myself."

"That a fact?"

Will forced a grin. "I hope so, because you seem to be threatening me."

"You think?" Knox banged on the open cell door. "You hear that, Ronny? Mr."

GBI here says I'm threatening him."

"What's that, Larry?" the wife beater shouted back. "I can't hear nothing through these thick walls. Not a goddamn thing."

Will sat in the interrogation room, trying to breathe through his mouth as he stared at the photocopied pages Sara had given him. Officer Knox had rescinded his offer to hose down the wife beater. Will had endured the man's stench for twenty minutes before giving up on interrogating him. In Atlanta, Ronny Porter would have sung his way to freedom, giving Will any information he had in order to get out of jail. Small towns were different. Instead of trying to cop a plea, Porter had defended every officer in the building. He'd even waxed poetic on Marla Simms, who apparently used to be his Sunday school teacher.

Will spread out the files, trying to put them into some sort of order. Tommy Braham's confession was handwritten, the copy dark from the yellow paper. He set that aside. The police report was like every form Will had ever handled at the GBI. Boxes provided space for dates, times, weather, and other details of the crime, to be written in by hand. The suicide note had caught the light from the copier, the letters blurring.

There were two other pages that were photocopies of notepaper from a small pad, the sort of thing most cops carried in their back pocket. Four sheets of the smaller paper had been lined up to fit on one copied page. In all, there were eight pages that had been torn from the notepad. Will studied the positioning. He could see faint marks where the lined paper had been taped to a bigger sheet for copying. Instead of jagged edges at the top where the paper had been ripped from the spiral, there was a clean line as if someone had used scissors to cut them out. This he found strangest of all—not just because cops didn't tend to be neat, but because he had never in his career known a police officer to tear pages out of their notebook.

The arrest warrant was the last page in the pile, but this part of the process, at least, was computerized. All the spaces were printed in a typewriter font. The suspect's name was at the top, his address and home phone. Will found the lined box for Tommy's employer. He leaned over the form, squinting his eyes as he held his finger under the tiny letters. His mouth moved as he tried to sound out the word. Will was tired from the monotonous drive. The letters mixed around. He blinked, wishing there was more light in the room.

Sara Linton had been right about one thing. She had sat across from Will for a solid hour and not realized that he was dyslexic.

His phone rang, the noise startling him in the small space. He recognized Faith Mitchell's number. "Hey, partner."

"You were going to call me when you got there."

"Things have been busy," he said, which was sort of the truth. Will had always been bad with directions, and there were parts of Heartsdale between Main Street and the interstate that weren't on his GPS.

She asked, "How's it going?"

"I'm being treated with the utmost respect and care."

"I wouldn't drink anything unless it's in a sealed bottle."

"Good advice." He sat back in the chair. "How're you holding up?"

"I'm about to kill somebody or myself," she admitted. "They're going to do the C-section tomorrow afternoon." Faith was diabetic. Her doctors wanted to control the delivery so her health wasn't jeopardized. She started to give Will the details of the procedure, but he dazed out after she used the word "uterus" the second time. He studied his reflection in the two-way mirror, wondering if Mrs. Simms was right about his hair looking better now that he'd let it grow out.

Finally, Faith wound down her story. She asked, "What's this fax you sent me?"

"Did you get all twelve pages?"

He could hear her counting the sheets. "I've got seventeen total. All from the same number."

"Seventeen?" He scratched his jaw. "Are some of them duplicates?"

"Nope. Got a police report, xeroxed field notes—pages are cut out of the notebook, that's weird. You don't take pages out of your field book—and ..." He assumed she was reading Tommy Braham's confession. "Did you write this?"

"Very funny," Will said. He hadn't been able to make out the words when Sara had shown him the confession in the car, but even to Will, the looped, cartoonish shape of Tommy Braham's handwriting seemed off. "What do you think?"

"I think this reads like one of Jeremy's book reports when he was in first grade."

Jeremy was her teenage son. "Tommy Braham is nineteen."

"What is he, retarded?"

"You're supposed to call it 'intellectually disabled' now."

She made a snorting sound.

"Sara says his IQ was around eighty."

Faith sounded suspicious, but she had been prickly the last time about Sara inserting herself into their case. "How does Sara happen to know his IQ?"

"She used to treat him at her clinic."

"Did she apologize for dragging you below the gnat line on your vacation?"

"She doesn't know it's my vacation, but, yes, she apologized."

Faith was quiet for a moment. "How's she doing?"

He thought not of Sara, but of the scent she had left on his handkerchief. She didn't strike him as the type of woman who would wear perfume. Maybe it was one of those fancy soaps that women used to wash their faces.

"Will?"

He cleared his throat to cover for his silence. "She's okay. She was very upset, but mostly I think she has a good reason." He lowered his voice. "Something doesn't feel right about any of this."

"You think Tommy didn't kill the girl?"

"I don't know what I think yet."

Faith went quiet; never a good sign. He had been partnered with her for over a year, and just when Will thought he was learning to read her moods, she had gotten pregnant and the whole thing went out of whack. "All right," she said. "What else did Sara tell you?"

"Some stuff about the man who killed her husband." Will knew that Faith had already gone behind Sara's back to find out the details. She didn't know about Lena Adams's involvement, or the fact that Sara believed Lena was responsible

for Tolliver's death. Will stood up and walked into the hall, making sure Knox wasn't there. Still, he kept his voice low as he relayed the story Sara had told him about her husband's murder. When he finished, Faith let out a long breath of air.

"Sounds like Sara has a hard-on for this Adams woman."

Will sat back down at the table. "That's one way to put it." He did not share the part of Sara's story that had stuck out the most. The entire time she spoke, she had not once uttered Jeffrey Tolliver's name. She had only referred to him as "my husband."

Faith offered, "I think priority number one is tracking down this Julie Smith. She either saw the murder or heard about it. Do you have her cell phone number?"

"I'll get it from Sara later."

"Later?"

Will ignored the question. Faith would want an explanation for why he was having dinner at Sara's house, and then she'd want a report on how it went. "Where does—did—Tommy Braham work?"

She shuffled through the pages. "Says here he was employed at the bowling alley. Maybe that's why he killed himself—to keep from having to spray Lysol in shoes all day."

Will didn't laugh at the joke. "They charged him with murder right off the bat. Not assault, not attempted murder, not resisting."

"Where did they get murder? Am I missing the autopsy report? Lab reports? Forensic filings?"

Will laid it out for her. "Brad Stephens is stabbed. He's airlifted to the hospital. The first thing Adams does is take Tommy Braham back to the station and get his confession for the Spooner girl's murder."

"She didn't go to the hospital with her partner?"

"I'm assuming the chief did. He's been a no-show."

"Did Braham have a lawyer present?" Faith answered her own question. "No lawyer would let him make this confession."

"A murder charge resonates more than assault. It could be political—get the town behind them so no one cares that a killer has killed himself." Will had told Sara the same thing. If Tommy Braham was Allison Spooner's murderer, then people would assume justice had already been served.

Faith said, "This confession is strange. He's got details out the wazoo until the murder. Then, it's taken care of in three lines. 'I got mad. I had a knife on me. I stabbed her once in the neck.' Not much of an explanation." She added, "And there would be a boatload of blood from something like this. Remember that case where the woman's throat was slit?"

Will cringed at the memory. Blood had sprayed everywhere—the walls, ceiling, floor. It was like walking into a paint booth. "Allison Spooner was stabbed in the back of the neck. Maybe that's different?"

"That brings up another good point. One stab wound doesn't sound mad. That sounds very controlled to me."

"Detective Adams was probably in a hurry to get back to the hospital. Maybe she was planning a follow-up interview. Maybe Chief Wallace was going to have a go at Tommy later."

"That's not how you do it. If a suspect is talking, especially confessing, you get every detail."

"They haven't shown much of an aptitude for policing so far. Sara thinks Adams is sloppy, that she plays it too loose. From what I'm seeing with the Spooner investigation, she's right about that."

"Is she pretty?"

For a moment, Will thought she was asking about Sara. "I haven't seen a picture yet, but the cop I spoke with said she was good-looking."

"Young girl, college aged. The press is going to be all over this, especially if she's pretty."

"Probably," he acknowledged. Yet another motive for putting Allison Spooner's murderer behind bars as quickly as possible. "The girl worked at the local diner. I gather a lot of the cops in the station knew her."

"That could explain why they made such a quick arrest."

"It could," he agreed. "But, if Sara is right and Tommy didn't kill the girl, then we've still got a murderer out there."

"When is the autopsy?"

"Tomorrow." Will didn't tell her that Sara had volunteered to do the procedure.

"It all seems very convenient," Faith pointed out. "Dead girl found in the morning, murderer arrested before noon, found dead in his cell before supertime."

"If Brad Stephens doesn't make it, they're probably not going to let Tommy Braham be buried in the city limits."

"When are you going to the hospital?"

"I hadn't planned on it."

"Will, a cop is in the hospital. If you're within a hundred miles, you go see him. You hang around and comfort his wife or his mother. You give blood. It's what cops do."

Will chewed his lip. He hated hospitals. He had never understood why it was necessary to hang around them unless you had to.

"Isn't Brad Stephens a potential witness, too?"

Will laughed. Unless Stephens was a Boy Scout, he doubted the man would help shed any light on what happened yesterday. "I'm sure he'll be as courteous as he is forthcoming."

"You still have to go through the motions." She paused before continuing. "And since I'm being a cop, let me state the obvious: Tommy killed himself for the same reason he ran when they confronted him in the garage. He was guilty."

"Or he wasn't, and he knew no one would believe him."

"You sound like a defense lawyer," Faith noted. "What about the rest of this stuff? It looks like the first few pages of a novel."

"What do you mean?"

"The handwritten notes from Spooner's crime scene. 'Found on the shore approximately thirty yards from the tide line and twelve feet from a large oak is a pair of white Nike Sport tennis shoes, sized women's eight. Inside the left, resting on the sole, which is blue with the word "Sport" emblazoned where the heel rests, is a yellow-gold ring....' I mean, come on. This isn't *War and Peace*. It's a field report."

"Did you get the suicide note?"

"I want it over." She had the same reaction as Will. "Not exactly the 'goodbye cruel world' you'd expect. And the paper is torn from a larger sheet. That's strange, right? You're going to write a suicide note and you tear it from another sheet of paper?"

"What else did you get? You said there were seventeen pages."

"Incident reports." She read aloud, "Police were called to Skatey's roller rink on Old Highway 5 at approximately twenty-one hundred hours ..." Her voice trailed off as she skimmed the words. "All right. Last week, Tommy got into a fight with a girl whose name they didn't bother to get. He wouldn't stop shouting. He was asked to leave. He refused. The police came and told him to leave. He left. No one arrested." Faith was quiet again. "The second report involves a barking dog at the residence from five days ago. The last one is about loud music. This was two days ago. There's a note on the last page where the cop who took the report makes a reminder to follow up with Tommy's father when he gets back in town."

"Who took the reports?"

"Same cop. Carl Phillips."

That name was more than familiar. "I was told Phillips was the booking officer on duty when all of this went down."

"That doesn't make sense. You don't put a street cop on booking."

"Either he's a really bad liar or they're afraid he's going to tell me the truth."

"So, find him and figure it out for yourself."

"I was told he's out camping with his wife and kids right now. No cell phone. No way to get in touch with him."

"What an amazing coincidence. His name's Carl Phillips?"

"Right." Will knew Faith was writing down the name. She hated when people tried to hide. He told her, "Their security cameras in the cells aren't recording, either."

"Did they tape the interview with Tommy?"

"If they did, I'm sure the film met with some kind of dropping accident involving electricity and water."

"Shit, Will. You numbered these pages yourself, right?"

"Yeah."

"One through twelve?"

"Right. What's going on?"

"Page number eleven is missing."

Will thumbed through his originals. They were all out of order.

She asked, "You're sure you numbered—"

"I know how to number pages, Faith." He muttered a curse as he saw that the eleventh page was missing from his copies, too.

"Why would someone take out a page and send the incident reports instead?"

"I'll have to see if Sara—"

He heard a noise behind him. A cough, maybe a sneeze. He guessed that Knox was standing in the viewing room listening to everything that was being said.

"Will?"

He stood up, stacking the pages together, putting them back in the file. "You still seeing your mom for Thanksgiving?"

She took her time answering, misinterpreting his meaning. "You know I'd ask you to come if—"

"Angie's planning a surprise for me. You know how she loves to cook." He walked into the hallway and stopped outside the storage room, where he rapped his knuckles on the door. "Thank you for your help, Officer Knox." The door didn't open, but Will heard feet shuffling on the other side. "I'll let myself out."

Faith didn't question him until he was in the squad room. "You clear?"

"Give me another minute."

"Angie loves to cook?" She gave a deep belly laugh. "When's the last time you saw the elusive Mrs. Trent?"

Seven months had passed since Angie had made an appearance, but that was none of Faith's business. "How's Betty doing?"

"I raised a child, Will. I think I can take care of your dog."

Will pushed open the glass front door and walked into the drizzle. His car was parked at the end of the lot. "Dogs are more sensitive than children."

"You've obviously never spent time around a sullen eleven-year-old."

He glanced over his shoulder. Knox, or at least a figure looking very much like Knox, was standing in the window. Will kept his gait slow, casual. He didn't speak again until he was safely inside the car. "There's something else going on with this girl's murder, Faith."

"What do you mean?"

"Call it gut instinct." Will looked back up at the station. One by one, the lights went off in the front of the building. "It's just convenient that the one person who could probably tell me the truth about what really happened is dead."

CHAPTER SIX

Lena held Brad's hand. His skin felt cool. The machines in the room beeped and blipped and hummed, yet none of them could tell the doctors how Brad was really doing. She'd heard a nurse use the phrase "touch and go" a few hours ago, but Brad looked the same to Lena. He smelled the same, too. Antiseptic, sweat, and that stupid Axe body wash he'd started using because of the TV commercials.

"You're going to be okay," she told him, hoping her words were true. Every bad thing she'd thought about Brad today was ringing in her head like a bell. He wasn't street smart. He wasn't cut out for the job. He didn't have the skills to be a detective. Was Lena to blame for Brad's injuries because she had kept her mouth shut? Should she have told Frank that Brad shouldn't be on the force? Frank knew this better than anybody. Every week for the last two years he'd muttered something about firing Brad. Ten minutes before Brad was stabbed, Frank was chewing him out.

But was it really Brad's fault? Lena could see this morning's events like a movie playing endlessly in her head. Brad ran down the street. He told Tommy to stop. Tommy stopped. He turned. The knife was in his hands. The knife was in Brad's stomach.

Lena rubbed her hands over her face. She should be congratulating herself for getting Tommy Braham to confess. Instead, she couldn't get past the feeling that she had missed something. She needed to talk to Tommy again, pull out more details about his movements before and after the murder. He was holding out on her, which wasn't unusual in murder cases. Tommy didn't want to admit that he was a bad person. That much had been evident the entire interview. He had skirted around the gory details, and Lena had let him because she wanted—needed—to get to Brad to see if he was okay. Lena wasn't so exhausted that she couldn't see that Tommy had more to say. She just needed some sleep before she went at him again. She had to make sure that her part of the case, at least the part she could control, was airtight.

The biggest problem was that Tommy was so damn hard to talk to. Less than a minute into his interrogation, Lena had figured out the kid wasn't right in the head. He wasn't just slow, he was stupid. Eager to fill in whatever blanks Lena left open so long as she gave him a map and directions. She had promised him he could go home if he confessed. She could still see the confused look on his face when she'd taken him back to the cells. He was probably sitting on his bunk right now wondering how on earth he had gotten himself into this mess.

Lena was wondering the same thing. All the pieces had come together so quickly this morning that she hadn't had time to consider whether they really fit or if she was just forcing them into place. The stab wound in Allison Spooner's neck. The suicide note. The 911 call. The knife.

The stupid knife.

Lena's phone vibrated in her pocket. She ignored it the same way she had ignored everything around her since she had gotten to the hospital. Two hours with Tommy at the station. Two hours driving to Macon. More hours spent standing vigil outside Brad's room. She had given blood. She'd drunk too much coffee. Delia Stephens, his mother, was getting some air now. She only trusted Lena to stay with her son.

Why? Lena was the last person on earth the woman should trust with her boy.

She got some tissue out of the box and wet the edge in the cup of water by the bed. Brad was on a ventilator, and some dried saliva was caked around his mouth. His lung had collapsed. His liver was damaged. There was lots of internal bleeding. They were worried about infection. They were worried he would not make it through the night.

She wiped his chin, surprised to feel stubble. Lena had always thought of Brad as a kid, but the hair on his face, the size of his hand that she held in hers, reminded her that he was a grown man. He knew the risks that came with being a cop. Brad had been on the scene when Jeffrey died, the first responding officer. He never talked about it, but Brad was different after that day. More grown up. The chief's death was a grim reminder that none of them was impervious to the bad guys they arrested.

Her phone vibrated again. Lena took it out of her pocket and scrolled through the numbers. She had called her uncle Hank in Florida to let him know she was okay in case he saw something on the news. Jared had called her as she was putting Tommy Braham in the back of the car. He was a cop. He'd heard about the stabbing on his radio. She had told him two words, "I'm okay," then hung up before she started crying.

All of the other incoming calls on her phone were from Frank. He had been trying to reach her for the last five hours. She hadn't seen him since he took off with Brad in the helicopter that had landed in the middle of the street. The look in his rheumy eyes had told a story she hadn't wanted to hear. And now he was worried that she was going to tell everyone what she knew.

He *should* be worried.

Her phone rang again as she held it in her hand, but Lena pressed the button until the device powered down. She didn't want to talk to Frank, didn't want to hear any more of his excuses. He knew what had gone wrong today. He knew that Brad's blood was on his hands just as much as it was on Lena's—maybe more so.

She should just quit. Her resignation letter was in her jacket pocket, had been for weeks. She had gotten Tommy's confession in record time. Let someone else get the details from him. Let another cop stare at Tommy Braham's slack-jawed face for another two hours trying to figure out what was going on in that tiny little brain of his. They could not fault Lena for her work. Jeffrey's ghost could not hold her here after what had happened today.

Delia Stephens came back into the room. She was a large woman, but she moved quietly around the bed, fluffing Brad's pillows, kissing his forehead. She stroked back her son's thinning blond hair. "He loves being a police officer."

Lena found her voice. "He's very good at it."

Delia had a sad smile on her face. "He always wanted to please you."

"He never failed to," she lied. "He's a good detective, Ms. Stephens. He's going

to be back on the street in no time.”

Delia’s eyes clouded with worry. She rubbed Brad’s shoulder. “Maybe I can talk him into selling insurance with his uncle Sonny.”

“You’ll have plenty of time to persuade him,” Lena’s voice cracked. Her false optimism was fooling no one.

Delia stood up. She clasped her hands in front of her. “Thank you for watching him. I always feel safer when he’s with you.”

Lena felt dizzy again. The room was too small, too hot. “I’m just gonna go to the bathroom for a second.”

Delia smiled, her gratefulness so apparent that Lena felt like a knife was being twisted in her chest. “Take your time, sweetheart. You’ve had a long day.”

“I’ll be right back.”

Lena kept her head up as she walked down the hallway. There were a couple of Grant County patrolmen standing vigil outside the ICU waiting room. Inside, she could see local Macon cops milling around. Frank Wallace was nowhere to be seen. More than likely he was bellied up at a bar trying to drink the bad taste out of his mouth. It was probably best for her not to see him right now. If he’d been standing in the hallway, she would’ve called him out on his drinking, his lies—everything that she’d been ignoring for the past four years. No more. After today, Lena’s knee-jerk loyalty to the man was gone for good.

At least Gavin Wayne, the Macon chief of police, was there. He nodded as Lena walked by. A few weeks ago, he had talked to Lena about joining his force. She was picking up Jared from his shift because his truck was in the shop. Lena had liked Chief Wayne all right, but Macon was a huge, sprawling city. Wayne was more politician than policeman. He was nothing like Jeffrey, an obstacle that had seemed insurmountable when he’d mentioned a job.

Lena pushed open the door of the ladies’ room, glad to find it empty. She turned on the cold faucet. Water ran through her hands. She had washed them a thousand times but the blood—Brad’s blood as well as her own—was still stuck under her fingernails.

She had been shot in the hand. The bullet had taken a chunk of skin off the outside edge of her palm. Lena had doctored it herself, using the first aid kit at the station. Oddly, there hadn’t been much blood. Maybe the heat of the bullet had cauterized the wound. Still, it took three overlapping Band-Aids to cover it up. At first the pain was manageable, but now that the shock had worn off, her whole hand throbbed. She couldn’t have anyone at the hospital look at it. Gunshot wounds had to be reported. Lena would have to call in a favor for some antibiotics so she didn’t get an infection.

At least it was her left hand. She reached toward the faucet with her good hand and added hot water to the cold. Lena felt filthy. She wet a paper towel, added some soap from the dispenser, and washed under her arms. She kept going, giving herself a whore’s bath at the sink. How long had she been up? Brad’s call about the body in the lake came around three this morning. The last time she’d checked a clock, it was coming up on ten in the evening. No wonder she was punch-drunk from exhaustion.

“Lee?” Jared Long stood in the doorway. He was dressed in his motorcycle patrol uniform. His boots were scuffed. His hair was a mess. Lena’s heart jumped at the sight of him.

The words rushed from her mouth. "You shouldn't be here."

"My squad came over to donate blood." He let the door close behind him. It felt like forever as he crossed the room and took her into his arms. Her head rested on his shoulder. She fit into him like a puzzle being solved. "I'm so sorry, baby."

She wanted to cry, but nothing was left inside.

"I nearly died when I heard one of you got hurt."

"I'm okay."

He took her hand in his, saw the Band-Aids she had used to cover her wound. "What happened?"

She pressed her face against his chest again. She could hear his heart beating. "It was bad."

"I know, baby."

"No," she said. "You don't know." Lena pulled back, still letting him hold her. She wanted to tell him what had really happened—not what the reports would say, not what the newspapers would be told. She wanted to confess her complicity, to unburden her soul.

But when she looked into his deep brown eyes, words failed.

Jared was ten years younger than she was. She thought of him as pure and perfect. He didn't have crow's feet or lines around his mouth. The only scar on his body came from a bad tackle during a high school football game. His parents were still happily married. His younger sister worshipped him. He was the exact opposite of Lena's type. The exact opposite of any man she had ever been with.

She loved him so much that it frightened her.

He said, "Tell me what happened."

She settled on half of the truth. "Frank was drunk. I didn't realize how much until ..." She shook her head. "Maybe I just haven't been paying attention. He's been drinking a lot lately. He can usually handle it, but ..."

"But?"

"I'm through," Lena told him. "I'm going to resign. I've got some vacation time coming. I just need to get my head clear."

"You can move in with me until you figure out what to do."

"I'm serious this time. I'm really quitting."

"I know you are, and I'm glad." Jared put his hands on her shoulders so he could look at her. "But, right now, I just wanna take care of you. You've had a hard day. Let me be there for you."

She relented easily. The thought of handing over the next few hours of her life to Jared seemed like the best gift in the world. "You go first. I'll check in on Brad and then follow you in my car."

He tilted up her chin and kissed her mouth. "I love you."

"I love you, too."

He reached for the door just as it opened. Frank stood stock-still, staring at Jared as if he'd seen a ghost.

"Jesus Christ," he whispered. She could smell the whisky on him from five feet away.

"Go," Lena told Jared. "I'll meet you back at the house."

Jared wasn't so easily directed. He stood his ground, glaring at Frank.

"Please go," she begged him. "Jared. Please."

He finally moved his gaze from Frank to Lena. "You sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine," she told him. "Just go."

Reluctantly, he left. Frank stared after him so long that Lena had to close the door before he would look away.

"What the hell are you doing?" Frank demanded. He had to keep his hand on the wall to steady himself. "How old is he?"

"It's none of your damn business." Still, she told him, "He's twenty-five."

"He looks ten," Frank countered. "How long have you been seeing him?"

Lena wasn't in the mood to answer questions. "What are you doing here, Frank? You can barely stand up straight."

He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Did you drive here? Don't answer that." She didn't want to think about how many lives he had risked climbing behind the wheel.

"Is the kid okay?"

He meant Brad. "They don't know. He's stable for now. Have you had anything to drink today that didn't have alcohol in it?"

Frank's footing was off. He didn't go to the sink so much as fall into it.

Lena turned on the water for him. She had a flash of her childhood, her uncle Hank so drunk that he'd pissed himself. She tried to separate her emotions, to distance herself from the anger she was feeling. It didn't work. "You smell like a bar."

"I keep thinking about what happened."

"Which part?" she asked, leaning down so that her face was close to his. "The part where we didn't identify ourselves as cops or the part where we nearly shot a boy for holding up a letter opener?"

Frank gave her a panicked look.

"You didn't think I'd find out about that?"

"It was a hunting knife."

"It was a letter opener," she insisted. "Tommy told me, Frank. It was a gift from his grandfather. It was a letter opener. It looked like a knife, but it wasn't."

Frank spit into the sink. Lena's stomach roiled at the dark brown color of his phlegm. "It doesn't matter. He stabbed Brad with it. That makes it a weapon."

"What did he cut you with?" Lena asked. Frank had been writhing on the floor of the garage, clutching his left arm. "You were bleeding. I saw it. That's what set this whole thing in motion. I told Brad he cut you."

"He did."

"Not with a letter opener, and I didn't find anything else on him except a toy car and some chewing gum."

Frank glanced at himself in the mirror. Lena stared at his reflection. He looked like he was two steps from falling into the grave.

She peeled off the Band-Aids on the side of her hand. The wound was red and raw. "Your shot went wild. Did you even realize I was hit?"

His throat worked as he swallowed. He probably wanted a drink. By the looks of him, he needed it.

"What happened, Frank? You had your gun out. Tommy came for you. You pulled the trigger and shot me. How did you get cut on the arm? How did a hundred-thirty-pound wimp of a kid get past you with a goddamn letter opener?"

"I told you that he cut me with the knife. He was wrong about the letter opener."

"You know, for a cop, you're a shitty liar."

Frank braced himself on the sink. He could barely stand. "Tommy doesn't mention a letter opener in his confession."

Lena's voice was more like a snarl. "Because I've got about two drips of loyalty left for you, old man, and they've been circling the drain all damn day. Tell me what happened in that garage."

"I don't know. I don't remember."

"How did Tommy get past you? Did you black out? Did you fall?"

"It doesn't matter. He ran. That's the point. Everything that happened after that is on him."

"We didn't identify ourselves in the garage. We were just three people pointing guns at his head."

He glared at her. "I'm glad to hear you admitting you did something wrong today, princess."

Lena felt overwhelmed with fury, ready to do any kind of damage she could. "When Brad shouted 'Police,' Tommy stopped. He turned around. He had the letter opener in his hand. Brad ran into it. Tommy didn't mean to stab him. I'll tell that to anyone who asks me."

"He killed that girl in cold blood. You telling me you don't care about that?"

"Of course I care about that," she snapped. "Jesus, Frank, I'm not saying he didn't do it. I'm saying the minute Tommy gets a lawyer, you're screwed."

"I didn't do anything wrong."

"Let's hope the judge agrees with you, otherwise he'll invalidate the arrest, the confession, everything that came out of finding Tommy in that garage. That kid's gonna get away with murder because you can't stand up straight without a bottle of whisky in you." She put her face inches from his. "Is that how you want to be remembered, Frank? As the cop who let a killer get away because he couldn't stay off the booze while he was on the job?"

Frank turned on the faucet again. He splashed water on his face, the back of his neck. She saw his hands were shaking again. His knuckles were busted up. There were deep scratch marks on his wrist. How hard had Frank hit Tommy that the boy's teeth had managed to break through Frank's leather gloves?

She said, "It's your fault this went bad. Tommy got past you. I don't know what you were doing rolling on the floor, how your arm got cut, but I do know if you had done your job and stopped him at the door—"

"Shut up, Lena."

"Screw you."

"I'm still your boss."

"Not anymore, you drunk, worthless bastard." She reached into her pocket and pulled out her resignation. When he didn't take it, she threw it in his face. "I'm done with you."

He didn't pick up the letter. He didn't shoot back a stream of obscenities. Instead, he asked, "Which pen did you use?"

"What?"

"Your pen that Jeffrey gave you. Is that the one you used?"

"Are you trying to guilt me into staying? You're going to tread on Jeffrey's

memory so I'll stick around to help you clean up this mess?"

"Where's your pen?" When she didn't volunteer it, he started searching her coat, patting her pockets. She resisted, and he slapped her around, throwing her against the wall.

"Get away from me!" She shoved him back into the sink. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

He looked her in the eye for the first time since he'd walked into the room. "Tommy killed himself in the cells."

Lena put her hand to her mouth.

"He cut his wrists open with an ink cartridge. The metal kind that you use in good pens. Good pens like the ones Jeffrey gave us."

Lena's hands wouldn't work for a few seconds. She found the pen where she always kept it—inside the spiral of the notebook in her back pocket. She twisted the barrel. The ballpoint didn't come out. "Shit," Lena hissed, unscrewing the cap. "No ... no ..." The pen was empty. "How did he get ..." She felt sick with grief. Her stomach clenched. "What did he ..."

Frank asked, "Did you frisk him before you put him in the cells?"

"Of course I—" Had she? Had Lena taken the time to pat him down or just thrown him into a cell as fast as she could so she could get to the hospital?

"It's a good thing he didn't attack anybody while he was back there. He already killed one person and stabbed a cop."

She couldn't stand anymore. Her knees gave out. She sank to the floor. "He's really dead? Are you sure?"

"He bled out."

Lena put her head in her hands. "Why?"

"What did you say to him?"

"I didn't ..." She shook her head, trying to clear out the image of Tommy Braham lying dead. He had been upset when she'd locked him up, but suicidal? She didn't think so. Even as rushed as she was to get to the hospital, Lena would have said something to the booking officer if she thought Tommy needed to be watched. "Why did he do it?"

"Must've been something you said."

She looked up at Frank. He was paying her back now. She could tell it by the petty look in his eyes.

He added, "At least that's what Sara Linton thinks."

"What does Sara have to do with this?"

"I called her because Tommy, your prisoner, wouldn't calm down. I thought she could give him something to help. She was there when I found him."

Lena knew she should be worried about her own hide, but all she could think about was Tommy Braham. What had gotten into him? What had pushed that stupid kid over the edge?

"She's got some bigwig from the GBI down here to look into the case. Knox has already dealt with him. He's figured out Tommy got the pen from one of us."

Lena tasted something awful in the back of her throat. Tommy was her prisoner. He was in her care. Legally, he was her responsibility. "Do they know the cartridge came from me?"

Frank dug around in his coat pocket. He tossed Lena a cardboard packet. She recognized the Cross logo. A new ink cartridge was wrapped in a plastic shell.

She asked, "Did you just buy this?"

"I'm not that stupid," he told her. "I buy them online. You can't get the cartridges local."

Everyone else did, too. It was a pain in the butt, but the gift meant a lot, especially now that Jeffrey was gone. Lena had a stack of ten cartridges in a box back home.

Frank said, "We're both in trouble on this."

Lena didn't respond. She was running through her time with Tommy, trying to figure out when he'd decided to take his own life. Had he said anything to her before she locked the cell door? Lena didn't think so. Maybe that was one of the many clues she had missed. Tommy had calmed down too quickly after she'd left the room to get him some tissues. She had taken him back to the cells shortly after. He'd been sniffing, but he'd kept his mouth shut, even as she shut the heavy metal door. They always said the quiet ones were the ones who had made up their minds. How had she missed that? How had she not noticed?

Frank said, "We need to stick together, get our stories straight."

She shook her head. How did she get into this mess? Why was it that the minute she crawled out of one pile of shit, she fell back into another one?

"Sara's out for blood. Your blood. She thinks she's finally found a way to punish you for what you did to Jeffrey."

Lena's head shot up. "I didn't do anything."

"We both know different from that, don't we?"

His words cut straight through her. "You're a bastard. You know that?"

"Yeah, well, back at you."

Lena felt her hand stinging. She was gripping the plastic packet hard enough to cut into her skin. She tried to pry it open, but her nails were too short. She ended up biting the cardboard with her teeth and ripping it away from the plastic.

Frank asked, "How solid is that confession?"

She jammed the new cartridge into her pen. "Tommy admitted to everything. He put it on paper."

"You better shout that to whoever listens or his daddy's gonna sue you for everything you have."

She snorted. "A fifteen-year-old Celica and an eighty-thousand-dollar mortgage on a sixty-thousand-dollar house? He can have the keys right now."

"You'll lose your badge."

"Maybe I should." She gave up on the pen. She gave up on everything. Four years ago, Lena would have been scrambling for a way to cover this up. Now, all she wanted to do was tell the truth and move on. "This doesn't change anything, Frank. Tommy was my responsibility. I'll take the consequences. But you'll have to take yours, too."

"It doesn't have to be like that."

She looked up at him, wondering at the sudden shift. "What do you mean?"

"Tommy killed that girl. You think anybody's gonna care about some little retard murderer slitting his wrists in a jail cell?" Frank wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "He killed that girl, Lee. He stabbed her through the neck like he was taking down an animal. All because she wouldn't let him get his pecker off."

Lena closed her eyes. She was so damn tired that she couldn't think. But she knew Frank was right. No one would care about Tommy's death. But that didn't mean it was okay. That didn't change what happened in the garage today, or fix the damage that had been done to Brad.

She told him, "Your drinking is out of hand. I didn't say anything about Brad being unfit. Maybe he'll be okay or maybe my silence will end up meaning the death of him. I don't know. I'm not gonna watch the same thing happen to you. You're not fit for duty, Frank. You shouldn't be behind the wheel of a car, let alone carrying a gun."

Frank knelt down in front of her. "There's a hell of a lot more you could lose than just your shield, Lena. Think about that."

"There's nothing to think about. I've made up my mind."

"I could always put in a word with Gavin Wayne about your little boyfriend."

"Be sure to brush the whisky off your breath before you do."

"We both know the kind of trouble I could make."

"Jared will know I made a mistake," Lena said. "And he'll know I stood up to take the consequences."

"When did you turn so noble?"

She didn't answer, but the thought of Tommy Braham sitting in those cells, scraping away at his wrists with Lena's ink pen, made her feel like the least noble person on the planet. How had she managed to fuck up so much in so little time?

Frank pressed, "Does your little boyfriend really know you, Lena? I mean, *really* know you?" His lips curled up in a smile. "Think about all the things you've told me over the years. All those squad cars we sat in together. All those late nights and early mornings after Jeffrey died." He showed his yellow teeth. "You're a dirty cop, Lee. You think your boyfriend's gonna forgive that?"

"I'm not dirty." She had stepped right up to the line many times, but Lena had never crossed it. "I'm a good cop, and you know it."

"You sure about that?" He sneered at her. "Brad got stabbed while you were standing with your thumb up your ass. You talked a nineteen-year-old retard into killing himself. I got a witness in the next cell who will say anything I tell him to as long as I let him go back to his wife."

Lena felt her heart stop in her chest.

"You think I'm just gonna walk away from my pension, lay down my gun and my shield, because you've developed a conscience?" He spat out a laugh. "Trust me, girl, you don't want me to start telling people what I know about you, because by the time I shut up, you'll be lucky if you don't find yourself sitting on the wrong side of a jail door."

"You wouldn't do that to me."

"You strut around town like you're some hot piece of shit wearing your bad reputation on your sleeve. Wasn't that what Jeffrey was always warning you about? Too many burned bridges. Too many people in town with knives in their backs."

"Shut up, Frank."

"The thing about having a bad reputation is that folks will believe just about anything people say about you." He sat back on his heels. "The chief could've gotten away with murder because no one thought he was capable of doing

anything bad. You think people feel that way about you? You think they trust your character?"

"You can't prove anything and you know it."

"Do I need to?" He smiled again, his lips peeling back from his teeth. "I've lived in this town all my life. People know me. They trust me—trust what I tell them. And if I say you're a dirty cop ..." He shrugged.

Lena's chest was so tight she could barely breathe.

"Maybe I'll ask ol' Jared out for a beer," Frank continued. "I bet Sara Linton wouldn't mind tagging along, either. What do you think of that? The two of them together having a nice chat about you?" Lena stared her hate into him. Frank's rheumy eyes glared back. "Don't forget what a son of a bitch I am, girlie. And don't for a minute think I won't throw your worthless ass under the bus to save mine."

She knew he was serious. She knew the threat was as real and as dangerous as a ticking bomb.

Frank took out his flask. He carefully unscrewed the top and took a long drink.

Lena's voice was barely above a whisper. "What do you want me to do?"

Frank smiled in a way that made her feel like she was something he'd just scraped off his shoe. "Just stick to the truth. Tommy confessed to killing Allison. He stabbed Brad. Nothing else matters." Frank shrugged again. "You play by my rules until we're clear of this, and maybe I'll let you go over to Macon and be with your little boyfriend."

"What else?" she asked. There was always something else.

He pulled a plastic evidence bag out of his pocket. Now that it was close up, Lena wondered how she'd ever thought it was real—the thick, dull blade, the fake leather handle. The letter opener.

He tossed the bag onto her lap. "Get rid of it."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Sara sat at the dining room table thumbing through a magazine while her sister and mother played cards. Her cousin Hareton had joined them half an hour ago, dropping by without a phone call as usual. Hare was two years older than Sara. They had always competed in everything, which was why he had made her go out into the pouring rain to look at his brand-new BMW 750Li. How he could afford such a luxurious car on a rural doctor's salary was beyond her, but Sara had made the appropriate noises because she didn't have the strength to do otherwise.

She loved her cousin, but sometimes it seemed as if his goal in life was to get on her nerves. He made fun of her height. He called her "Red" just to annoy her. The worst part was that everyone thought he was charming. Even her own mother thought he walked on water—a particularly sore point considering Cathy did not extend this rose-colored view to her own children. The biggest problem Sara had with Hare was that he never came across a situation he couldn't make light of, which could be a heavy burden to those around him.

Sara finished her magazine and started over from the beginning, wondering why none of the pages looked familiar. She was too distracted to read and too smart to try to have a conversation with anyone at the table. Especially Hare, who seemed determined to catch her eye.

Finally, she asked, "What?"

He slapped a card down on the table. "How's the weather up there, Red?"

Sara gave him the same look she'd given him thirty years ago when he'd first asked her that question. "Balmy."

He put down another card. Tessa and Cathy groaned. "You're on vacation, Red. What's the problem?"

Sara closed the magazine, fighting the desire to tell him that she was sorry she wasn't more upbeat, but that she couldn't quite get the image out of her mind of Tommy Braham lying dead on the jailhouse floor. A quick glance at her mother told Sara that Cathy knew exactly what she was thinking.

"I'm expecting someone," she finally confessed. "Will Trent. He's an agent with the GBI."

Cathy's eyes narrowed. "What's a GBI agent doing here?"

"He's investigating the murder at the lake."

"And the death at the police station." Cathy spoke pointedly. "Why is he coming to the house?"

"He missed supper. I thought you could—"

"Am I responsible for feeding strangers now?"

Tessa, as usual, didn't help matters. "You're gonna be responsible for putting him up for the night, too." She told Sara, "The hotel's closed for remodeling. Unless he wants to drive forty-five minutes into Cooperstown, you'd better go straighten up the apartment over the garage."

Sara held back the curse that came to her lips. Hare was leaning forward, chin resting in his hands, as if he was watching a movie.

Cathy shuffled through the cards again. The noise was made louder by the tension. "How does this man know you?"

"Police officers are always at the hospital." Not technically a lie, but close enough.

"What's going on here, Sara?"

She shrugged, the gesture feeling so fake that she had trouble letting her shoulders drop back down. "It's complicated."

"Complicated?" Cathy echoed. "That sure did happen fast." She slapped the cards down on the table as she stood up. "I guess I'll go tell your father to put some pants on."

Tessa waited until their mother had left. "You might as well tell her, Sissy. She'll get it out of you somehow."

"It's none of her business."

Tessa gave a shocked bark of laughter. *Everything* was their mother's business.

Hare picked up the cards. "Come on, Red. Aren't you taking this a little too seriously? This is probably the most exciting thing that's happened to Brad Stephens in his entire life. The guy still lives with his mother."

"That's not funny, Hare. Two people are dead."

"A retard and a college student. The town mourns."

Sara bit her tongue so that she wouldn't cut him in two.

Hare sighed as he shuffled the cards between his hands. "All right. The thing about the girl in the lake was a cheap shot, but Tommy's fair game. People don't just up and kill themselves for no reason. He felt guilty for killing the girl. That's why he stabbed Brad. End of story."

"You sound like a cop."

"Well ..." He put his hand to his chest. "You know I *did* dress up as one for Halloween." He turned to Tessa. "Remember the thong?"

"That was my birthday party, not Halloween," Tessa reminded him. She asked Sara, "Why did you go to the jail in the first place?"

"Tommy needed ..." She didn't bother to finish the sentence. "I don't know why I went down there." She stood from the table. "I'm sorry. All right? I'm sorry I went to the station. I'm sorry for bringing this home. I'm sorry Mama's mad at me. I'm sorry I came here in the first place."

Tessa began, "Sissy—" but Sara left before she could say more.

Tears filled her eyes for the umpteenth time that day as she went down the hall and stood at the front door. She should go upstairs and talk to her mother. At the very least, Sara could try to come up with an explanation that would stop Cathy from worrying. Of course, Cathy would see right through any explanation Sara could come up with, because they both knew the truth: Sara was trying to get Lena in trouble. Her mother would take no joy in telling Sara that she might as well go outside and howl at the rain. She would be right—at least partially. Lena was good at lying, cheating, and doing whatever else it took to keep herself out of trouble. Sara was no match for the woman because she lacked the basic deviousness with which Lena approached every situation in her life.

And what about the dead girl? Sara was as bad as Hare. She had completely ignored Allison Spooner, treating her death as yet another springboard for

attacking Lena. People around town who knew Allison were starting to talk. Tessa had been on the phone most of the afternoon and had the whole story for Sara by the time she got back from downtown. Allison was petite and cheery, the sort of girl with good country manners and a bright smile for strangers. She had worked at the diner during lunch and over the weekends. She must have a family somewhere, a mother and father who had just gotten the worst news a parent could ever hear. Surely they were on their way to Grant County right now, heavy hearts sinking further with every mile.

There were footsteps on the stairs behind her—Cathy, judging by the light tread. Sara heard her mother pause on the landing, then head toward the kitchen.

Sara let out a breath of air she hadn't realized she'd been holding.

"Sweetpea?" Eddie called from upstairs. He was listening to his old records, something he did when he was feeling melancholy.

"I'm all right, Daddy." She waited for the squeaking floorboards to signal he was going back to his room. They took an awful long time.

She closed her eyes again. Her father put on some Bruce Springsteen, the needle skipping on the vinyl record as he found the right place. She could hear her mother moving around the kitchen. Plates and pans banged. Hare said something that must have been funny, because Tessa's laugh rang through the house.

Sara stared out at the street, rubbing her arms to fight the chill that had come over her. This was silly, she knew, to stand at the door waiting for a man who might not even come. As much as Sara did not want to admit it, she wanted more than information from Will. He was from her Atlanta life. He was a reminder that there was something else waiting for her.

And thank God he was finally here.

For the second time that day, Sara watched Will hide the various electronics in his Porsche. It seemed to take longer this time, or maybe she was more impatient. Finally, he got out of the car. He held the file she had given him over his head to shield himself from the rain as he ran up the driveway.

She started to open the door, then reconsidered. She didn't want him to think she'd been standing here waiting for him. Then again, if she was trying to be covert, she probably shouldn't have been staring at him through the window.

"Idiot," she muttered, opening the door.

"Hi." He shook the rain out of his hair, taking advantage of the cover of the front porch.

"You want me to—" She reached for the wet file in his hand. Sara suppressed a groan of disappointment. It was soaked through. Everything would be ruined.

"Here," he said, lifting his sweater, untucking his undershirt. Sara saw the pages she'd given him pressed against his bare skin. She also saw what looked like a dark bruise fanning across his abdomen, disappearing into the waist of his jeans.

"What—"

He quickly pulled down his shirt. "Thanks." He scratched his face, a nervous habit she had forgotten about. "I think we can just throw the folder away."

She nodded, not knowing what to say. Will seemed at a loss for words, too. They stared at each other until the hall light snapped on.

Cathy stood in the kitchen doorway with her hands on her hips. Eddie came down the stairs. There was a brief moment of the most uncomfortable silence Sara had ever experienced in her life. She felt for the first time what a monumental mess she had made of the day. If she could've clicked her heels and gone back to the beginning, she would still be in Atlanta and her family would have been spared this awful situation. She wanted to melt into the floor.

The silence broke with her father. He held out his hand to Will. "Eddie Linton. Glad we can give you respite from this rain."

"Will Trent." Will gave him a firm handshake.

"I'm Cathy," her mother chimed in, patting Will on the arm. "Goodness, you're soaked through. Eddie, why don't you see if you can find him something dry?" For some reason, her father chuckled to himself as he ran up the stairs. Cathy told Will, "Let's get this sweater off before you catch a chill."

Will looked as uncomfortable as any man would look if an overly polite sixty-three-year-old woman told him to undress in her foyer. Still, he complied, lifting his sweater over his head. He was wearing a long-sleeved black T-shirt underneath. It started to ride up when he lifted his arms and Sara reached out without thinking, holding down the shirt.

Cathy gave her a sharp look that made Sara feel like she'd been caught stealing.

"Mama," Sara began, feeling a cold sweat coming on. "I really need to talk to you."

"We'll have plenty of time later, sweetheart." Cathy looped her hand through Will's arm as she led him down the hall. "You're from Atlanta, my daughter tells me?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"What part? I have a sister who lives in Buckhead."

"Uh ..." He glanced back at Sara. "Poncey-Highlands, it's near—"

"I know exactly where that is. You must live close to Sara."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Mother—"

"Later, honey." Cathy shot her a cat's smile as she took Will into the dining room. "This is Tessa, my youngest. Hareton Earnshaw is my brother's boy."

Hare gave him a look of open appraisal. "My, you're a tall drink of water."

"Just ignore him," Tessa advised as she shook Will's hand. "Nice to meet you."

Will started to sit in the closest chair, and Sara felt her heart drop in panic. Jeffrey's place.

Cathy was not completely devoid of a soul. "Let's put you at the head of the table," she suggested, tugging Will gently in the right direction. "I'll be right back with your dinner."

Sara sank down beside Will. She put her hand on his arm. "I am so sorry."

He feigned surprise. "About what?"

"Thank you for pretending, but we don't have much time before—" Sara jerked her hand away. Her mother was already back with a plate of food.

"I hope you like fried chicken."

"Yes, ma'am." Will stared down at the full plate. There was enough food for half the town.

"Sweet tea?" Cathy asked. Sara started to stand, but her mother nodded

toward Tessa to fetch a glass. "Tell me how you know my daughter."

Will held up his finger for a minute so that he could swallow a mouthful of butterbeans. "I met Dr. Linton at the hospital."

Sara could have kissed him for his odd adherence to formality. She explained, "Mama, Agent Trent's partner was a patient of mine."

"Is that right?"

Will nodded, taking a healthy bite of fried chicken. Sara couldn't tell if he was hungry or just desperate to have a reason not to speak. She chanced a look at Hare. For once in his miserable life, he was choosing to be silent.

"Is your wife in law enforcement, too?"

Will stopped chewing.

"I noticed your ring."

He looked down at his hand. Cathy kept him trained in her sights. He chewed some more. Finally, he answered, "She's a private investigator."

"That must give you two a lot to talk about. Did you meet during the course of one of your investigations?"

He wiped his mouth. "This food is very good." Tessa put a glass of tea down in front of him. Will took a long drink, and Sara wondered if he was wishing there was something stronger in the glass.

Cathy kept up her subtle pressure. "I wish my daughters had been interested in cooking, but neither one of them took to it." She paused for a breath. "Tell me, Mr. Trent, where are your people from?"

Sara fought the urge to drop her head into her hands. "Mama, really. It's none of our—"

"That's all right." Will wiped his mouth with his napkin. He told Cathy, "I was raised in state care."

"Bless your heart."

Will didn't seem to know how to answer her. He took another long drink of tea.

Cathy continued, "Mr. Trent, my youngest daughter reminded me that the hotel is closed for renovations. I hope you'll accept the offer of my home while you're here?"

Will choked on his tea.

"There's an apartment over the garage. I'm sorry to say it's not much, but I wouldn't feel right making you drive all the way over to Cooperstown in this weather."

Will wiped the tea off his face. He looked to Sara for help.

She shook her head, helpless to stop the onslaught of her mother's southern hospitality.

The Linton home renovation had not extended to the laundry room. Sara had to go down the stairs into the unfinished part of the basement to get some clean towels for Will. The dryer was still running when she turned on the lights. She checked the towels. They were damp.

Sara turned the dryer back on. She started up the stairs, but stopped halfway and sat down. She had been acting pretty dimwitted throughout most of the day, but she wasn't crazy enough to offer herself up to her mother right now.

She rested her chin in her hand. Her cheeks had been beet red from the moment Cathy welcomed Will Trent into the house.

"Sis?" Tessa whispered from the top of the stairs.

"Quiet," Sara admonished. The last thing she needed was more of her mother's attention.

Tessa gently pulled the door to. She held one hand under her stomach and grabbed the railing with the other as she descended the stairs. "You all right?"

Sara nodded, helping Tessa sit on the stair above her.

"I can't believe they didn't move the laundry room upstairs."

"Her sanctuary?"

They both laughed. As teenagers, Tessa and Sara had studiously avoided the laundry room for fear of being ordered to help out. They'd both thought they were so clever until they realized their mother was actually enjoying the lack of company.

Sara placed her hand on her sister's stomach. "Hey, what's this?"

Tessa grinned. "I think it's a baby."

Sara spanned both of her hands across the width. "You're enormous."

"I love it," Tessa whispered. "You wouldn't believe all the shit I've been eating."

"You must be feeling it kick all the time now."

"She's going to be a soccer player."

"She?" Sara raised an eyebrow.

"I'm just guessing. Lem wants to be surprised."

"We could go to the clinic tomorrow." Elliot Felteau had bought Sara's practice, but she still owned the building. "I can just pretend I'm doing something landlord-y over by the ultrasound machine."

"I want to be surprised, too. Besides, I think you have enough on your plate right now."

Sara rolled her eyes. "Mother."

Tessa chuckled. "My God, that was epic. What a shakedown!"

"I can't believe how awful she was."

"You kind of sprung him on her."

"I thought ..." Sara shook her head. What *had* she been thinking? "Hare wasn't any help."

"He's taking this harder than you think."

"I doubt that."

"Tommy used to cut his grass, too." Tessa shrugged. "You know how Hare is. He's been through a lot."

Hare had lost many friends as well as his longtime lover to AIDS, but Sara thought she was the only person in her family who remembered that his casual attitude had predated the epidemic. "I hope he didn't embarrass Will."

"Will took care of himself just fine."

Sara shook her head as she thought about the mess she had made. "I'm sorry, Tess. I didn't mean to bring all of this to your doorstep."

"What's 'all this'?"

She thought about the question. "A vendetta," she admitted. "I think I've finally found a way to get Lena."

"Oh, honey, will it make a difference?"

Sara felt tears in her eyes. She didn't fight them this time. Tessa had seen her in much worse shape before. "I don't know. I just want ..." She paused for breath. "I want her to be sorry for what she did."

"Don't you think she's sorry?" Tessa tread carefully. "As awful as she is, she loved Jeffrey. She worshipped him."

"No. She's not sorry. She won't even accept that she's the reason Jeffrey died."

"You can't really think that she knew that bastard boyfriend of hers was going to kill Jeffrey."

"It's not what she *wanted* to happen," Sara admitted. "But it's what she *let* happen. Jeffrey would've never even known that the man existed but for Lena. She put him in our life. If someone throws a grenade, you don't say they're innocent because they never considered that it'd actually blow up."

"Let's not talk about her anymore." Tessa wrapped her arm around Sara's shoulder. "All that matters is that Jeffrey loved you."

Sara could only nod. This was the one truth in her life. She had known without a doubt that Jeffrey had loved her.

Tessa surprised her. "Will's nice."

Sara's laugh didn't sound very convincing, even to her own ears. "Tess, he's married."

"He was looking at you all googly-eyed at the table."

"That was fear you saw."

"I think he likes you."

"I think your hormones are making you see things."

Tessa leaned back on the stairs. "Just prepare yourself for the first time being awful." Sara's look must've given her away. Tessa's mouth dropped. "Oh, my God. Have you already slept with somebody?"

"Shh," Sara hissed. "Keep your voice down."

Tessa leaned forward. "Why am I trekking all the way to the only pay phone in Oobie Doobie to call you if you're not gonna tell me about your sex life?"

Sara waved her away. "There's nothing to tell. You're right. It was awful. It was too soon and he never called me again."

"What about now? Are you seeing anybody?"

Sara thought of the epidemiologist from the CDC. The fact that this was the first time all week that she'd really considered the man said it all. "Not really. I've been on a few dates, but ... What's the point?" Sara threw up her hands. "I'm never going to connect with anyone like that again. Jeffrey ruined me for everybody else."

"You'll never know if you don't try," Tessa countered. "Don't deny yourself, Sara. Jeffrey wouldn't want that."

"Jeffrey wouldn't want me to ever touch another man ever again and you know it."

"You're probably right." Still, she said, "I think Will could be good for you."

Sara shook her head, wishing Tessa would drop the subject. Even if Will was available—even if by some miracle he was interested—Sara would never date another cop again. She couldn't have a man leave her bed every morning not knowing whether or not he would come back in one piece that night. "I told you. He's married."

"Now, there's married and there's *married*." Tessa had dabbled in more than

her share of trysts before settling down. She'd practically had a revolving door to her bedroom. "Where'd he get that scar on his lip?"

"I have no idea."

"Makes you want to kiss his mouth."

"Tess."

"Did you know about him growing up in a home?"

"I thought you were in the kitchen when he talked about that."

"I had my ear pressed to the door," she explained. "He eats like the kids at the orphanage."

"What do you mean?"

"The way he sort of wraps his arm around his plate so no one can steal his food."

Sara hadn't noticed, but now she realized it was true.

"I can't imagine growing up without parents. I mean—" She laughed. "After tonight, it seems ideal, but it must've been hard for him."

"Probably."

"Ask him about it."

"That would be rude."

"Don't you want to know more about him?"

"No," Sara lied, because of course she did. She wanted to know about the scars. She wanted to know how he had entered the system as an infant and never been adopted. She wanted to know how he could stand in a room full of people and still seem completely alone.

"The kids in my orphanage are so happy," Tessa said. "They miss their parents—there's no question about that. But, they get to go to school. They get three meals a day, clean clothes. They don't have to work. The other kids who still have parents are jealous." She smoothed out her skirt. "Why don't you ask Will what it was like for him?"

"It's none of my business."

"Give Mama another go at him and you'll find out everything." Tessa pointed her finger at Sara's chest. "You have to admit she was at the top of her game tonight."

"I don't have to admit anything."

Tessa affected their mother's soft accent. "Tell me, Mr. Trent, do you prefer boxers or briefs?" Sara laughed, and Tessa continued, "Was your first sexual experience from a missionary position or more of a canine nature?"

Sara laughed so hard that her stomach ached. She wiped her eyes, thinking this was the first time she was actually happy to be home. "I've missed you, Tess."

"I've missed you, too, Sissy." Tessa struggled to stand. "But right now, I'd better go to the bathroom before I pee in my pants from all this laughing." She made her way up the stairs, taking them one tread at a time. The door closed softly behind her.

Sara stared into the basement. Her mother's rocking chair and lamp were in a corner by a small window. The ironing board was out, ready to be used. Plastic containers along the back wall held all of Sara and Tessa's childhood mementos, at least the ones that her mother deemed worth keeping. Yearbooks, school photos, report cards, and class papers filled two boxes for each girl. Eventually,

Tessa's baby would get her own box. She would have baby shoes and flyers from school plays and piano recitals. Or soccer trophies, if Tessa got her way.

Sara couldn't have children. An ectopic pregnancy while she was in medical school had taken away her ability. She'd been trying to adopt a child with Jeffrey, but that dream had disappeared the day he'd died. He had a son somewhere, a brilliant, strong young man who had never been told that Jeffrey was his real father. Jeffrey was just an honorary uncle, Sara an honorary aunt. She often thought about reaching out to the boy, but the decision was not hers. He had a mother and father who had done a very good job of raising him. Ruining that, telling him he had a father he could never talk to, seemed like an act of cruelty.

Except where Lena was concerned, Sara had an intense aversion to inflicting cruelty.

The dryer buzzed. The towels were ready enough, considering she had to walk outside in the pouring rain. She put on her jacket and left the house as quietly as she could. Outside, the rain had turned into a drizzle again. She glanced up at the night sky. Even with the dark clouds, she could see the stars. Sara had forgotten what it was like to be away from the lights of the city. The night was as black as coal. There were no sirens or screams or random gunshots piercing the air. There were only crickets and the occasional howl of a lonely dog.

Sara stood outside Will's door, wondering if she should knock. It was late. He might have already gone to sleep.

He opened the door just as she turned around. Will certainly wasn't looking at her all googly-eyed, as Tessa had stated. If anything, he seemed distracted.

"Towels," she told him. "I'll just leave them with you."

"Wait."

Sara held up her hand to keep the rain from pelting her in the eyes. She found herself staring at Will's mouth, the scar above his lip.

"Please come in." He stepped back so she could walk through the door.

Sara felt an unexplained wariness. Still, she went inside. "I am so sorry about my mother."

"She should teach a class on interrogation at the academy."

"I cannot apologize enough."

He handed her one of the clean towels to wipe her face. "She loves you very much."

Sara hadn't expected his response. She supposed a man who had lost his mother at such a young age had a different perspective on Cathy's obtrusiveness.

"Did you ever—" Sara stopped. "Never mind. I should let you get to sleep."

"Ever what?"

"I mean ..." Sara felt her cheeks redden again. "Were you in foster homes? Or ..."

He nodded. "Sometimes."

"Good ones?"

He shrugged. "Sometimes."

Sara was thinking about the bruise on his belly—not a bruise at all, but something far more sinister. She had seen her share of electrical burns in the morgue. They left their own distinct mark, like a dusting of gunpowder that got under the skin and never washed away. The dark branding on Will's body had

faded with time. He'd probably been a child when it happened.

"Dr. Linton?"

She shook her head by way of apology. Instinctively, her hand went to his arm. "Can I get you anything else? I think there's some extra blankets in the closet."

"I've got some questions for you. If you have a few minutes?"

She had forgotten the reason she'd come up here in the first place. "Of course."

He indicated the couch. Sara sank into the old cushion, which nearly swallowed her. She looked around the room, seeing it as Will might. There was nothing fancy about the space. A galley kitchen. A tiny bedroom with an even tinier bathroom. The shag carpet had seen better days. Buckled wood paneling covered every vertical surface. The couch was older than Sara. And it was big enough for two people to comfortably lie down on, which was why Cathy had moved it from the den to the upstairs apartment when Sara turned fifteen. Not that Sara had boys lining up to lie on the couch with her, but Tessa, three years younger, had.

Will put the towels on the kitchen counter. "Can I get you some water?"

"No, thank you." Sara indicated the apartment. "I'm so sorry we couldn't offer you better accommodations."

He smiled. "I've stayed in a lot worse."

"If it's any consolation, this is actually nicer than the hotel."

"The food's better anyway." He gestured toward the opposite end of the couch. There was really nowhere else for him to sit. Still, he asked, "May I?"

Sara bent her legs up underneath her as he sat on the edge of the cushion. She crossed her arms, suddenly aware that they were alone in the same room together.

The uncomfortable silence was back. He played with his wedding ring, twisting it around his finger. She wondered if he was thinking about his wife. Sara had met the woman once at the hospital. Angie Trent was one of those vivacious, life-of-the-party types who never left the house without her makeup on. Her nails were perfect. Her skirt was tight. Her legs would have given the Pope second thoughts. She was about as different from Sara as a ripe peach was from a Popsicle stick.

Will clasped his hands together between his knees. "Thank you for dinner. Or, thank your mother. I haven't eaten like that in ..." He chuckled, rubbing his stomach. "Well, I'm not sure I've ever eaten like that in my life."

"I'm so sorry she questioned you like that."

"It's no bother. I'm sorry for imposing."

"It's my fault for bringing you down here."

"I'm sorry the hotel was closed."

Sara cut to the chase, afraid they would spend the rest of the night trading inconsequential apologies. "What questions did you have for me?"

He paused another few seconds, staring openly. "The first one is kind of delicate."

She tightened her arms around her waist. "All right."

"When Chief Wallace called you earlier today to come help Tommy ..." He let his voice trail off. "Do you always keep diazepam on you? That's Valium, right?"

Sara couldn't look him in the eye. She stared down at the coffee table. Will had obviously been working here. His laptop was closed, but the light was pulsing. Cables connected the machine to the portable printer on the floor. An unopened packet of colored folders was beside it. A wooden ruler was on top alongside a pack of colored markers. There was a stapler, paper clips, rubber bands.

"Dr. Linton?"

"Will." She tried to keep her voice steady. "Don't you think it's time you started calling me Sara?"

He acquiesced. "Sara." When she didn't speak, he pressed. "Do you always have Valium with you?"

"No," she admitted. She felt such shame that she could only look at the table in front of her. "They were for me. For this trip. In case ..." She shrugged the rest of her answer away. How could she explain to this man why she would need to drug herself through a family holiday?

He asked, "Did Chief Wallace know that you had the Valium?"

She tried to think back on their conversation. "No. I volunteered to bring it."

"You said you had some in your kit?"

"I didn't want to tell him they were for—"

"It's all right," he stopped her. "I'm really sorry that I had to ask such a personal question. I'm just trying to figure out how it happened. Chief Wallace called you to help, but how would he know that you'd be able to?"

Sara looked up at him. Will stared back, unblinking. There was no judgment in his gaze, no pity. Sara couldn't remember the last time someone had looked at her and really seen her. Certainly not since she'd gotten into town this morning.

She told him, "Frank thought I could talk to Tommy. Talk him down, I guess."

"Have you helped prisoners in the jail before?"

"Not really. I mean, I got called in a couple of times when there was an overdose. Once, someone had a burst appendix. I transferred them all to the hospital. I didn't really treat them at the jail. Not medically."

"And on the phone with Chief Wallace—"

"I'm sorry," Sara apologized. "Could you call him Frank? It's just—"

"You don't have to explain," he assured her. "On the phone before, when you said that you didn't really remember Tommy Braham, that there was no connection with him. Did you feel like Frank was trying to push you into coming to the station?"

Sara finally saw where this was going. "You think he called me after the fact. That Tommy was already dead." She remembered Frank looking through the cell door window. He had dropped his keys on the floor. Had that all been an act?

"As you know, time of death isn't an exact science," Will said. "If he called you right after he found Tommy—"

"The body was still warm," she remembered. "But the temperature inside the cells was hot. Frank said the furnace was acting up."

"Had you ever known it to act up before?"

She shook her head. "I haven't stepped foot in that station in over four years."

"The temperature was normal when I was there tonight."

Sara sat back on the couch. These were people who had worked with Jeffrey. People she had trusted all of her life. If Frank Wallace thought Sara was going to

cover something up, he was sadly mistaken. "Do you think they killed him?" She answered her own question. "I saw the blue ink from the pen. I can't imagine they held Tommy down and scraped it across his wrists. There are easier ways to kill someone and make it look like a suicide."

"Hanging," he suggested. "Eighty percent of custodial suicides are achieved by hanging. Prison inmates are seven times more likely to kill themselves than the general population. Tommy fits just about every part of the profile." Will listed it out for her. "He was unusually remorseful. He wouldn't stop crying. He wasn't married. He was between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five. This was his first offense. He had a strong parent or guardian at home who would be angry or disappointed to learn of his incarceration."

She admitted, "Tommy was all of those things. But why would Frank postpone finding the body?"

"You're well respected here. A prisoner killed himself in police custody. If you say there's nothing hinky about it, then people will believe you."

Sara couldn't argue with him. Dan Brock was a mortician, not a doctor. If people got it into their heads that Tommy had been killed at the jail, then Brock would be hard-pressed to disprove the rumor.

"The cartridge from the pen that Tommy used," Will began. "Tonight, Officer Knox told me that your husband gave them all pens for Christmas one year. That's a very thoughtful thing to do."

"Not exactly," Sara said before she could catch herself. "I mean, he was busy, so he asked me to ..." She waved her hand, dismissing her words. She had been so annoyed with Jeffrey for asking her to track down the pens, as if her life was less busy than his. She passed this off by telling Will, "I'm sure there are things you ask your wife to do for you when you're tied up."

He smiled. "Do you remember where you got the pens?"

Sara felt another wave of shame crashing down. "I asked Nelly, my office manager at the clinic, to find them online. I didn't have time to ..." She shook her head, feeling like a heel. "I might be able to find the credit card receipt if it's important. This was over five years ago."

"How many did you get?"

"Twenty-five, I think? Everyone on the force got one."

"That's a lot of money."

"Yes," she acknowledged. Jeffrey hadn't given her a budget, and Sara's idea of an expensive gift had a higher price tag than Jeffrey's. It all seemed so silly now. Why had they wasted days being angry at each other? Why had it mattered so much?

Will surprised her, saying, "Your accent is different down here."

She laughed, taken off guard. "Do I sound country?"

"Your mother has a beautiful accent."

"Cultured," Sara said. Except for tonight, she had always loved the sound of her mother's voice.

He surprised her again. "You've kind of been dragged into the middle of this case, but in a lot of ways, you've put yourself there on your own."

She felt a blush brought on by his candor.

His expression was soft, understanding. She wondered if it was genuine or if he was using one of his interviewing techniques. "I know this sounds forward,

but I'm assuming you had me meet you at the hospital in plain view of Main Street for a reason."

Sara laughed again, this time at herself, the situation. "It wasn't that calculated. It must seem that way now."

"I'm staying at your house. People are going to see my car parked on the street. I know how small towns work. They're going to think something's going on between us."

"But there's not. You're married and I'm—"

His smile was more of a wince. "The truth isn't much help in these types of situations. You must know that."

Sara looked back at his office supplies. He had separated the rubber bands by color. Even the paper clips were turned in the same direction.

Will said, "Something is going on here. I'm not sure if it's what you think, but something's not right at that station house."

"What is it?"

"I don't know yet, but you need to prepare yourself for some bad reactions." He spoke carefully. "Cases like this, where the police get questioned. They don't like that. Part of the reason they're good at their jobs is because they think they're right about everything."

"I'm a doctor. Trust me, it's not just cops who feel that way."

"I want you to be prepared, because when we get to the end of this, whether I find out Tommy was guilty, or Detective Adams screwed up, or if I find out nothing was wrong at all, people are going to hate you for bringing me down here."

"They've hated me before."

"They're going to say you're dragging your husband's memory through the mud."

"They don't know anything about him. They have no idea."

"They'll fill in the blanks themselves. It's going to get a lot harder than it is now." He turned his body toward her. "I'm going to make it harder. I'm going to do some things on purpose to get them mad enough to show their hand. Are you going to be okay with that?"

"What if I say no?"

"Then I'll find another way to do it that doesn't upset you."

She could see that his offer was genuine, and felt guilty for questioning his motives before. "This isn't my home anymore. I'm leaving in three days no matter what happens. Do what you have to do."

"And your family?"

"My family supports me." Sara wasn't certain about a lot of things these days, but this, at least, was true. "They may not agree with me, but they support me."

"All right." He looked relieved, as if he'd gotten the hard part out of the way. "I need to get Julie Smith's phone number from you."

Sara had anticipated the request. She took a sheet of folded paper out of her pocket and handed it to Will.

He pointed to the Princess phone beside the couch. "Is this the same line as the house?"

She nodded.

"I wanted to make sure the caller ID was the same." He picked up the phone

and stared at the rotary dial.

Sara rolled her eyes. "My parents don't exactly embrace technology."

He started spinning the dial, but the rotary slipped out from under his finger in the middle of the number.

"Let me," she offered, taking the phone before he could protest. She spun the dial, the motion coming back to her more quickly than she wanted to admit.

Will put the receiver to his ear just as an automated squawk blared down the line. He held the phone between them so they both could hear the recorded voice advising the caller that the line he was trying to reach had been disconnected.

Will put the phone back on the hook. "I'll have Faith do a trace tomorrow. My bet is that it was a throwaway phone. Do you remember anything else about Julie? Anything she said?"

"I could tell that she was calling from a bathroom," Sara told him. "She said that Tommy had texted her that he was in jail. Maybe you can get the transcript from his phone?"

"Faith can do that, too," he offered. "What about Julie's voice? Did she sound young? Old?"

"She sounded really young and really country."

"Country how?"

Sara smiled. "Not like me. At least I hope not. She sounded more like the wrong side of the tracks. She used the word 'you'uns.' "

"That's mountain talk."

"Is it? I'm not up on dialects."

"I had an assignment in Blue Ridge a while back," he explained. "Do you hear that word around here much?"

She shook her head. "Not really. Not that I can remember."

"All right, so we've got someone young, probably a transplant from north Georgia or Appalachia. She told you that she was Tommy's friend. We'll dump his phone line and see if they've ever called each other."

"Julie Smith," Sara said, wondering why it had never occurred to her that the girl might be using an alias.

"Maybe the phone taps will give us something."

Sara indicated the photocopies she'd made. "Were these helpful?"

"Not in the way you're thinking." He thumbed through the pages. "I asked the station secretary, Mrs. Simms, to fax these to Faith. Can you look at them for me?"

Sara glanced through the pages. There were handwritten numbers at the top. She stopped on the eleventh page. Someone had written the number twelve in the corner. The two was backward. "Did you number these?"

"Yes," he said. "When I got them back from Mrs. Simms, one of the pages was missing. Page eleven. The page right after Detective Adams's field report."

Sara thumbed back to the second page. The two was written the correct way. She checked the third and fifth page. Both numbers were facing the correct direction. The pen had been pressed so hard that the paper felt embossed.

He asked, "Can you remember what's missing?"

Sara went through them again, concentrating on the content instead of the numbering. "The 911 transcript."

"You're sure?"

"There was another page from Lena's notebook. It was taped on the sheet of paper by itself. She wrote down the contents of the 911 call."

"Can you remember what it said?"

"I know that it was a woman's voice. I can't really remember the rest."

"Did they trace the number she called from?"

"I didn't see anything indicating they had." She shook her head. "Why can't I remember what else it said?"

"We can get it from the call center."

"Unless they managed to lose it."

"It's no big deal," he told her. "You got the file from Frank, right?"

"From Carl Phillips."

"The booking officer?"

"Yes. Did you talk to him tonight?"

"He's gone on vacation with his family. No idea when he'll be back. No phone. No cell. No way to get in touch with him."

Sara felt her mouth drop open.

"I doubt he's really gone. They're probably keeping him away from me. He might even be at the station tomorrow, hiding in plain sight."

"He's the only African American on the force."

Will laughed. "Thanks for the tip. That narrows things down considerably."

"I can't believe they're doing this."

"Cops don't like to be questioned. They circle their wagons, even if they know it's wrong."

She wondered if Jeffrey had ever done anything like this. If he had, it was only because he wanted to be the one to clean out his own house. He would never let someone come in and do his job for him.

Will asked, "Where did you make the copies?"

"At the front of the room."

"The copier that's on the table by the coffeemaker?"

"That's right."

"Did you get some coffee?"

"I didn't want to dawdle." Everyone had been staring at her like she was a monster. Sara's only goal had been to make the copies and get out of there as soon as possible.

"So, you're standing by the copier waiting for the pages to come out. That looked like an old machine. Does it make a noise?"

She nodded, wondering where this was going.

"Like a whirring or a clunking?"

"Both," she answered, and she could hear the sound in her head.

"How much coffee was left in the pot? Did anyone come up?"

She shook her head. "No. The pot was full." The machine was older than the copier. She could smell the grounds burning.

"Did anyone talk to you?"

"No. No one would even look at—" She saw herself standing by the copier. The machine was old, the kind you had to feed the pages into one at a time. She had read the file to keep from staring aimlessly at the wall. "Oh."

"What do you remember?"

"I skimmed the 911 transcript while I was waiting for the copier to warm up."

"What did it say?"

She could see herself standing back in the station reading the files. "The woman called it a possible suicide. She said she was worried her friend had done something." Sara narrowed her eyes, trying to force the memory to come. "She was worried Allison was going to kill herself because she'd gotten into a fight with her boyfriend."

"Did she say where she thought Allison was?"

"Lover's Point," she recalled. "That's what town people call it. It's the cove where Allison was found."

"What's it like?"

"A cove." Sara shrugged. "It's romantic if you're out for a walk, but not in the pouring rain and cold."

"Is it secluded?"

"Yes."

"So, according to this caller, Allison got into a fight with her boyfriend. The caller was worried Allison was suicidal. The caller also knew she was going to be at Lover's Point."

"It was probably Julie Smith. Is that what you're thinking?"

"Maybe, but why? The caller wanted to bring attention to Allison's murder. Julie Smith was trying to help Tommy Braham get away with murder. They seem to have opposite goals." He paused. "Faith is trying to track her down, but we're going to need more than a disconnected number to find her."

"Frank and Lena are probably thinking the same thing," Sara guessed. "That's why they hid the transcript. They either don't want you to talk to her or they want to talk to her first."

Will scratched his cheek. "Maybe." He was obviously considering another option. For her part, Sara could not get past Marla Simms hiding information in a formal investigation. The old woman had worked at the station longer than anyone could remember.

Will sat up on the couch. He thumbed through the pages on the coffee table. "Mrs. Simms took it upon herself to send some extra information. I had Agent Mitchell scan these in so I could print them out." He found what he was looking for and handed it to Sara. She recognized the form, a two-page incident report. Patrolmen filled out dozens of these a week to notate cases where they had been called in but no arrest had been made. They were useful to have in case something bad happened later, sort of like a progress report on a person or an area of town.

Will said, "These are incident reports documenting Tommy's run-ins with the law." He indicated the pages in Sara's hands. "This one talks about a girl he got into a screaming match with at the roller rink."

She saw there was a yellow dot in the corner of the report.

He asked, "Did you ever know Tommy to have a temper?"

"Never." Sara checked through the other incident reports. There were two more, each two stapled pages, each with a dot from a colored marker in the corner. One was red. The other was green.

She looked back up at Will. "Tommy was pretty even-keeled. Kids like that tend to be very sweet."

“Because of their mental state?”

Sara stared at him, thinking back on their conversation in the car. “Yes. He was slow. Very gullible.”

Much like Sara.

She handed a different report back to Will, showing it to him upside down. She pointed to the middle of the page where Carl Phillips had described the incident. “Did you read this part?”

She watched Will’s eyes go to the red dot. “The barking dog. Tommy started screaming at his neighbor. The woman called the cops.”

“Right.” She took the third report and handed it to him in the right direction. “Then there’s this.”

Again, his eyes went not to the words, but to the colored dot. “Loud music reported a few days ago. Tommy yelled at the officer.”

She was silent, waiting for him to send out another feeler.

He took his time, finally asking, “What are you thinking?”

She was thinking he was incredibly clever. Sara looked at the folders, the markers. He color-coded everything. His penmanship was awkward, like a child’s. He’d written the number two backward, but not with any consistency. He couldn’t tell whether a page was upside down or not. Sara might not have even noticed under different circumstances. Hell, she *hadn’t* noticed the last time she’d spent time with him. He’d been in her home. She had watched him work and never realized there was a problem.

He joked, “Is this some kind of test?”

“No.” She couldn’t do this to him. Not like this. Maybe not ever. “I was looking at the dates.” She shuffled through the forms to give herself something to do. “All the incidents happened within the last few weeks. Something must have set him off. Tommy didn’t have a temper until recently.”

“I’ll see what I can find.” He took back the pages and stacked them on the table. He was nervous, and he was not stupid. He had spent a lifetime looking for cues, searching for tells and ticks, so that he could keep his secret hidden.

Sara put her hand on his arm. “Will—”

He stood up, moving out of her reach. “Thank you, Dr. Linton.”

Sara stood, too. She fumbled for something to say. “I’m sorry I couldn’t help more.”

“You’ve been great.” He walked to the door and held it open for her. “Please thank your mother for her hospitality.”

Sara left before she was pushed out. She got to the bottom of the steps and turned around, but Will had already gone inside.

“Good Lord,” Sara mumbled as she walked across the wet grass. She’d actually managed to make Will feel more uncomfortable than her mother had.

The distant sound of a car came from up the road. Sara watched a police cruiser roll by. This time, the cop behind the wheel did not tip his hat at her. In fact, he seemed to glare at her.

Will had warned her this would happen, that the town would turn against her. Sara hadn’t thought the time would come so quickly. She laughed at herself, the circumstances, as she crossed the driveway and went into the house. Will might have trouble reading the words on a page, but he was pretty damn good at reading people.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Jason Howell paced back and forth across his tiny dorm room, the shuffling of his feet blending with the shushing of the rain outside his window. Papers were strewn across the floor. His desk was cluttered with open books and empty Red Bull cans. His ancient laptop made a sound like an exhausted sigh as it went to sleep. He needed to be working, but his brain was spinning in his head. Nothing could hold his attention for more than a few minutes—not the broken lamp on his desk or the emails flooding his inbox and certainly not the paper he was supposed to be working on.

Jason rested his palm just below the keyboard on the laptop. The plastic was hot to the touch. The fan that cooled the motherboard had started clicking a few weeks ago, around the same time he'd nearly gotten a third-degree burn on his legs from keeping the computer on his lap. He guessed there was something bad happening between the battery and the charger plugged into the wall. Even now there was a slight tinge of burning plastic in the air. Jason grabbed the plug but stopped short of yanking it out of the socket. He chewed the tip of his tongue as he stared at the snaking electrical cord in his hand. Did he want the machine to overheat? A dead laptop was a life-altering catastrophe. Maybe his work would be lost, his footnotes and research and the last year of his life melting into one giant lump of stinking plastic.

And then what?

He didn't have any friends left. Everyone in the dorm avoided him when he walked down the hall. Nobody talked to him in class or asked to borrow his notes. He hadn't been out for a drink in months. Except for his professors, Jason couldn't recall one meaningful conversation he'd had with anyone since before Easter break.

Anyone but Allison, but that didn't count. They weren't really talking lately. All they did was end up screaming at each other about the stupidest things—who was supposed to order the pizza, who forgot to shut the door. Even the sex was bad. Confrontational. Mechanical. Disappointing.

Jason couldn't blame Allison if she hated him right now. He couldn't do anything right. His paper was a mess. His grades had started to slip. He was running out of money from his grandfather's trust. Papa had left him twelve thousand dollars to supplement Jason's scholarships and loans for school. At the time, the number had seemed enormous. Now that Jason was a year into his graduate program, it seemed like a pittance. And that pittance was getting smaller every day.

No wonder he was so depressed he barely had the strength to raise his head.

What he really wanted was Allison. No, scratch that—he wanted the Allison he had known for one year and eleven months. The one who smiled when she saw him. The one who didn't burst into tears every five minutes and yell at him for being a bastard when Jason asked her why she was sad.

"Because of you," she would say, and who wanted to hear that? Who wanted to be blamed for somebody else's misery when you were knee-deep in your own?

And Jason was miserable. It radiated off him like the heat lamp over the french fries at McDonald's. He'd lost track of the last time he'd showered. He couldn't sleep. Nothing could make his brain shut down long enough for rest. As soon as he lay down, his eyelids started going up and down like a lazy yo-yo. Darkness tended to bring it all fresh into his mind, and before long that monster weight of loneliness started pressing on his chest so that he felt like he couldn't breathe.

Not that Allison cared. He could be dead right now for all she knew. He hadn't seen another human being since the dorm cleared out for Thanksgiving break three days ago. Even the library had closed early on Sunday, the last stragglers clawing at the steps as the staff finally locked the doors. Jason had watched them go from his window, wondering if they were going to be alone, if they had anyone to spend their holiday with.

Except for the constant hum of the Cartoon Network and Jason's occasional mumblings to himself, the place was completely silent. Even the janitor hadn't shown his face in days. Jason probably wasn't supposed to be in the building. The heat had been turned off when the last students left. He was sleeping in his warmest clothes, holed up under his winter coat. And the one person who was supposed to care about this evidently didn't give a shit.

Allison Spooner. How had he fallen in love with a girl who had such a stupid name?

She had called him like crazy for days, and then yesterday—nothing. Jason had watched his phone light up each time with her caller ID and each time he hadn't answered it. Her messages were all the same: *"Hey, call me."* Would it kill her to say something else? Would it kill her to say that she missed him? He had conversations in his head where he asked her these questions and she said, "You know what? You're right. I should be a better girlfriend."

Conversations. More like fantasies.

For three days, all the phone did was ring. He started to worry that Allison's caller ID would get etched into the screen on his phone. He'd watched the bars for the battery indicator disappear one by one. With each bar, he told himself he would answer the phone if she called before the next one disappeared. Then it would blink off with no call and he'd say the next one. Then the next one. Finally, the phone had turned itself off while he was sleeping. Jason had panicked as he searched for the charger. He'd plugged it into the wall and—nothing.

Her silence was loud and clear. You didn't give up on somebody like that if you loved them. You kept calling. You left messages that said something more deep and personal than *"Hey, call me."* You apologized. You didn't send a stupid IM every twenty minutes saying "where r u?" You banged on their door and yelled at the top of your lungs for them to please, please see you.

Why had she given up on him?

Because he didn't have any balls. That's what she had told him the last time they talked. Jason wasn't man enough to do what needed to be done. He wasn't man enough to take care of her. Maybe she was right. He was afraid. Every time

they talked about what they were going to do, he felt like his intestines were squeezing up on him. He wished that he had never talked to that asshole from town. He wished that he could take it all back—everything they had done over the past two weeks. Allison acted like she was fine with it, but he knew she was afraid, too. It wasn't too late. They could back out of this. They could pretend like it didn't happen. If only Allison would see that there was no good way out. Why was Jason the only person in this whole damn mess who seemed to be cursed with a conscience?

Suddenly, there was a noise outside. He threw open the door and went into the hallway. Jason stood in the dark, glancing around like a madman. No one was there. No one was watching him. He was just being paranoid. Considering the number of Red Bulls he'd chugged and the two bags of Cheetos that were sitting like a brick in his stomach, it was no wonder he was feeling wired.

Jason went back into his room. He opened the window to let in some air. The rain had slacked off, but the sky hadn't given up the sun in days. He checked his bedside clock, unsure whether it was morning or night. Midnight was only a few minutes away. A stiff wind was blowing, but he had been holed up inside for so long that he welcomed fresh air, even if it was cold enough to make his breath appear as a cloud in front of his face. Outside, he could see the empty student parking lot. In the distance, a dog barked.

He sat back down at his desk. He stared at the lamp by his laptop. The neck was broken. The shade dangled from two wires, hanging its head as if in shame. The light cast weird shadows in the room. He had never liked the dark. It made him feel vulnerable and lonely. It made him think about things he didn't want to think about.

Thanksgiving was a few days away. Last week, Jason had made the usual call to his mother, but she wasn't interested in seeing him. She never was. Jason was from his mother's first marriage, to a man who'd gone out for beer one day and never come back. Her second husband made it clear from the start that Jason wasn't his son. They had three daughters who barely knew Jason existed. He wasn't invited to family get-togethers. He didn't get invitations to weddings or holidays. His mother's only connection to him was through the U.S. Postal Service. She mailed a check for twenty-five dollars every birthday and Christmas.

Allison was supposed to make things different. They were supposed to spend all of their holidays together. They were supposed to create their own family. That's what they'd done for the last year and eleven months. They went to movies or ate Chinese food while the rest of the planet was holed up with relatives they didn't like, eating food they didn't enjoy. That was their thing—they were two against the world, filled with combined glee because they had each other. Jason had never known what it was like to be inside something good. He was always on the outside, his face pressed against the glass. Allison had given him that, and now she had taken it away.

He didn't even know if she was still in town. She might have gone home to visit her aunt. Maybe she had run off with another guy. Allison was attractive. She could do a hell of a lot better than Jason. He wouldn't be surprised if she was screwing some new guy right now.

A new guy.

The thought cut him like a knife. Their legs and arms entangled, her long hair draped across another guy's chest. Probably it was a hairy chest, the kind of chest that men had, not a concave, pasty white chest that hadn't changed since junior high school. This new guy would have balls the size of grapefruits. He would pick Allison up in his arms and take her like a beast whenever he wanted.

How could she be with another guy? Jason knew from the first time they kissed that he was going to marry her. He'd given her that ring with the promise that as soon as all of this was over, he'd buy her a better one. A real one. Had Allison forgotten that? Could she really be that cruel?

Jason chewed at his tongue, rolling it around with his front teeth until he tasted blood. He stood up and started pacing again. The broken lamp traced his movements in an eerie shadow that swung back and forth across the wall. Six paces one way. Six paces back. The shadow hesitated, stopped and started, clinging to Jason like a bad dream. He raised his hands, hunched his shoulders, and the shadow grew into a monster.

Jason dropped his hands, thinking he was going to freak himself out if he didn't stop this.

If he could just get through Thanksgiving, all of this would be over. He and Allison would be rich, or at least not as poor. Tommy would be able to buy enough equipment to start his own gardening business. Allison would be able to quit her job at the diner and concentrate on school. Jason would ... What would Jason do?

He would buy Allison that ring. He would block that other guy and his stupid hairy chest from his mind, and he and Allison would go on and live their lives together. They could get married. Have children. They'd both be scientists, doctors. They could buy a new house, new cars, leave the air-conditioning on sixty all summer if they wanted to. The last three months would be a distant memory, something they would talk about in ten, fifteen years when it was all behind them. They would be at a dinner party. Allison would've had a little too much to drink. Talk would turn to wild college days, and her eyes would sparkle in the candlelight as she looked at Jason, a smile tugging at her lips.

"Oh, we can top that," she would say, and proceed to shock them all with the crazy mess they had gotten themselves into over the last few weeks.

That's what it would end up being—a party story, like the one Jason told about the first time his papa took him duck hunting and Jason had accidentally maimed two decoys.

He needed to finish his paper for that to happen. He couldn't just settle for a degree now. He had to be the best, the top in his class, because Allison didn't say it, but she liked having nice things. She liked the idea of being able to go into a store and buy whatever she wanted. She hated having to balance her checkbook down to the last penny every month. Jason wasn't going to be the kind of husband who asked how much a pair of shoes cost or why she needed another black dress. He was going to be the kind of husband who made so much money that Allison could fill ten closets with designer clothes and there would still be money left over to go to Cancún or St. Croix or wherever it was filthy rich people went on their private jets for the holidays.

Jason rested his fingers on the keys but did not type. He felt feverish. Guilt had always been a problem for him. There was no punishment that anyone

could mete out that was worse than the distress brought on by Jason's own disappointment in himself. And he *should* be disappointed. He should be feeling horrified by what he had done. He should have protected Allison from all of this, told her that no matter how much money was involved, it wasn't worth it. He'd endangered her. He'd gotten Tommy mixed up in it, too, because Tommy was stupid enough to go along with anything as long as you pushed him in the right direction. Jason was responsible for both of them. He was supposed to protect his friends, not push them into oncoming traffic. Were their lives really worth so little? Was that what it boiled down to at the end of the day, twenty-something years of life for less money than what a janitor brought home?

"No," he said, the sound of his voice drowned out by the howling rain. He couldn't let all of them get dragged down into this. Allison was wrong. Jason had balls. He had balls enough to do the right thing.

Instead of working on his paper, he opened his Internet browser. A quick search brought him to the right place. He found the contact information buried in the site map. Jason clicked on the icon to write new mail, but changed his mind. He didn't want this traced back to him. It was the coward's way out, but Jason would rather be an honest coward than a jailed whistle-blower. There was no denying his culpability in all of this—extortion, fraud, who knew what else. The feds would be involved. This might even count as attempted murder.

Jason opened up the Yahoo account he used for porn and pasted the contact address into the email. He spoke aloud as he wrote, "I don't know if you are the right person to talk to about this, but there is something seriously wrong going on at your Grant County ..." Jason's voice trailed off as he searched for the right word. Was it a site? A location? Facility?

"Hey."

Jason jerked up his head, surprised. "You scared the crap out of me." He fumbled for the mouse to close the browser.

"You all right?"

Jason glanced nervously at the computer. "What are you doing here?" The stupid email program was asking if he wanted to save. Jason moved the mouse again to minimize the page. It still asked if he wanted to save.

"What are you writing?"

"School stuff." Instead of hitting Save, Jason pressed the Delete key. The program closed down. He could hear the laptop's fan clicking, trying to cool the processor enough to complete the request. His dissertation flashed up, then disappeared. The screen went black.

"Shit," he whispered. "No, no, no ..."

"Jason."

"Just give me a minute." Jason tapped the space bar, trying to wake the computer. Sometimes that's all it took. Sometimes, it just needed to know he was paying attention.

"You asked for this."

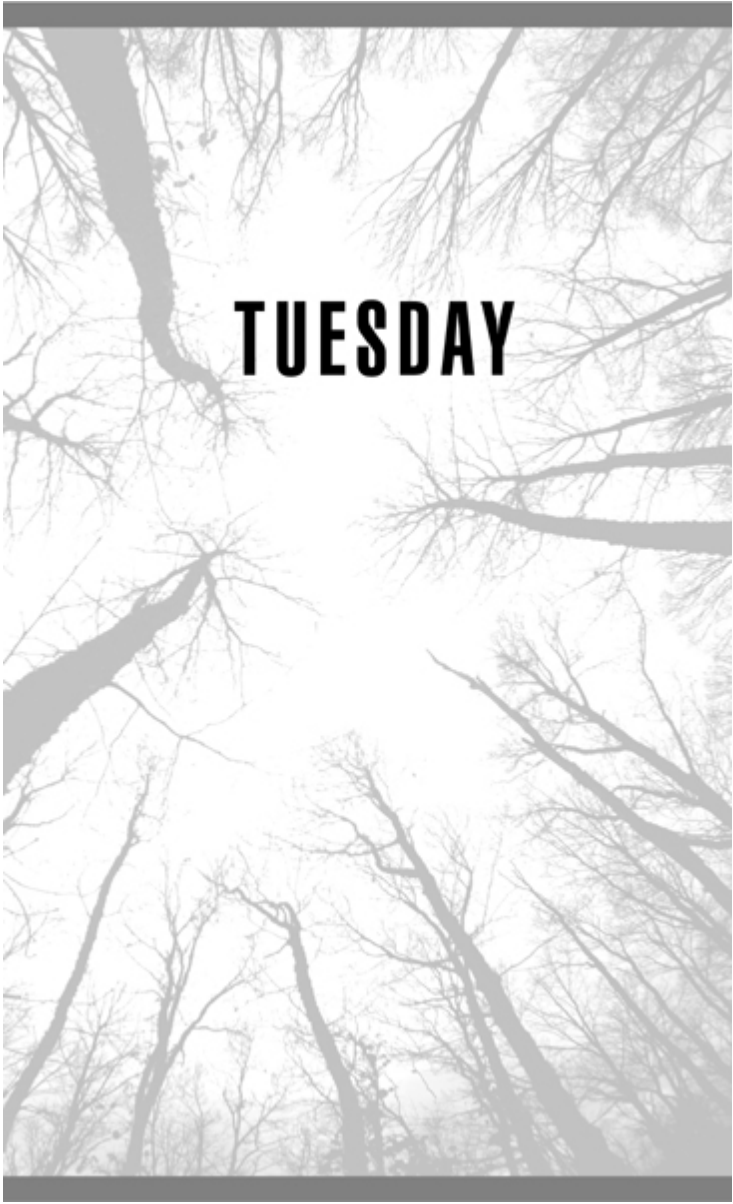
"Wha—" Jason pitched forward, his jaw snapping shut as his face slammed into his computer. The plastic was hot against his cheek. Dark liquid pooled around the keys. He had the crazy thought that the computer was injured, bleeding.

Wind gusted in from the open window. Jason tried to cough. His throat

wouldn't comply. He coughed again. Something wet and thick came out of his mouth. He stared at it, thinking it looked like a piece of pork. Pink flesh. Raw meat.

Jason gagged.

He was staring at his tongue.



TUESDAY

CHAPTER NINE

Will felt like a thief as he sneaked across the Linton yard and climbed into his Porsche. At least the driving rain gave him an excuse to keep his head down and move quickly. He jammed the key in the lock and was inside the car before he realized there was something trapped under his windshield wiper. Will groaned. He pushed open the door and tried to reach around to the wiper, but his arm wasn't long enough. His sleeve was nearly soaked through by the time he got out of the car again to retrieve the plastic sandwich bag.

Someone had left him a note. The paper was folded in two, safe inside the plastic. Will glanced around, trying to see up and down the street. No one was milling about, which was unsurprising, considering the awful weather. There were no parked cars with the engines running. Will unzipped the bag. He caught a whiff of a familiar scent.

Fancy soap.

He stared at the folded piece of paper, wondering if Sara was playing some kind of joke. He'd paced the floor of her family's romper room half the night, replaying in his mind the last five minutes of their conversation. She hadn't said anything, really. Or had she? There was definitely a look in her eyes. Something had changed between them, and it wasn't a good change.

Other than Will's wife, there were only two people in his life who knew about his dyslexia. Both of them had found their own special ways to make him miserable about it. Amanda Wagner, his boss, threw out occasional bon mots about him being professionally incompetent at best and mentally incapacitated at worst. Faith was more well-meaning, but she was too nosy for her own good. Once, she'd peppered Will with so many questions about the disorder that he'd stopped talking to her for two whole days.

His wife, Angie, was a combination of both responses. She had grown up with Will, helped him write school assignments and work on papers and fill out applications. She'd been the one who reviewed his reports and made sure he didn't sound like a backward chimp. She was also prone to dangling her help in exchange for things she wanted. And they were never good things. At least not good for Will.

In their own way, all three women made it clear that they thought something was wrong with him. Something not quite right with his head. With the way he thought. With the way he handled things. They didn't pity him. He was pretty sure Amanda didn't even like him. But they treated him differently. They treated him like he had a disease.

What would Sara do? Maybe nothing. Will wasn't even sure if she had figured it out. Or he could just be fooling himself. Sara was smart—that was part of the problem. She was a hell of a lot smarter than Will. Had he tripped up? Did she have some kind of special doctor's tool to trap unsuspecting morons? He must have said something or done something that had given himself away. But what?

Will glanced back at the Linton home to make sure no one was watching him. Sara had developed a weird habit of lurking behind closed doors. He unfolded the notebook paper. There was a smiley face at the bottom.

Did she think he was a child? Was she out of gold stars?

He pressed his fingers to his eyes, feeling like an idiot. There was nothing sexy about a barely literate thirty-five-year-old man.

He looked back at the note.

Thankfully, Sara didn't write in cursive. She didn't write like a doctor, either. Will put his finger under each letter, moving his lips as he read. "Fun ..." His heart did a weird double beat in his chest, but quickly he realized his mistake. "Funeral." He knew the next word, and numbers had never been a problem for him.

He stared back at the front door. The window was clear. He checked the note again. "Funeral home 11:30."

And a smiley face, because apparently she thought he was intellectually disabled.

Will stuck his key into the ignition. Obviously, she was talking about the time for the autopsies. But was this also some kind of test to see how well he could read? The thought of Sara Linton examining him like a lab rat made him want to pack his bags and move to Honduras. She would feel sorry for him. Worse, she might try to help him.

"Hello?"

Will jumped so hard he slammed his head into the ceiling. Cathy Linton was standing outside his car with a pleasant look on her face. She had a large umbrella over her head. She motioned for him to roll down the window.

"Good morning, Mr. Trent." She was all smiles again, but he had fallen for her sweet-southern-lady crap once before.

"Good morning, Mrs. Linton."

Her breath was visible in the cold. "I hope you slept well."

He looked back at the house, wondering why this was the only time Sara wasn't lurking behind the door. "Yes, ma'am. Thank you."

"I just went for my walk. Exercise is the best way to start the morning." She smiled again. "Won't you come in and have some breakfast with us?"

His stomach rumbled so loudly he was sure the car was shaking. The energy bar he'd found at the bottom of his suitcase this morning hadn't exactly hit the spot. A woman like Cathy Linton would know how to make a good biscuit. There would be butter and ham. Probably grits. Eggs. Sausage patties. It was like she was inviting him into the woods to visit her cottage made of candy.

"Mr. Trent?"

"No, ma'am. I need to get to work, but I appreciate it."

"Dinner, then." She had a way of saying things that sounded like a suggestion at first but ended up being a strict order. "I hope the apartment wasn't too horrible last night."

"No, ma'am. It was fine."

"I'll just slip up there later and do some dusting. Eddie and I haven't used the place since the girls were here. I cringe to think of the state it must be in."

Will thought about the dirty clothes he'd left piled on the couch. He'd packed in Atlanta thinking he'd wash everything at the hotel. "That's all right. I—"

"Nonsense." She tapped her hand on the car door like a judge passing down an edict. "I can't have you breathing in all that dust."

He knew there was no way to stop her. "Just ... uh ... Just ignore my mess. Please. I'm sorry."

Her smile changed to something much kinder than he'd seen before. He could see now where Sara got her beauty. Cathy reached into the car and gently rested her hand on his arm. Sara had touched him on the arm a lot last night. They were obviously a touchy-feely kind of family, which was just as foreign to Will as if they were from Mars.

She squeezed his arm. "Dinner's at seven-thirty sharp."

He nodded. "Thank you."

"Don't be late." Her smile changed back to the one he was more familiar with. She winked at him before turning on her heel and walking back toward the house.

Will rolled up his window. He put the car in gear and headed up the road, too late remembering that he was going in the wrong direction. Or maybe not. Sara had told him that Lakeshore was just a big circle. Will had lately gone around in enough circles to last a lifetime, but he wasn't going to risk driving past the Linton home again.

The road was empty, he assumed because of the early hour. Will was timing his arrival at the police station so that he'd get there before most of the cops came on shift. He wanted to look eager and alert. He wanted them to feel like he was stepping on their toes.

He slowed his car as he rounded a curve. The road was more like a stream, rainwater flooding across the asphalt. He maneuvered the Porsche into the opposite side of the street to keep his floorboards from flooding. Will had spent ten years of his life and a chunk of his savings restoring the 9-11 by hand. Most of that time, he was bent over manuals and schematics, trying to figure out how the car was supposed to work. He'd learned to weld. He'd learned to do body work. He'd learned that he wasn't particularly fond of either.

The engine was solid, but the gears were temperamental. He felt the clutch slip as he downshifted. Once he was out of the floodwaters, he idled the car, thinking he'd let the undercarriage drain, wondering if such a thing was even possible. Up ahead, a blue mailbox with an Auburn University logo painted on it rocked in the strong wind. He recalled the first house number Sara had written on the outside of the folder when she was giving him directions to her parents' house. Will had always been good at remembering numbers.

In Atlanta, Sara lived in the old dairy factory, one of those industrial complexes that had been turned into luxurious lofts back during the real estate boom. He'd remarked then that the place didn't really seem like her type of home. The lines were too hard. The furniture too sleek. He had imagined she lived somewhere warm and welcoming, more like a cottage.

He had been right.

The Auburn mailbox belonged to a shotgun-style, one-story home with plants overflowing in the front yard. Sara had lived on the lake, and the sky was just light enough so that Will could see the glorious aspect of her backyard. He wondered what Sara's life had been like when she lived here. She didn't strike him as the kind of wife who would have dinner and a dry martini waiting when

her husband got home, but maybe occasionally she had filled the role out of kindness. There was something about her that indicated a tremendous capacity for love.

The porch light came on. Will put the car in gear and continued around the lake. He missed the turnoff for Main Street and had to back up. He felt his wedding ring on his hand, making a mental note that the turn would be on that side. Over the years, he had trained his mind to recognize his watch, not the ring. Probably because the watch was more permanent.

Will had met Angie Polaski when he was eight years old. Angie was three years older, thrown into the system because her mother had overdosed on a nasty combination of heroin and speed. While Diedre Polaski lay comatose in the bathroom, Angie was being looked after by her mother's pimp in the bedroom. Finally, someone had called the police. Diedre was put on life support at the state hospital, where she remained to this day, and Angie was sent to the Atlanta Children's Home for the remaining seven years of a childhood that had already been lost. Will had fallen in love with her on sight. At eleven, she'd had a chip on her shoulder and hell in her eyes. When she wasn't giving boys handjobs in the coat closet, she was beating the snot out of them with her unsurprisingly quick fists.

Will had loved her for her fierceness, and when her fierceness had worn him down, he had clung to her for her familiarity. Last year, she had married him on a dare after years of empty promises. She cheated on him. She pushed him to the breaking point, then sank her claws into his flesh and yanked him back. His relationship with Angie was more akin to a twisted hokey pokey. She was in Will's life. She was out. She was in. She was shaking him all about.

Will found Main Street after a couple of wrong turns. The rain wasn't coming down in sheets anymore, so he could make out the small shops lining the road. One place was obviously a hardware store. The other looked like a shop to buy ladies' clothing. Directly across from the station was a dry cleaners. Will thought about his dirty laundry piled on the couch. Maybe he could find time to sneak back and get it. He usually wore a suit and tie to work, but he hadn't had a lot of options this morning. There was just one T-shirt and a pair of boxers left. His jeans were clean enough to last another day. The sweater was the one he wore last night. The cashmere blend hadn't responded well to the rain. He felt the material tighten every time he flexed his shoulders.

Will pulled into the farthest space from the front door, backing in so that the Porsche was facing the street. Catty-corner to the station, he saw a low office building with glass brick on the front. The faded sign out front had a teddy bear holding some balloons. Probably a daycare center. A squad car rolled down the street but didn't stop, going ahead through the gates of what must have been the college. Will's was the only car in the lot. He supposed Larry Knox was inside the station, or maybe they'd given him a relief when Will left last night. Either way, he wasn't going to spend the next twenty minutes standing in the rain outside the locked door.

He dialed Amanda Wagner's number, holding out slim hope that she wasn't in the office yet.

His luck took a nasty turn. Amanda answered the phone herself.

"It's Will," he said. "I'm outside the station house."

Amanda never gave anyone the benefit of the doubt, not least of all Will. “Did you just get there?”

“I got in last night.” He felt a slight bit of relief. In the back of his mind, he’d been worried that Sara would call Amanda and ask that Will be taken off the case. She would want the best the GBI had to offer, not a functional illiterate with a suitcase full of dirty laundry.

Amanda’s tone was clipped. “Run it down for me, Will. I haven’t got all day.”

He told her Sara’s story: that she had gotten a call from Julie Smith, then Frank Wallace. That she had gone to the jail and found Tommy Braham dead. He didn’t tell her about Sara’s beef with Lena Adams, instead skipping ahead to the Cross pens that Jeffrey Tolliver had given his staff. “I’m pretty sure the ink cartridge Braham used came from one of those pens.”

“Good luck finding out whose.” Amanda picked at the same thread Will had spotted. “There’s no way of knowing exactly when Tommy Braham died—before or after Frank Wallace called Sara.”

“We’ll see what the autopsy brings. Dr. Linton is going to do it.”

“There’s a bright spot in a bleak day.”

“It’s good to have someone down here who knows what they’re doing.”

“Shouldn’t that be you, Will?”

He let the remark go unanswered.

She asked, “What’s your impression on the Allison Spooner homicide?”

“I’m fifty-fifty. Maybe Tommy Braham did it. Or maybe her killer’s assuming he got away with murder.”

“Well, figure it out and get back here fast, because they’re not going to like you very much if you prove he’s innocent.”

She was right. One thing cops hated more than bad guys was being proven wrong about the bad guys. Will had seen an Atlanta detective nearly go into convulsions as he argued that the DNA exonerating his suspect had to be wrong.

Amanda told him, “I called Macon General this morning. Brad Stephens had to be taken back into surgery. They missed a bleeder the first time.”

“Is he all right?”

“Prognosis is guarded. They’re keeping him sedated for the time being, so he’s not going to talk to anyone anytime soon.”

“I’m pretty sure he’s not going to remember anything useful except that his fellow officers saved his life.”

“Be that as it may, he’s still a cop. You need to go over there at some point and share in the camaraderie. Donate some blood. Buy him a magazine.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“What’s your game plan?”

“I’m going to rattle some cages this morning and see if anything falls out. Faith is working on the paper trail for Julie Smith and Carl Phillips. Talking to them is my priority, but we’ve got to find them first. I want to check out the lake where Spooner was found, then go see the garage where she lived. It feels like her murder is at the center of this. Whatever they’re hiding from me goes back to her death.”

“You don’t think they’re tap-dancing because of the suicide?”

“They might be, but my gut is telling me something else is going on.”

“Ah, your famous women’s intuition.” Amanda never missed an opportunity to

insult him. "What about Adams?"

"I'll keep her close by."

"I met her once. She'll be a hard nut to crack."

"So I hear."

"Loop me in at the end of the day."

She hung up the phone before Will could respond. He rubbed his fingers through his hair, wondering if the damp was from the rain or his own sweat.

For the second time that morning, Will jumped when someone knocked on the window of his car. This time the knocker was an older black man, and he stood at the passenger door, grinning at Will's reaction. He made a rolling motion with his arm. Will leaned over and opened the door.

"Come in out of the rain," Will offered, thinking the man was the first nonwhite face he'd seen since he'd arrived in Grant County. He didn't want to make assumptions, but he would've bet half his paycheck that the African Americans in town didn't make a habit of approaching investigators outside the police station.

The man groaned as he climbed into the bucket seat. Will saw that he walked with a cane. His leg was stiff, and bent awkwardly at the knee. Rain dripped from his heavy coat. A slight mist clung to his salt-and-pepper beard. He wasn't as old as Will had first thought—maybe early sixties. When he spoke, his voice was like sandpaper scratching through gravel.

"Lionel Harris."

"Will Trent."

Lionel took off his glove and they shook hands. "My father was named Will. Short for William."

"Me too," Will told him, though his birth certificate said no such thing.

Lionel pointed up the street. "Daddy worked at the diner for forty-three years. Old Pete closed it down back in oh-one." He rubbed his hand along the leather dashboard. "What year is this?"

Will assumed he meant the car. "Seventy-nine."

"You do all the work yourself?"

"Is it that obvious?"

"Nah," he said, though he'd found the kink in the leather under the handle of the glove box. "You did a good job, son. Real good job."

"I take it you're interested in cars?"

"My wife would tell you I'm too interested for my own good." He glanced pointedly at Will's wedding ring. "You known Sara long?"

"Not too long."

"She took care of my grandson. He had asthma real bad. She'd rush over in the middle of the night to help him. Sometimes she'd still be in her pajamas."

Will tried not to think of Sara in her pajamas, though he imagined from Lionel's story that they were probably not the ones his mind had conjured.

"Sara's from good people." He ran his finger along the trim on the door, which, thankfully, Will had done a better job covering. Lionel seemed to agree. "You learned from your mistakes. Got a good fold on this corner here."

"It took me half the day."

"Worth every minute," he approved.

Will felt foolish even as he asked, "Your son isn't Carl Phillips, is he?"

Lionel gave a deep, satisfied laugh. “ ’Cause he’s black and I’m black—”

“No,” Will interrupted, then, “Well, yes.” He felt uncomfortable even as he explained, “There doesn’t seem to be much of a minority population around here.”

“I guess coming from Atlanta, you’ve had a bit of a culture shock.”

He was right. In Atlanta, Will’s white skin made him a minority. Grant County stood as a stark contrast. “I’m sorry.”

“That’s all right. You aren’t the first person to do that. Carl goes to my church, but I don’t know him other than that.”

Will tried to steer the conversation away from his own stupidity. “How do you know I’m from Atlanta?”

“License plate says Fulton County.”

Will smiled patiently.

“All right, you got me,” Lionel relented. “You’re here to look into that stuff with Tommy?”

“Yes, sir.”

“He was a good kid.”

“You knew him?”

“I saw him in town a lot. He’s the kind of kid got thirty different jobs—mowing lawns, walking dogs, hauling trash, helping people move house. Just about everybody in town knew him.”

“How do people feel about him stabbing Brad Stephens?”

“About how you’d expect. Confused. Angry. Torn between thinking there was some mistake and thinking ...” His voice trailed off. “He was a bit tetchy in the head.”

“He’d never been violent before?”

“No, but you never know. Maybe something set him off, turned on the crazy.”

In Will’s experience, people were either prone to violence or not. He didn’t think Tommy Braham was an exception. “Do you think that’s what happened—he just snapped?”

“I don’t know what to think about nothin’ anymore, and that’s the God’s honest truth.” He gave a weary sigh. “Lord, I feel old today.”

“The weather gets into your bones,” Will agreed. He’d broken his hand many years ago, and every time it got cold like this, his fingers ached. “Have you lived here all your life?”

Lionel smiled again, showing his teeth. “When I was a boy, people called where we lived Colored Town.” He turned to Will. “Can you believe that? Colored Town, and now I live on a street with a bunch of professors.” He gave a deep laugh. “A lot’s changed in fifty years.”

“Has the police force?”

Lionel stared openly at Will, as if he was trying to decide how much to say. Finally, he seemed to make up his mind. “Ben Carver was chief when I left town. I wasn’t the only young black man who thought it was a good idea to leave while the gettin’ was good. Joined the army and got this for my trouble.” He knocked on his leg. There was a hollow sound, and Will realized the man wore a prosthetic. “Laos. Nineteen and sixty-four.” Lionel paused for a minute as if to reflect on the loss. “There was two kinds of living for people back then, just like there was two kinds of law under Chief Carver: one for black and one for white.”

"I heard Carver retired."

Lionel nodded approvingly. "Tolliver."

"Was he a good cop?"

"I never met the man, but I can tell you this: A long while back, my father was working at the diner when a lady professor from the college got killed. Everybody saw a black face and made their assumptions. Chief Tolliver spent the night at Daddy's house just to make sure he woke up the next morning."

"It was that bad?"

"Chief Tolliver was that good." Lionel added, "Allison was a good girl, too."

Will got the feeling that they had finally reached the point of Lionel's impromptu visit. "You knew her?"

"I own the diner now. You believe that?" He shook his head as if he still could not believe it himself. "I came back a few years ago and took it off Pete's hands."

"Is business good?"

"It was slow at first, but most days now we're full up. My wife works the books. Sometimes my sister pitches in but it's better if she doesn't."

"When was the last time you saw Allison?"

"Saturday night. We're closed on Sundays. I guess except for Tommy, I was one of the last people to see her alive."

"How was she?"

"Same as usual. Tired. Glad to be getting off work."

"What sort of person was she?"

His throat worked, and he took a few moments to collect himself before he could continue. "I never hire kids from the college. They don't know how to talk to people. They just know how to type into their computers or their phones. No work ethic and nothing's ever their fault no matter how red-handed you catch 'em. Except for Allison. She was different."

"How so?"

"She knew how to work for a living." He pointed to the open gates at the end of Main Street. "Not a kid in that school knows how to do an honest day's work. This economy is their wake-up call. They're gonna have to learn the hard way that a job is something you earn, not something you're given."

Will asked, "Did you know much about Allison's family?"

"Her mama was dead. She had an aunt she didn't talk about much."

"Boyfriend?"

"She had one, but he never bothered her at work."

"Do you know his name?"

"She never mentioned him except in passing, like I'd ask what she was going to do over the weekend and she'd say she was going to study with her boyfriend."

"He never called her or dropped by? Not even once?"

"Not even once," he confirmed. "She was mindful that I was paying for her time, you see. I never saw her on her cell phone. She never had her friends come in and take up her time. It was work for her, and she knew that she had to take care of business."

"Did she make a good living?"

"Hell no." He laughed at what must have been a surprised look on Will's face. "I don't pay much and my customers are cheap—mostly old men and cops,

sometimes students from the school who think it's funny to run out on the bill. Or, try to run out. Pretty stupid thinking you're gonna stiff the check in a room full of cops."

"Did she carry a purse or book bag with her?"

"She had this pink book bag with a tassel on the zipper. Left it in her car when she was at work. Except her wallet. She wasn't one'a them primpin' girls, can't stay away from a mirror."

"Was there anyone suspicious hanging around her? Customers who were too attentive?"

"I would've taken care of that myself. Not that I'd need to. That girl was street-smart. She knew how to take care of herself."

"Did she carry a weapon? Maybe pepper spray or a pocket knife?"

"Not that I ever saw." He held up his hands. "Now, don't get the impression she was hard. She was a real sweet girl, one'a them who just wanted to go along to get along. She didn't take to confrontation, but she stood up for herself when it mattered."

"Had her attitude changed lately?"

"She seemed a little more stressed than usual. She asked me a couple of times could she study when we were slow. Don't get me wrong—I'm an easy man to work for so long as you do your job. I let her crack open her books when we weren't busy. I made sure she had a hot meal before she went home."

"Do you know what kind of car she drove?"

"Old Dodge Daytona with Alabama plates. You remember those? Based on the Chrysler G platform. Front-wheel drive, kind of low to the ground."

"Four door?"

"Hatchback. The pistons were blown. She kept the trunk tied down with a bungee cord. I think it's a '92, '93." He tapped his head. "Mind ain't as good as it used to be."

"What color?"

"Red, you could say. Mostly it's primer and rust. Spits out smoke from the tailpipe every time she cranks it."

"Where did she park?"

"Behind the diner. I checked this morning. It's not there."

"Did she ever walk home from work?"

"Sometimes when the weather was good, but it ain't been good in a long while, and she wasn't making her way home." He pointed behind them. "The lake's back there. Behind the station. Behind the diner." He pointed across the street. "When she walked home, she always went that way, out the front door."

"Do you know Gordon Braham?"

"I believe he works for the power company. He also dates the woman who works at the five and dime across from the diner. They come in for lunch every couple'a three days."

"You seem to know a lot about people."

"This is a small town, Mr. Trent. Everybody knows a lot about everybody else. That's why we live here. Cheaper than cable TV."

"Who do you think killed Allison?"

Lionel didn't seem surprised by the question, but he gave the expected answer. "Police say it was Tommy Braham."

"What do you say?"

He looked at his watch. "I say I'd better go fire up the grill before the breakfast crowd comes in." He put his hand on the door, but Will stopped him.

"Mr. Harris, if you think somebody—"

"I don't know what to think," he admitted. "If Tommy didn't do it, then why'd he stab Brad? And why'd he kill himself?"

"You don't think he did it." Will wasn't asking a question.

Lionel gave another weary sigh. "I guess I'm a bit like old Chief Carver. There's good people and there's bad people. Allison was good. Tommy was good. Good people can do bad things, but not that bad."

He started to leave again.

"Can I ask you—" Will waited for him to turn back around. "Why did you come to talk to me?"

"Because I knew Frank wouldn't be knocking on my door. Not that I've been able to tell you much, but I wanted to say something on the girl's behalf. She ain't got nobody speaking up for her right now. It's all about Tommy and why'd he do it, not about Allison and what a good girl she was."

"Why do you think Chief Wallace wouldn't want to talk to you?"

"Meet the new boss, same as the old boss."

Will knew he didn't mean Jeffrey Tolliver. "Ben Carver?"

"Frank and Ben—they were cut from the same cloth. White cloth, if you catch my drift."

"I think I do."

Lionel still had his hand on the door handle. "When I got back to town after Daddy died, I saw a lot of people had changed. On the outside, I'm talking—not on the inside. You gotta go through a special kind of hell or a special kind of love to change who you are inside. Outside's a whole different story." He rubbed his beard, probably thinking about the gray in it. "Now, Miss Sara, she got prettier. Her daddy Mr. Eddie got more hair sprouting out of his eyebrows. My sister got older and fatter, which ain't never a good combination for a woman."

"And Frank?"

"He got careful," Lionel said. "I may not be living in Colored Town anymore, but I still remember what it feels like to have that man's foot on my neck." He pulled the handle on the door. "You get you a heat gun and work it just the tiniest little bit around that leather on your glove box and you'll be able to get that kink out." He picked up his leg so he could get out of the car. "Just a tiny bit, though. Too much heat, and you'll burn a hole right through." He stared his meaning into Will. "Not too much heat, son."

"I appreciate your advice."

Lionel struggled to get out of the Porsche, finally gripping the roof and pulling himself up. He steadied himself on the cane and held out his hand, giving Will a gymnast's finish and a "tah-dah," before gently closing the door.

Will watched Lionel lean heavily on the cane as he made his way up the street. He stopped in front of the hardware store to talk to a man who was sweeping debris from the sidewalk. The rain had died down, and they seemed to be taking their time. Will imagined they were talking about Allison Spooner and Tommy Braham. In a place as small as Grant County, there wouldn't be anything else to occupy people's minds.

An old Cadillac pulled into the parking lot. Even from a distance, the gospel music hummed in Will's ears. Marla Simms parked her car as far from Will's as she could. She checked her makeup in the mirror, arranged her glasses—did all of the things that made it obvious she was ignoring him—before getting out of the car.

He walked across the lot to meet her, putting as much cheer into his voice as he could manage. "Good morning, Mrs. Simms."

She tossed him a wary look. "No one's here yet."

"I see that." He held up his briefcase. "I thought I'd go ahead and get set up. If you wouldn't mind bringing me the evidence from the lake and anything collected from Tommy Braham's person?"

Marla didn't bother to acknowledge him as she threw back the bolt on the door. She turned on the lights and walked into the lobby. Again, she leaned over the gate and buzzed herself through. Will caught the door before it latched closed.

"Cold in here," Will said. "Something wrong with the furnace?"

"The furnace is fine," she said defensively.

"Is it new?"

"Do I look like I work for the furnace company?"

"Mrs. Simms, I'd be lying if I didn't say that you look like you know everything that goes on in this station, if not the entire town."

She made a grumbling noise as she took the carafe from the coffeemaker.

"Did you know Tommy Braham?"

"Yes."

"What was he like?"

"Slow."

"What about Allison Spooner?"

"Not slow."

Will smiled. "I should thank you, Mrs. Simms, for those incident reports you sent to my partner last night. It shows an interesting pattern with Tommy. He'd had some trouble with his temper lately. Is that what you wanted me to know?"

She gave him a look over her glasses, but her mouth stayed closed as she walked to the back of the room. Will watched her push open the heavy steel door. She'd left him alone in the dark.

He went to the fax machine and checked under the table, giving Marla Simms the benefit of the doubt. There were no loose pages underneath, no 911 transcript that had fallen through the cracks. He opened the copier and saw the glass staring back at him. Something sticky was in the center. Will used his thumbnail to pry off the substance, which would transfer to every copy made on the machine. He held it up to the light. Glue, maybe? Gum?

He flicked it into the trashcan. None of the copies Sara had made for him yesterday showed a mark. Maybe someone else had used the machine after her and unwittingly transferred the gum onto the glass.

The office on the side of the squad room was empty, just as he'd thought. Will tried the knob. The door was unlocked. He went in and opened the blinds, giving him a nice view of the desks where the detectives sat. There were nail holes in the walls. In the slim ray of light coming through the outside window, he could see the shadows where photographs had once been. The desk was

empty but for a telephone. All the drawers were cleaned out. The chair squeaked when he sat down.

If he was the betting type, Will would have put ten bucks on this being Jeffrey Tolliver's old office.

He opened his briefcase and set out his files. Finally, the overhead lights flickered on. Will saw Marla through the glass in the wall. She stared at him, mouth open. With her tight bun and dirty glasses, she looked like one of those beady old ladies from a Gary Larson comic strip. Will plastered a smile on his face, tossed her a wave. Marla gripped the handle of the carafe so hard he could almost feel her desire to smash the glass into his face.

Will reached into his pocket and found his digital recorder. Every cop in the world kept a spiral notebook in which to record details of their investigations. Will did not have that luxury, but he'd learned to compensate.

He checked the window for Marla before putting the recorder to his ear and pressing play. The volume was low, and he heard Faith's voice reading Tommy Braham's confession. Will had not wasted the entire night worrying about his schoolgirl crush on Sara Linton. He'd prepared himself for the day by reading every single word in the reports and listening to Tommy Braham's confession over and over again until he had memorized almost every word. He listened to the whole thing again in the office, the cadence of Faith's voice so familiar that he could have spoken along with her.

Her tone was dispassionate, offering no inflection. "I was in Allison's apartment. This was last night. I don't know what time. Pippy, my dog, was sick. It was after I took her to the doctor. Allison said she would have sex with me. We started to have sex. She changed her mind. I got mad. I had a knife on me. I stabbed her once in the neck. I took the extra chain and lock and drove her to the lake. I wrote the note so people would think she had killed herself. Allison was sad. I thought that would be reason enough."

There were murmurs in the squad room. Will glanced up to find a couple of uniformed cops staring at him in disbelief. One of them started toward the office, probably to confront him, but his partner stopped him.

Will leaned back in the chair, hearing the squeak again. He took out his cell phone and called Faith. She picked up on the fourth ring. Her hello was more like a grunt.

"Did I wake you up?"

"It's seven-thirty in the morning. Of course you woke me up."

"I can call back."

"Just gimme a minute." He heard her moving around. She yawned so loudly that Will felt his own jaw twitching to open. "I pulled up some info on Lena Adams."

"And?"

She yawned again. "Let me get to my laptop."

Will couldn't stop his own yawn. "I'm sorry I got you out of bed."

"You've got me until four this afternoon. That's when I meet my doctor at the hospital."

Will started talking so she wouldn't explain the procedure again. "That's great, Faith. I guess your mom is driving you. She must be excited. What about your brother? Have you called him?"

"You can shut up now. I'm at my computer." He heard keys being tapped. "Salena Marie Adams," Faith said, probably reading from the woman's personnel file. "Detective first grade. Thirty-five years old. Five-four and a hundred and twenty pounds." Faith mumbled a curse. "God, that's enough to make me hate her right there."

"What about her history?"

"She was raped."

Will was taken aback by her abruptness. He'd been expecting date of birth, maybe some commendations. Sara had said that she suspected Lena had been raped by her ex-boyfriend, but he'd been under the impression no formal charges had been filed. He asked Faith, "How do you know that?"

"The case came up when I cross-referenced her file. You really should Google more."

"When did it happen?"

"Ten years ago." He heard her fingers pecking the keyboard. "Her file is pretty clean. She's worked some interesting cases. You remember that south Georgia pedophile ring awhile back? She and Tolliver broke it open."

"Does she have any black marks?"

"Small-town forces don't air their dirty laundry on paper," Faith reminded him. "She took some time off the job six years ago. She worked security at the college less than a year, then went back on the job. That's all I've got on her. Have you found anything else?"

"I had an interesting conversation with the man who runs the diner this morning."

"What did he say?"

"Not a whole lot. Allison was a good kid. Hard worker. He didn't know much about her personal life."

"Do you think he killed her?"

"He's sixty-something years old with a fake leg."

"A real fake leg?"

Will thought about Lionel knocking on the prosthesis, the hollow sound. "I'll see if I can confirm it, but he was putting on quite an act if the leg is real."

"You never know with those small towns. Ed Gein was a babysitter."

Faith was never one to miss an opportunity to compare a kindly old man to one of the twentieth century's most notorious serial killers.

She said, "Spoooner's background check didn't offer much, either. She's got a bank account with eighteen dollars and change. She must be a cash-and-carry gal. The only checks she's written in the last six months are to the college and the campus bookstore. The statements are delivered to the Taylor Drive address. Other than that, she's got no credit cards. No utilities in her name. No credit history. No cell phone on record. No car."

"The old guy at the diner says she drove a Dodge Daytona with Alabama plates."

"It must be registered in someone else's name. Do you think the locals know about it?"

"I don't know. My source also says that Allison had a pink book bag she kept in the car when she was working."

"Hold on a second." Faith was obviously doing something on her computer.

"All right, I'm not finding any BOLOs for the car coming out of Grant County or any towns in the vicinity." If Frank Wallace knew about Allison's car, he would have posted a "be on the lookout" to all neighboring counties.

Will said, "Maybe they already know where the car is but they don't want me to find it."

"I'm posting a BOLO around the state right now. Your chief will have to tell his boys to look for it during their briefing this morning."

"It's an old car. Allison's lived here a couple of years without changing the plates."

"College town. Wouldn't be odd to have cars with out-of-state tags. The only reason not to register a car is because it's not insured," Faith pointed out. "I'd buy that. This girl was living on the margins. She barely made a blip on the radar."

Will saw that the squad room was filling up. The crowd of cops had gotten bigger. A more fearful man might call them a growing mob. They kept stealing looks at Will. Marla was pouring them coffee, glaring at him over her shoulder. And then, as if on cue, they all looked toward the front door. Will wondered if Frank Wallace had deigned to make an appearance, but quickly saw this was not the case. A woman with olive skin and curly, shoulder-length brown hair joined the group. She was the smallest in the bunch, but they parted for her like the Red Sea.

Will told Faith, "I think Detective Adams has decided to grace us with her presence."

"How does she look?"

Lena had spotted him. Her eyes burned with hatred.

He said, "She looks like she wants to rip out my throat with her teeth."

"Be careful. You know you have a weakness for bitchy, spiteful women."

Will didn't bother to argue. Lena Adams had the same color skin and hair as Angie, though she was obviously of Latin descent, whereas Angie's origins were vaguely Mediterranean. Lena was shorter, more athletic. There was none of Angie's womanliness about her—Lena was too cop for that—but she was an attractive woman. She also seemed to share Angie's talent for stirring things up. Several of the cops were staring at Will with open hostility now. It wouldn't be long before someone grabbed a pitchfork.

Faith asked, "What's this email from you?" She answered her own question. "Julie Smith. All right, I'll see if I can trace the number. The warrant for Tommy Braham's phone records shouldn't be a problem considering he's dead, but I may need an official cause of death before we get access."

Will kept his eyes on Lena. She was saying something to the group. Probably telling them to check their weapons. "Can you fudge that a little? Julie Smith told Sara that Tommy texted her from jail. The transcript might help find out who she is. Maybe Amanda can call in some favors."

"Oh, great. Just who I want to talk to first thing in the morning."

"Can you get her to rush through a search warrant for the garage, too? I want to show the locals what proper procedure looks like."

"I'm sure she'll fall over herself trying to accommodate your requests." Faith gave a heavy groan. "Anything else you want me to ask her?"

"Tell her I want my testicles back."

"They're probably already at the bronzer."

Lena took off her jacket and threw it on a desk. "I need to go." Will hung up the phone just as the detective stomped toward the office.

Will stood up. He gave one of his winning smiles. "You must be Detective Adams. I'm so glad to finally meet you."

She stared at the hand he offered. He thought for a minute she might rip it off.

"Is there something wrong, Detective?"

She was obviously so angry she could barely speak. "This office—"

"I hope you don't mind," Will interrupted. "It was empty, and I want to make sure I stay out of your way." His hand was still extended between them. "We're not to that point yet where you can't shake my hand. Are we, Detective?"

"We passed that point the minute you sat behind that desk."

Will dropped his hand. "I was expecting Chief Wallace."

"Interim Chief," she corrected, just as raw as Sara on the subject. "Frank's at the hospital with Brad."

"I heard Detective Stephens had a rough night, but he seems all right this morning."

She didn't answer him, which was just as well. Her accent was full of south Georgia twang, and anger made her words blend like cake batter.

Will indicated the chair. "Please have a seat."

"I'll stand."

"Hope you don't mind if I sit." The chair squeaked as he settled back in it. Will steepled his fingers together. He noticed that a pen was clipped to Lena's breast pocket. It was silver, a Cross just like the one Larry Knox had clipped to his shirt last night. Will glanced at the group of officers who were milling around the coffee machine. They all had pens clipped to their chest pockets, too.

Will smiled. "I'm sure your chief already told you why I'm here."

He saw her eye twitch. "Tommy."

"Right, Tommy Braham, and by extension, Allison Spooner. I hope we can wrap this up quickly. I'm sure we'd all rather have this off our plate going into Thanksgiving."

"This good-guy bullshit isn't really going to work with me."

"We both have badges, Detective. Don't you think you should try to cooperate so we can get to the truth of this matter?"

"You know what I think?" She crossed her arms high on her chest. "I think you're down here where you don't belong, sleeping in places you have no right, and trying to get a lot of good people into trouble for shit that's beyond their control."

There was a loud knock at the open door. Marla Simms stood ramrod straight, a medium-sized cardboard box gripped between her hands. She walked to the desk and dropped the box with a thud in front of Will.

"Thank you," he told her retreating back. "Mrs. Simms?" She didn't turn, but she stopped. "If you don't mind, I need the audiotape of the 911 call reporting Allison Spooner's alleged suicide."

She left without acknowledging the request.

Will looked over the top of the box, eyeing the contents. There were several plastic evidence bags, obviously taken from the scene of Allison Spooner's death. A pair of white sneakers was in one. Streaks of mud went up the sides and stuck

into the treads.

The ring and watch mentioned in Lena's report were in the other bag. He studied the ring, which was cheap, the sort of thing you gave a girl when you were fifteen and spending fifty dollars on a piece of jewelry from the locked display at Walgreens was a big deal.

He held up the ring. "I gave my wife one of these when we were kids."

Lena's nasty look resembled the same one Angie had shown Will when he'd given her the ring.

He pulled another bag out of the box. There was a closed wallet inside. Will managed to pry it open through the plastic. He found a photo of an older woman beside a young girl and another photograph of an orange cat. There were some bills in the cash compartment. Allison Spooner's student ID and driver's license were tucked in the back sleeves.

Will looked at the girl's picture. Faith had guessed right. Allison was very pretty. She also looked younger than her given age. Maybe it was her size. She seemed delicate, almost fragile. He flipped back to the photograph of the older woman, realizing now that the girl beside her was Allison Spooner. The picture had obviously been taken a few years ago. Allison looked like a teenager.

He asked Lena, "Is this all you found in the wallet?" He listed it out for her. "Two photos, forty bucks, the license, and student ID?"

She was staring at the open wallet in his hands. "Frank catalogued it."

Not exactly an answer, but Will knew that he'd need to choose his battles. He saw there was one more evidence bag in the box. He guessed it contained the contents of Tommy Braham's pockets. "Gum, thirty-eight cents, and a metal Monopoly game piece of a car." He looked back up at Lena. "He didn't have a wallet on him?"

"No."

"Cell phone?"

"Is there one in the bag?"

Her combative answers were telling him more than she realized. Will asked, "What about his clothes and shoes? Any blood on them? Any stains?"

"Per protocol for a suicide in custody, Frank sent them to the lab. Your lab."

"The Central GBI lab in Dry Branch?"

She nodded.

"What about the sheath?"

She seemed confused.

"In Tommy's confession, he said he had a knife on him when he killed Allison. I imagine he had a sheath on his belt? A knife sheath?"

She shook her head. "He probably got rid of it."

"He doesn't mention in his confession what kind of knife he used."

"No, he doesn't."

"Did you find any knives in the house where Tommy lived?"

"We can't search his house without a warrant or permission from his father, who's the owner of the property."

Well, at least she knew the law. That she was choosing to follow it now was a bit of a mystery. "Are you assuming Tommy used the same knife to stab Detective Stephens that he used to kill Allison Spooner?"

Lena was silent for a few seconds. She had conducted enough interviews to

recognize what a corner felt like when it was pressing against your back. "I've found in my career that it's better not to make assumptions about what a suspect will and will not do."

"That's a valuable lesson for any officer," he allowed. "Any reason why the Spooner evidence wasn't sent to Central?"

She hesitated again. "I assume because the case is closed."

"You're sure about that?"

"Tommy ran from the police. He stabbed a police officer. He confessed to the crime. He killed himself because he couldn't take the guilt. I'm not sure how you do it in Atlanta, but down here we generally stop throwing money at an investigation once it's closed."

Will rubbed the back of his neck. "I really wish you'd sit down. This is going to take a while and I don't think I can keep looking up at you without getting a crick."

"What's going to take a while?"

"Detective Adams, perhaps you don't comprehend the import of this investigation. I'm here to interview you about the death of a prisoner who was in your custody, in your jail, in your town. In addition to that, a young woman was murdered. A police officer was badly wounded. This isn't going to be a quick chat over coffee and doughnuts, not least of all because I've been advised not to take any food from y'all that isn't sealed in a container." He smiled. She didn't smile back. "Would you please sit down so we can talk to each other like rational people?" She still didn't move, and Will took it a step further. "If you'd rather go to one of the interrogation rooms instead of being in your dead chief's office, then I'd be more than happy to accommodate you."

Her jaw tightened. They had a long, drawn-out staring match that Will nearly lost. Lena was hard to look at. Her pain and exhaustion showed on every line of her face. Her eyes were swollen, the whites shot through with red. Her hand was resting on the chair in front of her, yet still she swayed, as if her knees wanted to give out.

Finally, she said, "Yes."

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, I think you're the enemy." Still, she pulled out the chair and sat down.

"I appreciate your candor."

"Whatever." She kept opening and closing her fist. He saw two flesh-colored Band-Aids wrapped around the palm of her hand. Her fingers looked swollen.

He asked, "That happen yesterday?"

She didn't answer.

Will took a red folder out of his briefcase and left it unopened on the desk. Lena glanced down nervously. "Would you like a lawyer present?"

"Do I need one?"

"You should know better than to ask an investigator for legal advice, Detective. How about your union rep?"

She gave a short, sharp laugh. "We don't have unions down here. We barely have uniforms."

He should have remembered. "Do I need to remind you of your Miranda rights?"

"No."

"Should I mention that lying to a state investigator during the course of an active investigation is a felony that can result in fines and imprisonment up to five years?"

"Didn't you just do that?"

"I guess I did. Where was she stabbed?"

He'd caught her off guard. "What?"

"Allison Spooner. Where was she stabbed?"

"Here." She put her hand to the back of her neck, her fingers resting a few inches from the spine.

"Was that the only wound?"

She opened her mouth, then closed it. Finally, she answered, "As you said, Frank noticed ligature marks around her wrist."

"Did you notice them?"

"The body was in the water for a long time. I'm not sure what I saw except for the knife wound in the neck."

The detail bothered him, mostly because it was the first point where Frank Wallace's story didn't dovetail with Lena's. "Have you found Spooner's car?"

"She doesn't have one."

"That strikes me as odd."

"It's a college town. Kids walk everywhere or drive their scooters." Lena shrugged. "If they need to go somewhere, they can usually bum a ride."

"Could Allison have a car without you knowing about it?"

"Not at the school. They'll tow you if you take up two spaces. They're really good about policing the campus. And, there aren't a lot of places around town to ditch a car, either. I can put out a BOLO at the morning briefing if you want, but it's a dead end. This isn't Atlanta. If people see abandoned cars, they call the police."

Will studied Lena, trying to read any deceit. "What about Allison's boss at the diner? Have you talked to him?"

"Lionel Harris. Frank said he talked to him last night. He doesn't know anything."

Either Frank had lied or Lena was making things up as she went along.

Will asked, "How does Mr. Harris look for the murder?"

"He's got one leg and he's older than Jesus."

"I'll take that as an unlikely." Will opened the red folder. The photocopy of Tommy Braham's confession was on top. He saw a flash of recognition in Lena's eyes. "Take me through it."

"Which part?"

He knew she was expecting him to get straight to the point—the stabbing, what went down outside the garage. He went the opposite direction, hoping to throw her off. "Let's start with you bringing Tommy Braham into the station and work our way forward. Did he say anything in the car?"

"No."

Will hadn't yet seen the booking pictures or the crime scene photos Sara had taken of Tommy Braham in the cell, but he knew that a cop had been stabbed while two other able-bodied officers were at the scene. He hazarded a guess about what happened next. "What condition was Tommy in at this time?"

She stared at him blankly.

"Did he fall down a couple of times during the arrest?"

Again, she took her time. "You'll have to ask Frank about that. I was tending to Brad."

"You saw Tommy in the car. What kind of state was he in?"

Lena pulled a spiral-bound notebook out of her back pocket. She slowly flipped to the pages she wanted. Will saw the paper was taped back into the notebook and assumed these were the originals Sara had photocopied last night.

Lena cleared her throat. "I brought in the suspect, Thomas Adam Braham, at approximately eight-thirty yesterday morning." Lena scrutinized him. "You're not going to take notes?"

"Why, do you want to let me borrow your pen?"

Her composure cracked just a tiny bit, and Will saw what he had been looking for from the minute Lena walked into the room. No matter what she thought about Tommy Braham, she was upset about his death. Not upset because it might get her into trouble, but upset because he was a human being who had been in her care.

Will said, "I've already read your notes, Detective. Tell me the parts that aren't on the pages."

She started picking at the Band-Aid.

"Who did the death notifications?"

"I did."

"On both Spooner and Braham?"

She nodded. "Elba, where Allison's from, is a small town. The detective I talked to went to school with her. He says her mother died eight years ago. The father's unknown. There's an aunt, Sheila McGhee, but she's not home much. She works for a crew that's remodeling roach motels along the Panhandle. The detective's going to try to track her down. I left a message on her answering machine, but she won't hear it until she gets home or calls to check her messages."

She was actually sounding like a detective now. Will asked, "No cell phone?"

"Not that I can find."

"Was there an address book in Allison's apartment?"

"We didn't have time to do a search." Her tone became clipped again. "A lot was going on yesterday. My partner was bleeding to death in the street."

"I'd like to know when Ms. McGhee returns your call."

She nodded.

"What about Tommy's relations?"

"There's just his dad, Gordon. I talked to him early this morning, told him what happened."

"How did he take it?"

"No father wants to hear that his son's confessed to murder."

"How did he take the suicide?"

"About how you'd expect." Lena looked down at her notes, though Will could tell she was buying time to collect herself. "Gordon's driving up from Florida right now. I don't know how long that'll take. Seven, maybe eight hours."

Will wondered where Frank Wallace was in all of this, and why the hardest parts of the case had fallen to Lena. He asked, "Did you know Allison Spooner?"

"Half the town did. She worked at the diner down the street."

"Did you know her?"

"I never met her."

"You don't go to the diner?"

"Why does that matter?" She wasn't looking for an answer. "Tommy laid it all out. You've got his confession right in front of you. He said that he wanted to have sex with her. She didn't. So he killed her."

"How long did it take for him to confess?"

"He dicked around for about an hour, then I got it out of him."

"Did he offer an alibi? Initially, I mean."

"He said he was at the vet. He's got this dog, Pippy. She swallowed a sock or something. Tommy took her to the emergency vet over on Conford. The office staff can't vouch for him being there the entire time."

"Does he have a car?"

"A green Chevy Malibu. It's at the shop. Tommy said the starter's been acting up. He dropped the keys in the lockbox at Earnshaw's yesterday morning."

Will hadn't been expecting that. "Earnshaw?"

"Sara's uncle."

"Is there security footage of the lot?"

"No, but I called the garage. The car is there." She shrugged. "Tommy could've left it there after he killed Allison."

"Have you searched the car?"

"I planned on doing that today." Her tone indicated that Will was the major obstacle standing between her and doing her job.

Will didn't back down. "How did Tommy know Allison?"

"She rented space from his dad—a converted garage apartment." Lena looked at her watch.

"What was Tommy like?"

"Stupid," she told him. "Slow in his thinking. I'm sure Sara's already told you all about it."

"According to Dr. Linton, Tommy's IQ was around eighty. He wasn't bright, but he held down a job at the bowling alley. He was a good kid. Good except for the trouble he'd been in lately."

"I'd call murder a bit more than trouble."

"I was referring to the incident reports."

She hid her surprise well, but he could see the flicker of a question in her eyes.

"There are three reports detailing altercations over the last month. Mrs. Simms was kind enough to provide them." She remained silent, so he asked, "You knew about them, right?"

Still, Lena didn't respond. Will slid the incident reports across the desk so she could see them.

She skimmed the summaries. "Small problems. He obviously had a temper."

"Who told you to arrest Tommy for Allison's murder?"

"Frank—" She looked like she wanted to take back the word. "Frank and I discussed it. It was a joint decision."

At least he knew what she looked like when she was lying. The bad news was that her lying face looked a lot like her honest one. "When did you first hear there was a body in the lake?"

"Brad called me around three yesterday morning. I woke everybody else up, started the investigation."

"Have you talked to any of Allison's teachers at school?"

"They're all off for Thanksgiving break. I've got phone numbers for them, but I haven't made any calls yet. Most of them are local. They're not going anywhere. I was going to track them down this morning, but ..." She held out her arms, indicating the space between them.

"What else were you going to track down?" He listed out her plans so far. "Talk to the teachers. Maybe talk to the office staff at the vet. Look at Tommy's car. Try to track down Allison's known associates. I guess you'd get that through the school, maybe Lionel Harris?"

She shrugged. "Maybe."

"Were you planning on talking to Tommy again? Had he lived, I mean."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I wanted to get his confession on tape. He was a compelling witness against himself."

"But everything else made sense to you—his motivations, stabbing her in the neck?"

"There were things I wanted to clear up. Obviously, I wanted to find the murder weapon. I assume it's in his garage somewhere. Or his car. He must have taken Allison to the lake. There would have been trace evidence. Stop me if any of this reminds you of something you might have read in a textbook when you were in GBI school."

"That's a good word to use for it—'textbook.'" He pointed out, "Seems like a lot of work for a case you considered closed. Isn't that what you told me a few minutes ago, that it was closed?"

She stared at him again. Will knew she was waiting for him to ask about the 911 call.

He said, "You must be tired."

"I'm fine."

"You've had a pretty tough couple of days." He indicated her field notes. "You got Brad's call around three a.m. yesterday. Suspected suicide. You went to the lake. Found Spooner was dead, possibly murdered. Went to Spooner's house and your boss got hurt, your partner got stabbed. You arrested Tommy. Got his confession. I'm sure you were at the hospital all night."

"What's your point?"

"Was Tommy a malicious person?"

She didn't equivocate. "No."

"Did he show any anger during your interrogation?"

She was silent again, gathering her thoughts. "I don't think he planned to hurt Brad. But he *did* stab him. And he killed Allison, so ..."

"So?"

She crossed her arms again. "Look, we're just going in circles here. What happened to Tommy was bad, but he confessed to killing Allison Spooner. He stabbed my partner. Frank was hurt."

Will carefully weighed her words. She obviously believed Tommy was guilty of killing Allison Spooner. She got sketchier when she talked about Brad

Stephens being stabbed and Frank Wallace getting cut.

Lena checked her watch again. "Are we finished here?"

She was very good at this, but she couldn't keep it up forever. "The lake is behind the station, right?"

"Right."

"Between the college and Lover's Point."

"Not exactly between."

"Do you think I can borrow a jacket?"

"What?"

"A raincoat. Jacket. Whatever you have." Will stood up from the desk. "I'd like for us to go for a walk."

The rain had turned unrelenting, dark clouds rolling across the sky, tossing down buckets of water that all seemed to fall directly on Will's head. He was wearing a police-issue jacket meant for a man with considerably more girth than Will carried. The sleeves hung down past his thumbs. The hood fell into his eyes. The reflective panels on the back and front slapped against him with every step.

Will had always had trouble finding clothes that fit, but usually the opposite was the problem: short cuffs, tight seams stretching against his shoulders. He had been expecting Lena to offer him one of her own coats as a sort of joke. Apparently, she had come up with a better idea. Will stared down at the stitching on the breast pocket as they made their way around the lake. The jacket belonged to Officer Carl Phillips.

He stuck his hands into the pockets as the wind picked up. He could feel some latex gloves, a measuring tape, a plastic pen, and a small flashlight. At least he hoped it was a small flashlight. Despite Lena's worst intentions, the jacket was nice, a North Face rip-off with tons of zippered pockets and enough insulation to keep the wind out. Will had the brand-name version back at home. He hadn't brought it because in Atlanta, cold weather never lasted more than a few days, and even then, the sun came up to burn off the chill. The thought of the jacket hanging in his closet gave him a longing to be back home that surprised him.

Lena stopped, turning back toward the police station. She raised her voice to be heard over the rain. "The college is back there, past the station."

Will guessed they had been walking for about fifteen minutes. He could barely make out a bunch of buildings resting in the curve of the lake just beyond the police station.

Lena said, "There's no reason for Allison to walk this way."

"Where's Lover's Point?"

She pointed in the opposite direction. "That cove about a half mile away."

Will followed the line of her finger to the indentation in the shoreline. The cove was smaller than he'd thought it would be. Or perhaps the distance made it seem that way. Large boulders were scattered along the shore. He imagined people built campfires when the weather was better. It looked like the kind of place a family might pull up a boat to for a long picnic.

"Are we just going to stand here?" Lena had her hands deep in her pockets, head down against the wind. Will didn't need ESP to figure out she didn't want to be out here in the pouring rain. It was so cold by the water that he had to

fight to keep his teeth from chattering.

He asked, "Where are the roads again?"

She gave him a look that said she wasn't going to play this game much longer. "There." She pointed into the distance. "That's the fire road. It hasn't been used in years. We checked it when we pulled the body out of the lake. Nothing's there."

"That's the only egress from here to Lover's Point, right?"

"Like I showed you on the map back at the station."

Will had never been good with maps. "That place over there." He pointed to an area just past the cove. "That's the second road that people normally use to get to the cove, right?"

"Empty, like I told you. We checked it, all right? We're not total morons. We checked for cars. We checked for tire tracks, footprints. We checked both roads and neither one of them showed any signs of use."

Will tried to get his bearings. The sun wasn't doing much to help light the way. The sky was so dark that it could've been nighttime instead of smack in the middle of morning. "Where's the residential area?"

She pointed across the lake. "That's where Sara lives. Her parents. Over here"—she pointed farther along—"all of this shoreline, including where we're standing, belongs to the State Forestry Division."

"Do people take their boats out?"

"There's a dock at the campus for the rowing teams. A lot of the homeowners go boating during the summer. No one would be stupid enough to be out here in this rain."

"Except us." Will put as much cheer into his voice as he could muster. "Let's keep going."

She trudged along ahead of him. Will could see her sneakers were soaked. The running shoes he had found in the back of his car weren't faring much better. Allison's shoes, or at least the ones found near her body, were dirty, but not caked in mud. If she had walked along the shore, the terrain had been a lot harder than the red Georgia clay that was sliding out from under his feet.

Will had checked the weekly weather report last night on his computer. Temperatures had been lower the morning Allison was found, but the same rain they were seeing now had been pounding down the night before. It was a good time to kill somebody. Trace evidence on the shore would be lost. The cold water would make guessing when the murder occurred next to impossible. Except for the 911 caller, no one would have known there was a body in the lake.

Lena slipped in the mud. Will reached out, catching her before she fell into the water. She was so light that he could almost pick her up with one hand.

"Christ." She braced her hand against a tree. She was breathing hard. He realized she had been walking fast to keep a few paces between them.

Will asked, "Are you okay?"

She pushed away from the tree, a look of determination on her face. Will watched her feet as she picked her way across the large roots and fallen branches that riddled the shoreline. He had no way of knowing whether or not Allison had made her way to Lover's Point along this same route. His goal was to get Lena Adams out of the station, out of her element, so that she would talk to

him. Between the pounding rain and the rough going, he was thinking that it might be wise to set the bar lower. For instance, he could aim not to let them both freeze to death.

Lena was so certain that Tommy Braham had killed Allison Spooner—just as certain as Sara was that Tommy had not. Will felt caught in the middle, and was mindful that it would be wrong to let either woman influence his thinking. He supposed for Lena the question of Tommy's innocence carried with it a lot more guilt than she wanted to shoulder. To believe otherwise would mean that the kid had killed himself for nothing. That she had given him the means—and the motivation—to take his life. For Sara's part, admitting Tommy was a murderer would mean admitting that Lena wasn't as ruthless as she wanted to believe.

Will didn't feel the rain let up so much as hear it. The constant tapping of water against leaves died down to a gentle whisper. He heard a bird, a bunch of crickets. Up ahead, a large tree blocked the path. Thick roots jutted into the air, earth dripping from the tendrils. Lena lifted herself up and over. Will followed her, looking around, trying to get his bearings again. They were near the fire road. At least he thought they were.

"There," she said, pointing to a pile of stacked logs. "That's the end of the road." She took off her hood. Will followed suit. Two strips of earth about the width of the front end of a car lined the road for about ten feet, then gave way to thick forest. He understood why Lena was convinced the road was untraveled. You'd need a bulldozer to get through.

She told him, "The road on the other side is the one most people use, but it's about a hundred yards west of the cove. I told you, we had to clear out a path to get the emergency vehicles back here."

Will guessed they hadn't been looking for tire tracks on the way to a suicide. They had probably destroyed any evidence of another car out by the cove. He asked, "If Allison didn't have a car, how did she get here?"

Lena stared at him. "Tommy brought her here."

"But you just said you checked for cars."

"He had a scooter. He could've used that."

Will agreed, but he couldn't see Tommy balancing a dead body on the handlebars while he maneuvered his way through the forest. "Where was she before Tommy killed her?"

"Home, waiting to be killed." She stamped her feet to fight the cold. "All right. The school library closed at noon on Sunday. She could've been there."

"What about work?"

"The diner's closed on Sunday."

"Would Allison go this way to get home?"

Lena shook her head. "She would go through the woods across from the station. She'd be home in ten minutes."

At least she was being honest about that. Lionel Harris had told Will the same thing. He asked, "So, why was Allison here?"

Lena dug her hands into her pockets as the breeze picked up.

"Detective?"

"She was here because Tommy brought her here." She started walking again, trudging through the mud. Her shoes made a sucking sound with every step.

Will's stride was twice Lena's. He caught up with her easily. "Let's profile our

killer.”

She snorted a laugh. “You believe in that shit?”

“Not really, but we’ve got some time on our hands.”

“This is stupid.” She slipped again, but caught herself. “Are you really going to make me walk all the way to the cove?”

If Will could make her do anything, it would be for her to tell the truth. That didn’t seem to be an option, so he said, “Let’s do the profile.”

“Sure,” she muttered, pushing forward. “He’s a retarded kid between the ages of nineteen and nineteen and a half who drives a green Chevy Malibu and lives with his father.”

“Let’s take Tommy out of this for just a minute.”

She gave him a wary look.

Will asked, “What took place?”

Lena picked her way around another fallen tree.

“What took place?” he repeated.

She let her reluctance hang on every word. “You mean the murder?”

“Right. What happened?”

“Allison Spooner was stabbed in the neck Sunday night or early Monday morning.”

“Was it messy?”

She shrugged, but then said, “Probably. There’s all kinds of stuff in the neck. Arteries and veins. There would’ve been a lot of blood, which explains why Tommy had a bucket and sponge at Allison’s apartment. He was trying to clean up the mess.”

“Why did it happen?”

She laughed, incredulous. “This is profiling?”

Will’s version, at least. He didn’t share Lena’s certainty. She was so sure she was right about Tommy Braham that she hadn’t considered the possibility that a savage killer might be sharpening his knife for the next victim. “Why did the killer decide to kill? Anger? Opportunity? Money?”

“He killed her because she wouldn’t have sex with him. Did you actually read his confession?”

“I thought we were going to take Tommy out of this.” She shook her head, and Will tried again, “Just humor me, Detective. Let’s say there’s some mystery killer out there who wanted Allison dead. Other than Tommy Braham.”

“That’s quite a fantasy considering he admitted to doing it.”

He took her elbow to help her over a large puddle. “Did the murderer bring the weapon to the scene?”

Lena seemed to consider the question. “Maybe. He also had the cinder blocks, the chain, and lock.”

Will assumed the blocks and chain had been planted at the scene ahead of time, but now didn’t seem like a good time to bring up the theory. “So, this was premeditated.”

“Or, these were things lying around his house.” She added, “On Taylor Drive.”

Will didn’t rise to the bait. If Allison was killed at the lake rather than the garage, then Lena’s whole theory about Tommy’s guilt started to break down. He asked, “Was the killer angry?”

“The wound in her neck is pretty violent.”

"But not furious. That's controlled. Deliberate."

"He probably freaked out when he got a mouthful of blood back in his face." She jumped over a puddle. "What else?"

"Let's look at what we know: Our killer is organized. Not opportunistic. Has good knowledge of the area. He knows Allison. He drives a car."

She nodded. "I'd buy that."

"Go over the sequence of events."

Lena stopped. They were about thirty feet away from the cove. "All right. Tommy, or your mystery guy, kills Allison, brings her here." She squinted her eyes. "Probably he lays her down on the shore. He wraps the chains around her waist, ties her to the cinder blocks, then tosses her into the water."

"Tosses her how?"

Lena stared at the cove. Will could almost hear her mind working. "He would have to carry her. She was found about fifteen feet out in the water, where the bottom drops off. The cinder blocks were heavy. Maybe he would've floated her out to the water, then bolted the chain and blocks around her. That makes more sense. There's no way she could have been thrown in the water from the shore and ended up there."

Will kept leading her along. "So, the killer walks her into the water, then chains her down. It was cold that night."

"He'd need waders or something. He'd have to get back into his car to drive away. What's the point of disposing of the body in water if you're going to take the lake with you back into the car?"

"Being in the water wouldn't necessarily be a bad idea."

"Right. He would've been covered in blood."

"Our killer didn't want the body found. He walked her out to the deep end so she'd stay there. He weighted her down."

Lena was silent again, but he knew she was too smart not to be thinking the same thing he was.

Will said it for her. "*Someone* wanted the body found. There was the call to 911."

"Maybe one of Tommy's neighbors saw something."

"And followed him to the lake, watched him dump the body, and ..."

"You think he had an accomplice?"

"What do you think?"

"I think at best we've got a material witness. We'll need to talk to her at some point, but why does this matter when the guy who admitted to killing Allison is dead?"

Will looked around. They were standing in mud up to their ankles. The earth was darker here, turning almost black as it dipped into the water. Allison's shoes had black mud on them, not red clay.

Will asked, "Did Tommy mention whether or not Allison had a boyfriend?"

"Don't you think we'd be talking to him right now if he had?"

Will saw a fat squirrel scamper up a tree, tail twitching. Several twigs had been snapped in two. The ground covering was bent down. He heard a car in the distance. "Is there a road close by?"

"About a mile out." She pointed in the direction of the noise. "There's a divided highway."

“Any residences?”

Lena pressed her lips together. She wouldn't look at him.

“Detective?”

She stared down at the ground, knocked some mud off her shoe. “Tommy lived out that way.”

“So did Allison Spooner.” Will glanced back at the lake. The water was churning. The wind coming off the water was like ice against his skin. “Have you ever heard the name Julie Smith?”

Lena shook her head. “Who is she?”

“Did Tommy mention any friends? Either his or Allison's?”

“That wasn't the focus of the interview.” Her tone was terse. “I was trying to get him to confess to murder, not give me his life story.”

Will kept his eyes on the lake. He was looking at this the wrong way. Their killer was smart. He knew that water would get rid of trace evidence. He knew to walk the body into the deeper part of the lake. He had probably lured Allison out here after careful deliberation. The wet terrain, the mud and underbrush, all would serve to help cover his tracks.

Will rolled up the legs of his jeans. His shoes were already soaked, so he didn't bother to take them off before walking into the lake. The cold water sloshed into his sneakers.

“What are you doing?”

He went out a few feet and scanned the shoreline, studying the trees, the underbrush.

Lena had her hands on her hips. “Are you crazy? You're going to get hypothermia.”

Will studied each tree, each branch, each section of weeds and moss. His feet were completely numb by the time he found what he was looking for. He walked toward a large oak that was leaning away from the shore. Its knotty roots coiled into the lake like an open fist. At first, Will had thought he was seeing a shadow on the bark, but then he remembered you had to actually have sun or some other source of light to cast a shadow.

Will stood in front of the tree, his shoes sinking into the silt at the bottom of the water. The tree was deciduous, its bony canopy reaching up at least a hundred feet overhead. The trunk was about three feet around and bowed away from the water. Will wasn't an arborist, but there were enough oaks around Atlanta so that he knew their red-brown furrows of bark turned the color of charcoal as the tree aged. The scaly bark had absorbed the rain like a sponge, but there was something else Will had noticed from his vantage point in the water. He scraped at a small section of bark with his fingernails. The wood left a wet, rust-colored residue. He rolled the grit between his fingers, squeezing out the moisture.

Blood really was thicker than water.

“What is it?” Lena asked. She kept her hands in her pockets as she leaned out into the water.

Will remembered the flashlight in his jacket pocket. “Look.” He traced the light along a dark stain that sprayed up the trunk. He thought about what Sara had said about Allison's injury, that there would be a high-velocity spray, like a hose turned on full blast. Four to five pints of blood. That was over half a gallon.

Will said, "She must have been facedown on the ground, just shy of the water. Her blood splattered up and back in an arc. You can see the dispersement is thicker here at the base of the tree, closer to her neck. Then it starts to dissipate at the top."

"That's not—" Lena stopped. She saw it now. He could see from her shocked expression.

Will glanced up at the sky. The clouds were letting loose a few drops at a time. They hadn't been given much of a reprieve. It didn't matter. Short of scrubbing the bark, there was no way to completely clean the tree. The wood had absorbed the mark of death the same way it would absorb smoke from a fire.

Will asked, "You still think our murderer is a nineteen-year-old boy who lives with his father?"

The wind whipped off the lake as Lena stared at the tree. Tears came into her eyes. Her voice shook. "He confessed."

Will quoted Tommy's words back to her. "'I got mad. I had a knife on me. I stabbed her once in the neck.'" He asked, "Did you find blood in the garage?"

"Yes." She wiped her eyes with the heel of her hand. "He was cleaning it up when we got there. I saw a bucket, and there was ..." Her voice trailed off. "There was blood on the floor. I saw it."

Will rolled down the legs of his jeans. His shoes were sinking into the mud at the base of the tree. He saw there was a new color mixed in with the soil, a deep rust that soaked into the mesh on the toe of his sneaker.

Lena saw it, too. She fell to her knees. She stuck her fingers deep into the ground and grabbed a fistful of earth. The soil was soaked, but not just with rainwater. She let the dirt fall back to the ground. Her hand was dark red, streaked with Allison Spooner's blood.

CHAPTER TEN

Lena pressed a wet paper towel to her neck. She was sitting with her back against the stall of the locker room toilet. A patrolman had tried to come in while she was dry-heaving. He'd left without saying a word.

She'd never had a strong stomach. Her uncle Hank used to say that Lena didn't have the guts for the kind of life she was living. He wouldn't have taken any pleasure in seeing that he was right.

"Oh, God," she whispered, as close to a prayer as she'd come in a long while. What had that stupid kid gotten himself into? What else had she missed?

She closed her eyes. Nothing made sense right now. Nothing was fitting together the same way it had yesterday morning.

He did it. Lena knew Tommy had killed Allison. People didn't confess to murder unless they were guilty. Even without that, less than fifteen minutes after they pulled the girl out of the lake, they had found Tommy in Allison's apartment going through her things. Wearing a black ski mask. He ran when they confronted him. He stabbed Brad, even if it was with a letter opener. Lena had seen him stab Brad with her own eyes. She had listened to Tommy's confession. She had watched him write down everything in his own stupid words. And he had killed himself. The guilt had gotten to him and he had sliced open his wrists because he knew what he had done to Allison was wrong.

So why was Lena doubting herself?

Suspects lied all the time. They never wanted to confess to all the horrors they'd committed. They split hairs. They admitted to rape but not murder. They admitted to punching but not beating, stabbing but not killing. Was it as simple as that? Had Tommy lied about killing Allison in the garage because he'd wanted to make the crime seem more understandable, more spur of the moment?

Lena pressed her head against the wall.

That stupid profile Will Trent came up with kept coming back to her. Cold. Calculated. Deliberate. That wasn't Tommy. He wasn't smart enough to think of all the variables. He would've had to plan ahead, get the cinder blocks and chains ready, carry them out to the lake ahead of time. Even if Tommy got the blocks after the fact, he would've had to anticipate the blood, and plan on the rain covering his tracks.

All that blood. The ground was soaked in it.

Lena scrambled to her knees and held her head over the toilet. Her stomach clenched, but nothing was left to come up. She sat back on her heels, staring at the back of the tank. The cool white porcelain stared back. This was her stall, and only her stall. This toilet was the one piece of ground she had managed to stake out solely for herself in the unisex locker room. The urinals were stained like old-lady teeth. The other two stalls were disgusting. They reeked of excrement no matter how many times they were cleaned. This morning, it didn't

seem to stop there. The whole place reeked of shit. And it was all coming from the top down.

Lena wiped her mouth with the paper towel. Her hand was throbbing where she'd been shot. She was probably getting an infection. The skin felt hot down to her wrist. She squeezed her eyes shut. She wanted to be away from here. She wanted to be back in bed with Jared. She wanted to go back to yesterday and shake Tommy Braham until he told her the truth about what really happened. Why was he in Allison's apartment? Why was he going through her things? Why was he wearing the ski mask? Why did he run? And why, in God's name, did he kill himself?

"Lena?" Marla Simms's creaky voice was just above a whisper. "Can I have a minute?"

Lena pressed herself up to standing. It was not lost on her that the only spot she could call her own in this entire godforsaken place was the toilet.

Marla stood with a folded sheet of paper in her hands. "You all right?"

"No," she said, because there was no use lying. She need only glance in the mirror to see the truth. Her hair was disheveled. Her face was red and blotchy. She was punch-drunk with lack of sleep and her nerves were so raw that she felt like she was vibrating even standing dead still.

"Agent Trent wanted this." Marla held out the sheet of paper between her fingers, giving Lena a meaningful look, as if they were two spies passing a briefcase in front of the Kremlin. "He didn't see it last night."

Lena had to tug the sheet before Marla would release it. She recognized her own handwriting. The copied page was from her notebook. The transcript she had made of the 911 call. She tried to pick out the words but her eyes blurred. "I thought he asked for the tape?"

"If he wants more than this, then he's going to have to drive down to Eaton to get it." She tucked her hands into her wide hips. "And you can tell him from me that I'm not his personal secretary. I don't know who he thinks he is, ordering people around."

He was the man who was going to shut down this force if they didn't do everything he said. "Have you talked to Frank this morning?"

"I'm guessing he came by last night. My files were a mess when I got here."

Lena already knew Frank had stolen Tommy's phone and taken the photograph from Allison's wallet, but this new information sent a chill straight to her chest. "Which files?"

"All of them. I don't know what he was looking for, but I hope he found it."

"You gave Trent those incident reports."

"What of it?"

"Why?"

"No one wants to speak ill of the dead, but I'll come on out and say it to whoever asks. Tommy wasn't acting right lately. He was getting into trouble, yelling at people, threatening them. Don't get me wrong. He was a good boy when he was little. Had those precious little blond curls and pretty blue eyes. That's what Sara's remembering. But she doesn't know what he was like lately. I think something just clicked in his head. Maybe it was there all along and we just didn't notice. Didn't want to notice." Marla shook her head in a tight half-circle. "This is just a mess. A grade-A, certified pile of doo."

Lena focused on Marla for the first time. The old woman wasn't one of her biggest fans. At best, she managed a nod for Lena when she walked through the door in the morning. Most times, she never bothered to look up from her desk. "Why are you talking to me? You never talk to me."

Marla bristled. "Excuse me for trying to help." She turned on her heel and stomped out.

Lena watched the door slowly close on its hinges. The room felt small, claustrophobic. She couldn't stay here all day, but her instinct to hide from Will Trent was hard to overcome. Larry Knox had told Frank that Will was a suit, not a cop. Lena's first impression had been the same. With his cashmere sweater and metrosexual haircut, Will looked like he'd be more at home behind a desk, clocking out at five and going home to the wife and kids. The old Lena would have dismissed him as a fraud, not on her level and not deserving of the badge.

That old Lena had been burned so many times by her snap judgments that she'd practically self-immolated. Now, she could look past her knee-jerk reaction and see the truth. Will had been sent down by a deputy director who was a heartbeat away from the top job. Lena had met Amanda Wagner many years ago. She was a tough old bitch. There was no way Amanda would've sent her second string down here, especially at the request of Sara Linton. Will was probably one of the best investigators on her team. He had to be. In less than two hours, he had shattered Lena's case against Tommy Braham into tiny pieces.

And now she had to go back out there and face him again.

Lena's feet still ached from the long trek through the forest. Her shoes were soaking wet. She went to her locker. The combination left her mind as soon as she turned the dial. She pressed her forehead against the cool metal. Why was she still here? She couldn't keep this up with Will Trent. There were so many lies and half-truths dangling out there that she couldn't remember them all. He kept laying traps, and with each one, she felt herself getting closer and closer to falling in. She should go home before she said too much. If Trent wanted to stop her, he would have to do it with handcuffs.

The combination came into her head. Lena spun the dial, opening the locker. She looked at her rain jacket, her toiletries, the various crap she'd collected over the years. There was nothing here she wanted except the extra pair of sneakers she kept in the bottom. She started to close the locker but stopped at the last minute. Inside a box of tampons was a picture of Jared that had been taken three years ago. He was standing outside Sanford Stadium at the University of Georgia. The place was packed. Georgia was playing LSU. There was a crowd of students around him, but he was the only one looking back at the camera. Looking back at Lena.

This picture was the moment that she had fallen in love with him—outside that noisy stadium, surrounded by drunken strangers. Lena had actually managed to capture on film that exact moment when everything in her life had changed. Who would be around to capture it when it all changed back?

Probably the booking officer who took her mugshot.

The door popped open. Four patrolmen came in, so lost in conversation that they barely acknowledged Lena. She tucked Jared's picture into her back pocket. Her socks were soaking wet, but she slid on her spare sneakers anyway. She just wanted to get out of here. She would walk through the squad room, right past

Will Trent, get into her car and go home to Jared.

Lena would start packing tonight. She'd be one of those people who left her house key in the mailbox for the bank. Her car was in good shape. She had enough in savings to last her three months, four if Jared didn't expect her to help out with rent. She would move in with him and try to get over this, try to find a way to live her life without being a cop.

If she wasn't in jail for obstructing an investigation. If she wasn't convicted of negligence. If Gordon Braham didn't sue her into the ground. If Frank didn't fill Jared's ear with poison. Poison Jared would believe, because the great thing about lying was people believed it so long as the lie was close enough to the truth.

Lena slammed the locker closed, pressing her hand against the cool metal.

One of the patrolmen said, "You let that GBI asshole slip and hit his head, we're not going to shed any tears."

They were all suiting up, pulling on their heavy rain gear. Will had taken photographs and samples from the bark and soil by the tree, but he had ordered a full-scale search of the woods. He wanted more photographs, drawings, diagrams. He wanted to make sure the force knew that they had made a mistake. That Lena had made a mistake.

"Fucking retard," another cop said.

Lena didn't know if he meant Will or Tommy. Either way, she managed some false bravado. "Wish he was a little smarter so he knew how stupid he was."

They were all laughing when she left the locker room. Lena pulled on her jacket. She walked through the squad room with more swagger than she felt. She had to get her composure back. She had to steel herself against the next barrage of questions from Will Trent. The fewer answers she gave him, the better off she would be.

The paper Marla had given her was in her hand. Lena skimmed the words as she walked so she wouldn't have to talk to anybody. She stopped as she reached the front door. She read the transcript again. The words were in her handwriting, but the last few lines from the call were missing. The caller had mentioned that Allison had gotten into a fight with her boyfriend. Why was that part taken out?

She glanced at Marla behind the front desk. Marla stared back, one eyebrow raised above her glasses. She was either still pissed or sending Lena a message. It was hard to tell. Lena looked at the transcript again. The last part was gone, the cut clean so that you would never know it was missing. Had Marla taken a shot at tampering with police evidence? Frank had gone through her files last night. Why would he edit the transcript without telling Lena? Christ, she had her notebook in her back pocket with the original transcript. All Trent had to do was ask her to see it and Lena would be looking at an obstruction charge for tampering with evidence.

The front door opened before Lena could reach it. Will Trent had obviously grown impatient waiting outside.

"Detective," he said by way of greeting. He'd changed back into his dress shoes and shed Carl Phillips's jacket. He looked as eager as she was reticent.

Lena handed him the paper. "Marla told me to give you this. She said you'd have to track down the audio from Eaton yourself."

Will called to Marla at the desk. "Thank you, Mrs. Simms." He took the paper from Lena's hand. His eyes scanned back and forth. "You heard the call, right?" He looked up. "You made the transcript from the audio?"

"They dictated it to me from the screen. The audiotapes are stored off-site. They're not hard to get." Lena held her breath, praying that he would not ask her to track them down.

"Any idea who made the call?"

She shook her head. "It was a woman's voice. The number was blocked and she wouldn't leave her details."

"Did you make this copy for me?"

"No. Marla handed it to me."

He pointed at a black dot on the page. "You've got some gum on the glass in your copier."

Lena wondered why the hell he was telling her this. Will Trent was like no cop she had ever seen. He had a habit of skirting around the real questions, making random comments or observations that seemed to lead nowhere until suddenly it was too late and she felt the noose tighten around her neck. He was playing chess and she was sucking at checkers.

Lena tried her own diversion. "We should get out to the crime scene if you want to be back in time for the autopsies."

"Weren't we just at the crime scene?"

"We don't know for a fact what happened. Tommy could've lied. That happens in Atlanta, right? Bad guys lie to the cops?"

"More often than I'd like." He slipped the transcript into his briefcase. "What time are the procedures supposed to start?"

"Frank said eleven-thirty."

"This was when you talked to him last night?"

Lena tried to remember the answer she had given Will the first time he'd asked this question. She had talked to Frank twice. Both times he had drilled her on Tommy's confession. Both times he had renewed his threat to tear down her life if she didn't cover his drunk ass.

Lena cast out a nonanswer, hoping Will would bite. "It's like I told you before."

He held open the front door for her. "Any idea why the press isn't all over this?"

"The press?" She would have laughed if she hadn't been standing up to her knees in shit. "The paper's closed for the holiday. Thomas Ross always goes skiing this time of year."

Will laughed good-naturedly. "You gotta love small towns." A cold wind made him have to put his shoulder into closing the glass door. He tucked his hands into his jeans pockets. The cuffs of his pants were still wet. "Let's take your car."

She felt uncomfortable having him in her Celica, so she nodded toward Frank's Town Car. Lena pulled her key chain from her pocket. The county was on a tight budget and they both were supposed to share the car.

She pressed the button to unlock the doors.

Will didn't get in. Instead, he scowled at the smell that wafted through the morning air. "Smoker?"

"Frank," she said. The stink was worse than usual. He must have chain-

smoked the whole trip to and from Macon last night.

Will asked, "This is Chief Wallace's car?"

She nodded.

"Where's Chief Wallace if this is his car?"

Lena managed to swallow the bile in her throat. "He took a cruiser to the hospital."

Will didn't comment, though she wondered if he'd made a mark in his book. Frank had taken the cruiser so he wouldn't get stopped along the way. Speeding during a nonemergency situation was illegal, but it was the sort of illegal cops danced around all the time.

Will asked, "Can you drive a stick?"

It was her turn to scowl. Of course she could drive a stick.

Will said, "Let's take my car."

"Are you kidding me?" Lena had heard about the Porsche before she'd made it to the station this morning. The whole town was talking about it—what it must've cost, why a state investigator would be driving it, and, more important, that it was parked in front of the Linton house all night.

Will didn't wait to see if she followed as he walked toward the opposite end of the lot. He talked as he made his way to the car, his leather briefcase swinging gently at his side. "I'm curious about Allison Spooner. You said she's from Alabama?"

"Yes."

"And she's a student at Grant Tech?"

Lena was careful with her answer. "She's registered at the school."

Will turned to her. "So, that means she's a student?"

"It means she's registered. We haven't talked to her teachers yet. We don't know if she was actively attending classes. We get a lot of calls from parents this time of year wondering why they're not getting report cards."

He asked her again, "Do you think Allison Spooner dropped out?"

She tried a new strategy. "I think that I'm not going to tell you something unless I know it's the absolute truth."

He gave one of his quick nods. "Fair enough."

Lena waited for another question, another insinuation. Will just kept walking, his mouth closed. If he thought this new technique was going to break her, he was dead wrong. Lena had been dealing with silent disapproval her entire life. She had made an art out of ignoring it.

She tucked her head down against the cold. Her mind kept going back to her earlier conversation with Will. She had been so furious about him being in Jeffrey's office that she hadn't really paid attention to what he was saying at first. But then he had pulled out Allison's wallet and she had seen that the third photograph was missing.

The picture showed Allison sitting beside a boy who had his arm around her waist. An older woman sat on her left, some distance between them. They were all on a bench outside the student center. Lena had stared at the photo long enough to remember the details. The boy was around Allison's age. He had been wearing the hood of his sweatshirt pulled down low on his head but she could tell he had brown hair and eyes. A smattering of a goatee was on his weak chin. He was chubby the way most of the guys at Grant Tech tended to be, from too

many days spent in classrooms and nights wasted in front of video games.

The woman in the photograph was obviously from the poor part of town. She was in her forties, maybe older. Past a certain age, it was difficult to tell with hard-looking women. The good news was that they stopped aging. The bad news was that they already looked ninety. Every line on her face said she was a smoker. Her bleached-blond hair was so dry it looked more like straw.

Also missing from evidence was Tommy's cell phone. Frank had handed it to Lena in the street. He'd found it in Tommy's back pocket when he frisked him before putting him into the back of the squad car. She had sealed the phone in a plastic bag, written out the details, and logged it into evidence.

And at some point last night, both the photo from Allison's wallet and Tommy's phone had gone missing.

There was only one person who could've hidden the evidence, and that was Frank. Marla said he'd gone through her files. He had probably doctored the 911 transcript, too. But why? Both the picture and the call brought up the possibility of Allison having a boyfriend. Maybe Frank was trying to track down the kid before Will Trent found him. Frank had told Lena that they both should stick to the truth, or at least a close version of it. Why was he going behind her back and looking for another suspect?

Lena wiped her eyes with her hand. The wind was cutting, making her nose run, her eyes water. She had to carve out ten, fifteen minutes alone so she could think this through. Will's presence made it impossible for her to do anything but worry about the next question that would come out of his mouth.

"Ready?" Will asked. They had reached the Porsche. The car was an older model than Lena thought. There was no remote to unlock the door. Will did the honors, then handed her the key.

Lena felt a new wave of nervousness wash over her. "What if I crash this thing?"

"I'd really appreciate it if you didn't." He reached in and tucked his briefcase behind the front seat.

Lena couldn't move. This felt like a trap but she couldn't see the reason.

"Is there a problem?" Will asked.

Lena gave in. She climbed into the bucket seat, which was more like a recliner. With her feet stretched toward the pedals, the back of her calves were only a few inches off the floorboard.

Will opened the passenger door. She asked, "You don't have a car from the job?"

"My boss wanted me to get here as soon as possible." He had to let the seat back before he got into the passenger's side of the car. "It adjusts on the front," he told Lena. She reached down and dragged herself closer to the steering wheel. Will's legs were about ten feet longer than hers. Lena was practically pressed into the steering wheel by the time her feet found the clutch and gas.

For his part, Will couldn't get his seat right. He pushed it to the end of the track, then cranked it down as low as it would go so his head wouldn't hit the roof. Finally, he folded himself into the car like a piece of origami. She waited for him to buckle in, chancing a look at him. He was fairly average except for his height. He was lean, but his shoulders were broad, muscled, like he spent a lot of time at the gym. His nose had obviously been broken at some point in his

life. Faint scars were on his face, the sort of damage you got from fighting with your fists.

No, he definitely was not Amanda Wagner's second string.

"All right," Will said, finally settling into the seat.

She reached toward the ignition, but there wasn't one.

"It's on the other side."

She found the ignition on the left-hand side of the steering wheel.

Will explained, "It's from Le Mans racing. So you can start the engine with one hand while you change the gears with the other."

She was extremely right-handed and it took a few tries before she managed to get the key to turn. The engine roared to life. The seat vibrated underneath her. She could feel the clutch pushing back against the ball of her foot.

Will stopped her. "Can you give her a few minutes to warm up?"

Lena took her foot off the pedal. She stared across the street. He'd parked on the far side of the lot, the nose of the car facing out. She had a clear view to the children's clinic across the way. Sara's clinic. She wondered if he had parked here on purpose. He seemed to be very deliberate about everything he did. Or maybe her paranoia was such that she couldn't watch his chest rise and fall without thinking it was part of some master plan to trip her up.

Will asked one of his random questions. "What do you think about the 911 call?"

She told him the truth. "It bothers me that it came from a blocked number."

"She called in a fake suicide. Why?"

Lena shook her head. The caller was the last thing on her mind right now. "Tommy might have talked to her. She could be a co-worker. An accomplice. A jealous girlfriend."

"Tommy didn't strike me as a player."

No, he hadn't. During the interrogation, Lena had asked him to be explicit because she wasn't sure he really knew what sex was.

Will asked, "Did Tommy say anything about dating anyone?"

She shook her head.

"We can ask around. At the very least, the girl who called in the fake suicide knew something wasn't right. She was obviously laying down a foundation for Tommy's defense."

Lena's head jerked around. "How so?"

"The phone call. She said Allison got into a fight with her boyfriend. That's why she was worried she'd committed suicide. She didn't say anything about Tommy."

Lena felt every ounce of blood in her body freeze. Her hand gripped the steering wheel. Frank's amended transcript didn't mention a boyfriend. Will must have already contacted the call center in Eaton. So why had he asked Marla for the audio?

To set a trap. And Lena had just fallen right into it.

Will's tone of voice was even. "Obviously, we'll need to find the boyfriend. He'll probably be able to lead us to the caller. Did Allison have any photographs in her apartment? Love letters? A computer?"

Photographs. Did he know about the missing picture? Lena's throat felt so raw that she couldn't swallow. She shook her head.

Will took his briefcase from behind the seat. He snapped open the locks. She could hear a high-pitched alarm in her ears. Her chest was tight. Her vision blurred. She wondered if this was what a panic attack felt like.

"Hmm," Will mumbled, rifling through the case. "My reading glasses aren't in here." He held out the transcript. "Do you mind?"

Lena's heart shook against her rib cage. Will held the paper in his hand, the edge fluttering in the air blowing out from the heater.

Her voice was barely a whisper. "Why are you doing this?"

Fear saturated her every word. Will stared at her for a long while—so long that she felt as if her soul was being peeled away from her body. Finally, he gave one of his patented nods, as if he'd made a decision. He put the transcript back in his case and snapped the locks shut.

"Let's go to Allison's."

Taylor Drive was less than ten minutes from the station, but the trip seemed to take hours. Lena felt so panicked that she slowed down a couple of times, thinking she was going to be sick. She needed to concentrate on Frank, to figure out how many nails he could put in her coffin, but she was thinking about Tommy Braham instead.

He had died on her watch. He was her prisoner. He was her responsibility. She hadn't patted him down when she put him in the cells. She had assumed because he was slow that he was without guile. Who was the stupid one now? Lena thought the kid was capable of murder but considered him so harmless that she'd let him walk into a cell with a sharp object hidden on his person. Frank was right—she was lucky Tommy didn't turn the weapon on someone else.

When had Tommy taken the ink cartridge out of her pen? He must have known when he did it that he was going to use it for something bad. By the time he finished writing his confession, Tommy was in tears. The Kleenex box was empty. Lena had left him alone for no more than half a minute to get more tissues. When she came back into the room, his hands were under the table. She had wiped his nose for him like he was a child. She had soothed him, rubbed his shoulder, told him everything was going to be okay. He seemed to believe her. He'd blown his nose, dried his eyes. She had thought at the time that Tommy had resolved himself to his fate, but maybe the fate he had decided on was a lot different from the one that Lena had imagined.

Was it sympathy for Tommy or her instinctual need for self-preservation that had kept Lena from getting rid of the letter opener he had used on Brad Stephens? Last night, she had thought about tossing it over one of the thousands of concrete bridges between here and Macon. But she hadn't. It was still wrapped in its bag, buried under the spare tire in the trunk of her car. Lena hadn't wanted it in the house. Now, she didn't like that it was so close to the station. Frank had doctored paperwork. He'd broken the chain of custody. He'd tampered with evidence. She wouldn't put it past the old man to rummage through her car.

Christ. What else was he capable of?

She took a right onto Taylor Drive. The rain had come in torrents last night, washing away the blood on the street. Still, she could see it in her mind's eye.

The way Brad had blinked away the rain. The way his skin had already started to turn gray by the time the helicopter landed.

Lena steered the car onto the far side of the road and stopped. "This is where Brad was stabbed."

Will asked, "Where's Spooner's apartment?"

She pointed up the road. "Four houses, left-hand side."

He stared straight down the street. "What's the number?"

"Sixteen and a half." Lena put the car into gear and rolled past the scene of Brad's stabbing. "We got the address from the college. We came here to see if there was a roommate or landlord we could talk to."

"Did you have a warrant to search the house?"

He had asked the question before. She gave him the same answer. "No. We didn't come to search the house."

She waited for him to ask something else, but Will was silent. Lena wondered if what she had told him was the truth. If Tommy hadn't been in Allison's apartment, they still would have found a way to get into the garage. Gordon Braham was out of town. Knowing Frank, he would've broken the lock and gone into Allison's apartment anyway. He would have made some comment about how it was better to ask for forgiveness than permission. No one would have minded a simple breaking and entering when a young girl from the college had been murdered.

Will asked, "Did you canvass the neighbors?"

Lena stopped the car in front of the Braham house. "Patrol did. No one saw anything different from what happened."

"And what exactly *did* happen?"

"Brad was stabbed."

"Tell me from the beginning. You pulled up here ..."

She tried to take a breath. Her lungs would only fill to half capacity. "We approached the garage—"

"No," he interrupted. "Go back to the very beginning. You drove up to the scene. Then what?"

"Brad was already here." She didn't tell him about the pink umbrella or Frank's screaming fit.

"You got out of the car?" Will prodded. He really was going to make her go through this step-by-step.

She opened her door. Rain splattered her face with lazy, fat drops. Will had gotten out of the car, too. She told him, "The rain had died down. Visibility was good." She started up the driveway. Will was beside her with his briefcase in his hand. At the top of the hill, she could see that the garage was marked with yellow crime scene tape. Frank must have come back last night. Or maybe he had sent patrol to mark the space so it looked like they were taking this seriously. There was no telling anymore what he was doing or why.

Will opened his briefcase and pulled out a sheet of paper. "The search warrant came in while you were getting your coat."

He handed the document to Lena. She saw it had been issued by a judge out of Atlanta.

He asked, "What next? I take it the garage door was closed when you approached?"

She nodded. "We were standing about here. All three of us. The lights were out. There weren't any cars in the driveway or on the street." She pointed to the scooter. Mud was caked around the plastic fenders. "The lock and chain appeared to be the same." Lena stared at the scooter, feeling good about the debris lodged in the tires. Tommy could have gone to the woods on the scooter. They wouldn't be able to find tracks, but the mud on the wheels would match the mud around the lake.

"Detective?"

Lena turned around. She had missed his question.

"Did you knock on the front door of the house?"

She glanced back at the house. The lights were still off. There was a small bouquet of flowers propped against the door. "No."

Will leaned down and opened the garage's metal door. The noise as it rolled up was deafening, a loud clanging that must have been heard by half the neighborhood. Lena saw the bed, the table, the scattered papers and magazines. There was a small pool of blood where Frank had fallen by the mouth of the entrance. Ice glazed the top. The cut in his arm was deeper than she thought. There was no way the letter opener had done the damage. Had he stabbed himself?

Will asked, "Is this how you found the garage?"

"Pretty much." Lena crossed her arms over her chest. She could feel the cold seeping in through her jacket. She should have come back to the scene after getting Tommy's confession and searched Allison's things for more clues to back up Tommy's story. It was too late for that now. The best thing Lena could do for herself was to start thinking like a detective instead of acting like a suspect. The murder weapon was probably in here. The scooter was a good lead. The stain by the bed was an even better one. Tommy could've hit Allison in the head, then taken her into the woods to kill her. Maybe his plan was to drown her by the lake. The girl had come to, and he'd stabbed her in the back of the neck. Tommy had lived in Grant County all his life. He'd probably been to the cove hundreds of times. He would know where the bottom dropped in the lake. He would know to take the body out deep so that she wouldn't be easily found.

Lena exhaled. She could breathe now. This was making sense. Tommy had lied to her about how he'd killed Allison, but he *had* killed her.

Will cleared his throat. "Let's go back a few steps. All three of you were standing here. The garage was closed. The house looked empty. Then what?"

Lena took a minute to regain her composure. She told him about Brad seeing the masked intruder inside, the way he had circled the building before they fanned out to confront the suspect.

Will seemed to be only half listening as she laid out the events. He stood just under the garage door with his hands behind his back, scanning the contents of the room. Lena was telling him about Tommy refusing to lower the knife when she noticed that Will was focusing on the brown stain by the bed. He walked into the garage and knelt down for a better look. Beside him was the bucket of murky water she had seen yesterday. The crusty sponge was beside it.

He looked up at her. "Keep going."

Lena had to think to find her place. "Tommy was behind that table." She nodded to the table, which was crooked.

Will said, "That door isn't exactly quiet when it rolls up. Did he already have the knife in his hand?"

Lena stopped, trying to remember what she'd said the first time Will asked her the question. He wanted to know if Tommy had a sheath on his belt where he kept a knife. He wanted to know if it was the same knife that had killed Allison Spooner.

She said, "When I saw him, he already had the knife in his hand. I don't know where it came from. Maybe the table." Of course it had come from the table. There was a partially opened envelope there, the kind of junk mail that contained coupons nobody used.

"What else did you notice?"

She indicated the bucket of brown water by the bed. "He'd been cleaning. I guess he hit her in the head or knocked her out here. He put her on the scooter and—"

"He didn't mention cleaning up in his confession."

No, he hadn't. Lena hadn't even thought to ask him about the bucket. All she had been thinking about was Brad, and how gray his skin had looked the last time she'd seen him. "Suspects lie. Tommy didn't want to admit how he did it. He made up a story that painted him in a better light. It happens all the time."

Will asked, "What happened next?"

Lena swallowed, fighting the image of Brad that kept popping into her head. "I approached the suspect from the right."

Will had opened his briefcase on the bed. "Your right or his?"

"My right." She stopped talking. Will had taken some kind of field kit out of his briefcase. She recognized the three small glass bottles he took out of the plastic pouch. He was going to do a Kastle-Meyer test on the stain.

Will didn't prompt her to continue the story. He took a clean swab from the kit. He opened the first bottle and used the dropper to wet the cotton tip with ethanol. He touched the swab to the stain, gently rolling it so that the brown substance would transfer. He added the reagent, phenolphthalein, from the second bottle. Lena held her breath as he used the last dropper to add hydrogen peroxide to the mix. She had studied the procedure in class, performed it a hundred times herself. If the brown stain was human blood, the tip of the swab would rapidly turn bright pink.

The swab didn't turn.

Will started to pack the kit back up. "What happened next?"

Lena had lost her place. She couldn't take her eyes off the stain. How could it not be blood? It had the same shape, the same color, as a bloodstain. Tommy was in Allison's apartment, going through her things. He was dressed like a burglar. He was standing two feet away from her blood with a knife in his hand.

Not a knife. A letter opener.

And not Allison's blood.

Will prodded her to continue. "So, you flanked Tommy on your right. Interim Chief Wallace was on your right?"

"My left, your right."

"Is this when you identified yourself as police officers?"

Lena held her breath. She would have to lie to him. There was no way she could say she didn't remember, because that would be taken as an admission

that she hadn't followed the most basic procedure when confronting a suspect.

"Detective?"

Lena let out a slow breath. She tried to muster some sarcasm. "I know how to do my job."

He gave a solemn nod. "I hope so." Instead of jamming his foot down harder, he let up. "Tell me what happened next."

Lena continued the story as Will walked around the garage. The space was small, but there wasn't one inch that he didn't study at some point. Every time he stopped to examine an item more closely—the bracing along the back wall, a strip of metal jutting out from the track for the garage door—her heart skipped.

Still, she told him about Tommy running into the street, Brad chasing him. The stabbing. The LifeFlight's arrival. Lena finished, "The helicopter took off, and I went to the car. Tommy was already inside, handcuffed. I took him to the station. You know the story from there."

Will scratched his jaw. "How much time would you say elapsed between when Tommy knocked you to the floor and when you were able to regain your footing?"

"I don't know. Five seconds. Ten."

"Did you hit your head?"

Lena's head still ached from the bruise. "I don't know."

Will was at the back of the room. "Did you notice this?"

She had to force herself to walk into the garage. She followed his pointing finger to a hole in the wall. It was round with jagged edges, about the size of a bullet. Without thinking, Lena looked back at the front of the garage where Frank had been standing. The trajectory matched up. There were no casings on the floor. She hoped to God Frank had thought to look behind the garage. The bullet hadn't stopped after grazing her hand and punching a hole in the metal siding. It was out there somewhere, probably buried in mud.

Will asked, "Did anyone fire their weapons?"

"Mine wasn't fired."

He looked at the Band-Aids on the side of her hand. "So, you were here on the floor." He walked to the bed, standing where she had fallen.

"That's right."

"You stood up and saw that Frank Wallace was on the ground. Was he facedown? On his side?"

"On his side." Lena followed Will as he slowly walked to the front of the garage. She stepped over magazines that had scattered in the struggle. She saw a flash of an older model Mustang clinging to the side of a racetrack.

Will pointed to the jagged metal sticking out from the garage door track. "This looks dangerous."

He opened his briefcase again. With a steady hand, he used a pair of tweezers to pull a few threads of light tan material from the sharp metal. Frank's coat was tan, a London Fog he'd been wearing for as long as Lena had known him.

Will handed her the K-M test kit. "I'm sure you know how to do this."

Her hands trembled as she took the kit. She went through the same procedure Will had followed, using the dropper to add the reagent. When the tip of the swab turned bright pink, Lena didn't think either of them was too surprised.

Will turned back around and looked at the garage. She could almost hear his

mind working. For Lena's part, she had the benefit of her own involvement to paint a picture of the truth. Tommy had shoved the table toward Lena. Frank had panicked, or startled, or something—for whatever reason, he'd ended up pulling the trigger on his gun. The shot had gone wild, taking a chunk out of Lena's hand. Frank had dropped the gun. The Glock's recoil had probably been unexpected. Or maybe he was so drunk by then that his balance was off. He'd pitched to the side, cutting open his arm on the sharp metal that jugged out from the track for the door. He'd fallen to the floor. He was clutching his arm by the time Lena had gotten up. By then, Tommy was running down the driveway with the letter opener in his hand.

Keystone Kops. They were a fucking joke.

How many drinks had Frank had yesterday morning? He was sitting in the car with his flask while Lena was watching Allison being dragged from the lake. He'd taken three or four swigs on the drive over. What about before then? How many drinks did it take him just to get out of bed these days?

Will was silent. He took back the swab, the bottles, and put everything back in its proper place. She waited for him to say something about the scene, about what had really happened. Instead, he asked, "Where's the bathroom?"

Lena was too confused to answer anything other than "What?"

"The bathroom." He indicated the open space, and Lena realized that he was right. The room was just one big box. There was no bathroom. There wasn't even a closet. The furnishings were Spartan, nothing more than a bed that looked like it had been bought from a military supply store and a folding table of the sort they used at church bake sales. There was a small television in the corner with aluminum foil on the antennae and a Playstation jacked into the front. Instead of a chest of drawers, there were metal shelves bolted to the walls. T-shirts spilled over. Jeans. Baseball hats.

Will said, "What did Tommy say about why he was wearing a ski mask?"

Lena felt like she had swallowed a handful of gravel. "He said he had it on because it was cold."

"It's pretty cold in here," Will agreed. He put the kit in his briefcase. Lena flinched when he snapped the locks shut. The sound echoed like a gunshot. Or a cell door closing.

The car magazines. The dirty sheets on the bed. The lack of even the most basic facilities. There was no way Allison Spooner had lived in this desolate garage.

Tommy Braham had.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Brock's funeral home was housed in one of the oldest buildings in Grant County. The Victorian castle, complete with turrets, had been built in the early 1900s by the man in charge of maintenance at the railroad yard. That he had used funds embezzled from the railroad company was a matter later settled by the state prosecutor. The castle had eventually been auctioned on the courthouse steps to John Brock, the local mortician.

Sara had heard from her grandpa Earnshaw that everyone in town had breathed a sigh of relief when the Brocks left Main Street—especially the butcher who'd had the unfortunate luck of being their next-door tenant. The basement and first floor of the Victorian had been turned into a funeral parlor, while the top floor was reserved for the family.

Sara had grown up with Dan Brock. He'd been an awkward, serious boy, the sort of child who was more comfortable around adults than children his own age. She witnessed firsthand the relentless teasing Dan had experienced in grade school. Bullies had latched onto him like piranha and had not stopped until junior high, when Dan shot past six feet tall. As the tallest girl in her class, then the tallest person in school but for Dan, Sara had always appreciated having him around.

And yet, she still couldn't look at him without seeing the gangly ten-year-old boy girls had screeched at on the bus for having dead people's cooties.

A funeral was just letting out as Sara pulled into the parking lot. Death was a brisk business, even in the worst economies. The old Victorian was well cared for. The paint was fresh and there was a new tile roof. Sara watched the mourners leaving the house, preparing to make the short trek to the burial.

There was a marble headstone at the cemetery with Jeffrey's name on it. Sara had his ashes back in Atlanta, but his mother had suddenly found her religion and insisted on a proper funeral. The church was so full during the service that the back doors were opened so the people lining the steps could hear the preacher's voice. People walked to the cemetery rather than drive behind the hearse.

Those closest to Jeffrey had each put something in the coffin that reminded them of their friend, their boss, their mentor. There was an Auburn football program with Jeffrey on the cover supplied by his boyhood friends. Eddie had added a hammer Jeffrey used to help him build a shed in the backyard. Her mother had put in her old frying pan because she'd taught Jeffrey how to fry chicken with it. Tessa provided a postcard he had sent her from Florida. He had always loved teasing her. The postcard read, *Glad you're not here!*

A few weeks before Jeffrey had been killed, Sara had given him a signed first edition of MacKinlay Kantor's *Andersonville*. Sara had a hard time letting the book go, even though she knew she had to. She couldn't let the ground cover Jeffrey's coffin of memories without her own contribution. Dan Brock had sat

with her in the living room of her house for hours until she was ready to relinquish the book. She had looked at each page, touched her fingers to the spots where Jeffrey's hands had rested. Dan had been patient, quiet, but when the time came for him to go, he was crying as hard as Sara.

She took a tissue out of the glove compartment and wiped her eyes. She was going to end up bawling like a baby if she let her mind continue along this track. Her jacket was on the seat beside her but Sara didn't bother to put it on. She found a clip in the pocket and pulled back her hair. She checked the frizzy mess in the mirror. She should've put on some makeup this morning. The freckles across her nose were more pronounced. Her skin looked pale. Sara pushed away the mirror. It was too late to do anything about it now.

The last car pulled into the funeral procession. Sara jumped out of her SUV, barely missing a deep puddle. The rain was beating down and she covered her head with her hands in futility. Brock stood in the doorway, waving to her. His hair looked a bit thinner on the top, but with his three-piece suit and lanky frame, Dan Brock looked much as he had in high school.

"Hey there." He gave her a quick smile. "You're the first one here. I told Frank we'd start around eleven-thirty."

"I thought I could get a head start laying everything out."

"I think I may have beat you to that." He gave her a smile that seemed reserved for mourners. "How you holding up, Sara?"

She tried to return the smile, but was unable to answer the question. She'd skipped the pleasantries at the jail yesterday when Brock showed up to claim Tommy Braham's body, and she felt a little awkward around him now. As usual, Brock smoothed over the moment.

"Aw, come here." He grabbed her in a bear hug. "You're looking great, Sara. Really good. I'm so glad you came back for the holiday. Your mama must be happy."

"My father is, at least."

He kept his arm around her and led her into the house. "Let's get out of this inclement weather."

"Wow." She stopped at the door, glancing around the wide central hallway. Her parents weren't the only ones who'd been remodeling lately. The staid décor of the house had been considerably updated. The heavy velvet drapes and dark green carpeting had been replaced with Roman shades and a muted Oriental rug that covered beautiful hardwood floors. Even the viewing rooms had been updated so they no longer resembled formal Victorian parlors.

Brock said, "Mama hates it, so I must've done something right."

"You've done a lovely job," she told him, knowing Brock probably hadn't gotten many compliments.

"Business has been good." Brock kept his hand on her back as he led her down the hall. "I'll have to admit, I'm real torn up about Tommy. He was a good kid. He cut my grass for me." Brock stopped walking. He looked down at Sara, his attitude changed. "I know people think I'm naïve, give folks too much of the benefit of the doubt, but I can't see him doing any of this."

"Killing himself or killing the girl?"

"Both." Brock chewed his bottom lip for a moment. "Tommy was a happy kid. You know what he was like. Never had a cross word for anybody."

Sara was circumspect. "People can surprise you."

"Maybe with their ignorance, thinking just because the kid was slow that his brain just snapped one day and he went on a rampage."

"You're right." Tommy was disabled. He wasn't psychotic. One had nothing to do with the other.

"The thing that gets me is, she wasn't killed bad. Not like in a fury."

"What do you mean?"

He tucked his hand between the buttons of his vest. "You'd just expect more, is all."

"More?"

His demeanor changed back just as quickly. "Listen to me. You're the doctor here. You'll see for yourself, and probably find a lot more than I ever could." He put his hand on her shoulder. "It's really good to have you back, Sara. And I want you to know that I'm real happy for you. Don't listen to what anybody else says."

Sara didn't like the sound of that. "Happy about what?"

"Your new fella."

"My new—"

"Whole town's buzzing about it. Mama was on the phone all last night."

Sara felt her face turning red. "Brock—Dan. He's not really—"

"Shh," Brock warned. She heard shuffling on the stairs above them. He raised his voice. "Mama, I'm gonna go to the cemetery now to help Mr. Billingham's people. Sara'll be downstairs working, so don't you go and bother her. You hear?"

Audra Brock's voice was frail, though the old biddy would probably outlive them all. "What'd you say?"

He raised his voice again, cutting to the chase. "I said leave Sara alone."

There was something like a "humph," then more shuffling as she made her way back to her room.

Brock rolled his eyes, but his good-natured smile was still on his face. "Everything downstairs is the same as when you left it. I should be back in an hour or so to lend you a hand. Should I put a sign on the door for your fella?"

"He—" Sara stopped herself. "I'll do it."

"My office is still in the kitchen. I spiffed it up a bit. Lemme know what you think about it." He gave her a wave before leaving through the front door.

Sara walked to the back of the house. She had left her purse in the car so she didn't have a paper or pen to leave Will a note. The Victorian's kitchen had always served as the office. Brock had finally taken out the old sink and washboard, making the space more conducive to the business of managing death. The coffin display was built into the breakfast nook. Catalogues of flower arrangements were artfully spread out on a mahogany table. Brock's desk was glass and steel, a very modern design considering he was the oldest soul she had ever met.

She took a Post-it off his blotter and started to write Will a note, then stopped herself. Frank was planning to make an appearance. What could she put on this small square of paper that would tell Will where to go without making Frank suspicious?

Sara tapped the pen to her teeth as she walked to the front door. She finally

settled on “down stairs,” writing it as two words, each on its own line. To make it as clear as possible, she drew a large, downward-pointing arrow. That might not do any good, though. Every dyslexic was different, but there were certain characteristics that the majority of them shared. Primary among these was a lack of any sense of direction. It was no wonder Will had gotten lost driving down from Atlanta. Making a phone call wouldn’t have helped matters. Telling a dyslexic to turn right was about as useful as telling a cat to tap-dance.

Sara pressed the note to the glass on the front door. She had agonized over the message this morning, writing it six different times, signing it, not signing it. The smiley face had been a last-minute addition, her way of trying to let Will know that everything was okay between them. A blind man could’ve seen how upset he was last night. Sara felt horrible for embarrassing him. She had never been a smiley face person, but she’d drawn two eyes and a mouth at the corner of the note before sticking it in a baggie under his windshield, hoping that he would take it the right way.

It seemed wildly inappropriate to leave a smiley face on the front door of a funeral home, but she drew a small figure—two eyes and a curved mouth—thinking at least she’d get points for consistency.

The floorboards overhead creaked, and Sara trotted quickly back toward the kitchen. She left the basement door wide open and took the stairs two at a time to avoid Brock’s mother. There was a burglar door at the bottom of the landing. Black metal bars and a mesh screen kept anyone from breaking into the embalming area. You wouldn’t think that a person would want to come down here unless they had to, but many years ago, a couple of kids from the college had busted open the old door in their quest to steal some formaldehyde, a popular choice for cutting powder cocaine. Sara assumed the combination on the keypad hadn’t changed. She entered 1-5-9 and the door clicked open.

Brock kept the area immediately across from the door empty so that no one would accidentally glance through the mesh screen and see something they should never have to see. The buffer zone continued down the long, well-lit hallway. Storage shelves contained various chemicals and supplies with the labels all turned toward the wall so the viewer would not know what he was looking at. Small shoe boxes filled the last metal cabinet; cremains no one had ever bothered to pick up.

At the end of the hall, Brock had posted a sign that Sara recognized from the hospital morgue: *Hic locus est ubi mors gaudet succurrere vitae*. Roughly translated, “This is the place where death delights to teach the living.”

The swinging doors to the embalming suite were propped open with old bricks from the house. Artificial light bounced off the white tile walls. While the upstairs had been drastically changed, the downstairs looked exactly the same as Sara remembered. There were two stainless steel gurneys in the middle of the room with large industrial lights spring-mounted above them. A workstation stood at the foot of each gurney, plumbing connected at the ends to help evacuate the bodies. Brock had already laid out the autopsy tools—the saws, the scalpels, the forceps, and scissors. He was still using the pruning shears Sara had bought at the hardware store to cut through the breastbone.

The back of the room was wholly devoted to the funeral business. Beside the walk-in freezer was a rolling tray containing the metal trocar that was used to

pierce and clean out organs during the embalming process. Neatly tucked into the corner was the embalming machine, which looked like a cross between a buffet-style coffee warmer and a blender. The arterial tube hung limply in the sink. Heavy rubber gloves were laid out on the basin. A butcher's apron. A pair of construction goggles. A splatter mask. An industrial-sized box of roll cotton for stopping leaks.

Incongruously, there was a hair dryer and a pink makeup kit opened on top of the cotton box. Pots of foundation and various shades of eyeshadows and lip glosses were inside. The logo for "Peason's Mortuary makeup" was embossed on the inside of the lid.

Sara took a pair of disposable surgical gloves from the box mounted on the wall. She opened the freezer door. A gust of cold air met her. There were three bodies inside, all zipped into black bags. She checked the tags for Allison Spooner.

The bag unzipped with the usual hassle, catching on the bulky black plastic. Allison's skin had taken on the waxy, iridescent tone of death. Her lips were blackish blue. Pieces of grass and twigs were stuck to her skin and clothing. Small contusions pebbled her mouth and cheeks. Sara slipped on the surgical gloves and gently folded back the girl's bottom lip. Teeth marks cut into the soft flesh where Allison's face had been pressed into the ground. The wound had bled before she died. The killer had held her down in order to kill her.

Carefully, Sara turned Allison's head to the side. The rigor had already dissipated. She could easily see the gaping stab wound at the back of the girl's neck.

Brock was right. She wasn't killed bad. There was no fury written on the body, just a deadly, precise incision.

Sara pressed her fingers to the top and bottom of the wound, stretching the skin to reconstruct its probable position at the time of injury. The knife would have been thin, approximately half an inch wide, probably no more than three and a half inches long. The blade had gone in at an angle. The bottom of the incision appeared curved, which meant that the knife had been twisted to ensure maximum damage.

Sara pulled up the girl's jacket, matching the slice in the material to the wound in the neck. Lena was right about this, at least. The girl had been stabbed from behind. Sara guessed the killer had been right-handed, and very sure of himself. The blow would have been as swift as it was deadly. The hilt of the knife had bruised the skin around the injury. Whoever had killed Allison had not hesitated in driving home the blade, then twisting it for effect.

This was not the work of Tommy Braham.

Sara zipped back the bag with the same difficulty. Before she left the freezer, she put her hand on Tommy's leg. Obviously, he couldn't feel the pressure—it was too late for Sara to give him comfort—but it made her feel better knowing that she was going to be the one to take care of him.

She slipped off the gloves and tossed them into the trash as she made her way to the back of the basement. There was a small windowless room that, in the Victorian's early days, was meant to store wine. Red bricks lined the walls and wrapped around the floor and ceiling. Brock used the space as an office, despite the fact that the temperature was much cooler inside. Sara grabbed the jacket

hanging by the door, then quickly changed her mind when she smelled Brock's aftershave.

The desk was empty but for the autopsy forms and an ink pen. Brock had put together two packets for the procedures. He'd stuck Post-it notes on each with the name, date of birth, and last known address for each victim.

Georgia law required a medical autopsy to be performed only under certain circumstances. Violent death, death in the workplace, suspicious death, sudden death, unattended death, and surgical death all required further investigation. For the most part, the information gathered was always the same: legal name, aliases, age, height, weight, cause of death. X rays were taken. The stomach contents would be examined. Organs were weighed. Arteries, valves, and veins were explored. Contusions were noted. Traumas. Bite marks. Stretch marks. Lacerations. Scars. Tattoos. Birthmarks. Every detail, remarkable or not, that was found on or in the body had to be noted on the corresponding form.

Sara had hooked her reading glasses on her shirt before getting out of the car. She slipped them on and started on the forms. Most of the paperwork would have to be filled out after the procedures, but every label attached to a specimen or sample had to have her name, the location, and the proper date and time. In addition to that, every form had to have the same information at the bottom along with her signature and license number. She was halfway through the second packet when she heard someone knocking at the metal door.

"Hello?" Will's voice echoed through the basement.

Sara rubbed her eyes, feeling as if she'd just woken from a nap. "I'll be right there." She pushed herself back from the desk and walked toward the stairs. Will was standing on the other side of the security door.

She pushed open the latch. "I guess my notes worked."

He gave her a careful look, almost like a warning.

Sara waved him back to the autopsy suite.

"Quite a spread," Will told her, taking in the room. His hands were in his pockets. She saw that his jeans were wet and muddy at the hem.

She asked, "How did it go this morning?"

"The good news is that I found out where Allison was killed." He told her about his walk in the forest. "We were lucky the rain didn't wash it all out."

"Blood is five times more dense than water. It would take weeks for the soil to filter it out, and I'd bet that water oak will hold on to it for years." Sara explained, "The plasma would break down, but the proteins and globulin would remain in an indefinite colloidal stage."

"That's exactly what I was thinking."

She smiled. "What's the bad news?"

He leaned his hand on the gurney, then thought better of it. "I executed a search warrant on the wrong property and tainted some evidence."

Sara didn't speak, but her expression must have conveyed her surprise.

"Tommy lived in the garage, not Allison. The search warrant Faith got listed the garage address. Anything I found is tainted. I doubt a judge would let it through in court."

She suppressed a rueful laugh. At least he was seeing firsthand how Lena managed to screw up everything and everyone around her. "What did you find?"

"Not a lot of blood, if that's what you mean. Frank Wallace was cut while he

was standing at the front of the garage. The stain on the floor by the bed was probably from Tommy's dog, Pippy, trying to hork up a sock."

Sara winced. "Do you still think Tommy did this? His confession doesn't line up with the facts."

"Lena's been working on the theory that Tommy took Allison out to the woods on his scooter and murdered her there. I suppose he was sitting on the cinder blocks the way you'd put a kid on some phone books at the kitchen table."

"That sounds completely believable."

"Doesn't it just?" He scratched his jaw. "Have you examined Allison's body yet?"

"I took a preliminary look at the wound. The attacker was behind her. Most knife injuries to the throat are from behind, but usually the blade is drawn across the front of the throat, oftentimes resulting in a partial decapitation. Allison was stabbed from behind with the blade going into the neck from the rear, the trajectory going toward the front of the throat. It was one thrust, very calculated, almost like an execution, then the killer twisted the blade just to make sure."

"So, she died from the stab wound?"

"I can't say for sure until I have her on the table."

"But you have an idea."

Sara had never liked giving her opinion unless she had strong medical fact to support it. "I don't want to make assumptions."

"It's just us down here. I promise I won't tell anybody."

She was only vaguely aware that she was relenting much more easily than she should have. "The angle of the wound was designed to deliver a quick death. I haven't cut her open yet, so I'm not sure—"

"But?"

"It looks like the carotid sheath was cut, so we're talking an instant interruption of the common carotid and more than likely the internal jugular. They're branched together like this." She lined up the index fingers of both her hands. "The carotid's job is to carry oxygenated blood at a rapid speed from the heart into the head and neck. The jugular is a vein. It's gravity fed. It collects the deoxygenated blood from the head and neck and sends it back to the heart via the superior vena cava, where it's oxygenated again and the whole process starts all over. You follow?"

Will nodded. "Arteries are the water supply, veins are the drain. It's a closed system."

"Right," she agreed, giving him points for the plumbing analogy. "All arteries have a little muscle spiraling around them that relaxes and contracts to control blood flow. If you cut an artery in two, sever it, the muscle contracts, curling up like a broken rubber band. That helps stanch the blood flow. But, if you slice open the artery without cutting it in two, the victim dies from exsanguination, usually very quickly. We're talking seconds, not minutes. The blood shoots out, they panic, their heart beats faster, blood shoots out faster, and they're dead."

"Where is the carotid?"

She put her fingers alongside her trachea. "You've got one carotid on each side, mirror images. I'll have to excise the wound, but it appears that the knife followed this route, entering near the sixth cervical vertebra and traveling along

the angle of the jaw.”

He stared at her neck. “How hard is that to hit from behind?”

“Allison is very small framed. Her neck is the width of my palm. There’s so much going on in the back of the neck—muscles, blood vessels, vertebrae. You would have to pause, to take a second, to aim so that you hit the exact spot. You couldn’t go straight in from the back. You’d have to go from the back toward the side. With the right knife, at the right angle, the odds are pretty good that you’ll end up opening both the carotid and the jugular.”

“The right knife?”

“I’m guessing it had a three-and-a-half- to four-inch blade.”

“So, we’re talking about a kitchen knife?”

He obviously wasn’t good with measurements. She showed him the distance using her finger and thumb. “Three and a half inches. Think about the size of her neck. Or my neck, for that matter.” Sara kept the measurement between her fingers and held her hand to her neck. “If the blade had been any longer, it would’ve exited the front of the neck.”

He crossed his arms. She couldn’t tell if he was pleased or annoyed with the visual aids. He asked, “How wide do you think the blade was?”

She narrowed the space between her thumb and finger. “Five-eighths? Three-quarters? The skin is elastic. She must have struggled. The incision is wider at the bottom, so the killer jammed in the knife to the hilt, then twisted the blade to make sure he was doing maximum damage. I’m sure it wasn’t over an inch wide.”

“That sounds like a large folding knife.”

Sara thought he was right based on the bruise from the hilt, but she told him, “I really need to look at the wound in a better setting than inside the freezer.”

“Was it serrated?”

“I don’t think so, but really, let me get into the wound and I can tell you everything you need to know.”

He chewed his lip, obviously thinking about what she had told him. “It takes less than two pounds of pressure to penetrate skin.”

“As long as the knife is pointed and sharp and the blade is forcefully thrust.”

“Sounds like something a hunter would know how to do.”

“Hunter, doctor, mortician, butcher.” She felt the need to add, “Or anyone with a good search engine. I’m sure you can find all kinds of anatomical diagrams on the Internet. Whether they’re accurate is up for debate, but whoever did this was showing off his skills. I hate to keep banging the same drum, but Tommy had an IQ of eighty. It took him two months to learn how to tie his shoes. Do you really think that he committed this crime?”

“I don’t like to speculate.”

She gave him his own words. “It’s just us down here. I won’t tell anyone.”

Will didn’t give in as easily as Sara had. “Was Tommy a hunter?”

“I doubt Gordon would’ve let him have a gun.”

Will took a moment before asking his next question. “Why not drown her? She was standing by a lake.”

“The water must have been close to freezing. There was the chance of a struggle. She could’ve yelled. My house is—was—across the lake from Lover’s Point, but sometimes when the wind was right, I could hear music playing, kids

laughing. Certainly, any number of people would have heard a young girl screaming for her life."

"Wouldn't it be easier to cut the front of the throat instead of going in through the back?"

She nodded, saying, "If you cut the trachea, the victim wouldn't be able to speak, let alone yell for help."

Will pointed out, "Women tend to use knives."

Sara hadn't considered the possibility, but she was grateful his mind was moving off Tommy. "Allison was small. A woman could have overwhelmed her, then carried her to the water."

"Was the killer left-handed? Right-handed?"

"Well—" Sara was going to ask if it mattered to someone who could not tell the difference, but answered him instead. "I'm assuming right-handed." Sara held up her right hand. "The attacker would have been at a superior position, standing above her, possibly straddling her, when the blade went in." She paused. "This is why I don't like to make assumptions. I need to check her stomach and lungs. If we find lake water, then that means she was probably facedown in the water when he stabbed her."

"Knowing whether she was in the water or in the mud when she was stabbed will be instrumental to my investigation."

She furrowed her brow. "Are you being a smart-ass, Agent Trent?"

"Based on how you asked that question, I think my answer should be no."

Sara laughed. "Good call."

"Thank you, Dr. Linton." He looked around the embalming suite and gave a shiver. "It's cold down here. Aren't you cold?"

She realized he was wearing the same clothes from yesterday but for the black T-shirt, which he'd changed for a white one. "Didn't you bring a coat?"

He shook his head. "I'm in an awful situation with my clothes. I need to borrow your mom's washer and dryer tonight. Do you think she'll mind?"

"No. Of course not."

"Have you heard from Frank Wallace today?"

She shook her head.

"It's starting to annoy me that he hasn't bothered to show up. Does he normally let Lena do all the heavy lifting?"

"I don't know how they work together now. She used to go back and forth between Frank and my husband, whoever needed her at the time."

"I'm just wondering if she's reporting back to Frank or if they're both doing their own thing." Will gestured toward the gurneys. "Can I help you with anything?"

"What's your squeamish level?"

"I don't like rats and I'm bad around vomit."

"I think we're safe on both points." Sara wanted to get started so she wasn't here past midnight. "Can you help me get Allison onto the table?"

The joking camaraderie from before quickly turned into a more serious collaboration. They worked in silence, rolling the gurney into the freezer, lifting the body in unison. There was a scale in the floor. The digital readout already took the gurney into account. Sara rolled the bed onto the plate. Allison Spooner had weighed 102 pounds.

When Sara put on a pair of surgical gloves, Will followed suit. She let him help unzip the body bag and roll the girl left, then right, to slide the black plastic out from under her. He held one end of the measuring tape so she could get the girl's height.

Will said, "Sixty-three inches. Five foot three."

"I need to write this down." Sara knew there was no way she could remember all these numbers. There was a whiteboard mounted to the back wall over the counter. Sara used the marker hanging on a string to record Allison's height and weight. To be thorough, she then added age, sex, race, and hair color. The girl's eyes were open, so she noted that her eye color was brown.

When Sara turned around, she found Will looking at the numbers. Sara had used abbreviations that even a reading person would have trouble understanding. She pointed to the letters. "Date of birth, height, weight—"

"I got it," he said. His tone was as close to curt as she'd ever heard.

Sara resisted the urge to talk about the elephant in the room, to tell him that it was foolish for him to be ashamed. He had spent a lifetime hiding his dyslexia, and she wasn't going to fix that by confronting him about it in the basement of the funeral home. Not to mention that it was none of her business.

She walked to the tall locker beside the office, assuming Brock still kept his supplies in the same place. "Crap," she mumbled. The camera and all its pieces were laid out on velvet cloths covering two shelves. She picked up a lens. "I'm not sure I know how this thing goes together."

"Mind if I try?" Will didn't wait for her response. He picked up the lens and twisted it onto the camera, then bolted on the lights, the flash, and the metal guide that recorded depth. He pressed several buttons until the LCD display blinked on, then scrolled through all the icons until he found the one he was looking for.

Sara had two degrees and a board certification under her belt, but hell would have frozen over before she would've been able to figure out anything to do with the camera. Curiosity broke her earlier resolve. "Have you ever been tested?"

"No." He stood behind Sara, holding the camera in front so she could see. "Zoom here," he said, flicking the toggle.

"You could probably—"

"This is macro."

"Will—"

"Super macro." He kept talking over her until she gave up. "Here's where you adjust for color. This is light. Anti-shake. Red-eye." He clicked through the features like a photography instructor.

Sara finally relented. "Why don't I point and you shoot?"

"All right." His back was stiff, and she could tell that he was irritated.

"I'm sorry I—"

"Please don't apologize."

Sara held his gaze for a few moments longer, wishing she could fix this. There was nothing to say if he wouldn't even let her apologize.

She told him, "Let's start."

Sara directed him around the table as he photographed Allison Spooner head to toe. The warm-up jacket. The stab wound that went through to her neck. The

sliced material where the knife had cut through. The teeth marks on the inside of her lip.

She folded back the torn jeans, exposing the knee. There was a half-moon-shaped tear, the skin hanging on by a flap. A dark bruise outlined the area of impact. "This kind of laceration comes from blunt trauma. She fell very hard on her knee, probably with her full weight, definitely on something hard, like a rock. The impact busted open the skin."

"Can we look at the wrists?"

The jacket had bunched up around the girl's hands. Sara pushed up the material.

He took a few photographs. "Ligature marks?"

Sara leaned down for a closer look. She checked the other wrist. The veins were an iridescent blue. Lines of red shot through the skin where clots held the blood in place.

She explained, "Bodies start to float anywhere from two hours to two days after they're in the water. Decomposition starts quickly—as soon as the heart and lungs stop, the body turns on itself. Bacteria leaks out of the intestines. Gases build up, causing buoyancy. The cinder blocks would have kept her from floating to the surface. The cold water would've retarded decomposition. I don't know what the temperature of the lake was, but we can assume it was close to freezing. She was probably facedown, her hands hanging in front of her. Livor mortis settled into her fingertips, pooled up into her wrists. I suppose you could mistake the discoloration for ligature marks. It would've been dark that time of morning." Sara couldn't make any more excuses for Frank. "Honestly, I thought Frank was lying to me when he said it the first time."

"Why lie about that?" Will asked. "The stab wound is evidence enough that something was seriously wrong."

"You'll have to ask Frank."

"I've got a lot of questions for him if he ever shows up."

"He's probably with Brad. Frank has known him since he was a kid. We all have."

Will only nodded.

Sara put the ruler by Allison's wrist so he could take a photograph. When he was finished, she turned the hand over. There was a faint scar along the crease of the wrist. She checked the other hand. "She tried to kill herself before. A razor, maybe a sharp knife. I'd say within the last ten years."

Will studied the raised white lines. "What was Tommy like?"

She was surprised by the question because her focus was on Allison. Sara hadn't slept much last night. She'd had a lot of time to think about Tommy. "He was cheerful," she told Will. "I don't think there was ever a time I didn't see him smile. Even when he felt bad."

"Did you ever see him angry?"

"No."

"Did he have many broken bones or bruises?"

She shook her head, knowing where this was going. "Gordon was very gentle with him. The only time I saw him angry was when Tommy ate a whole jar of paste."

Will smiled fondly. "I used to eat paste." He held the camera at his side. "I

wonder if it tastes as good as it used to.”

Sara laughed. “I wouldn’t recommend finding out. Tommy was sick for days.”
“You didn’t tell me Lena was raped.”

The observation came out of nowhere. Sara was taken off guard, which was probably what he had intended. “It was a long time ago.”

“Faith found it on the Internet.”

She busied herself over by the back counter, finding a roll of brown paper under the cabinet so she could lay out the clothes. “Does it matter?”

“I don’t know. It bothers me that you left it out.”

Sara spread out the paper. “A lot of women have been raped.” She looked up when he didn’t respond. “Don’t feel sorry for her, Will. She’s so good at making people feel sorry for her.”

“I think she regrets what happened to Tommy.”

Sara shook her head. “You can’t expect good from her. She’s not a normal person. There’s no kindness in her.”

He spoke carefully, staring his meaning into Sara. “I’ve met a lot of people in my life who were truly unkind.”

“Still—”

“I don’t think Lena’s completely devoid of a soul. I think she’s angry, and self-destructive, and feeling trapped.”

“I used to think that, too. And I felt sorry for her. Right before she got my husband killed.”

There wasn’t much more Sara could say after that. She unbuttoned Allison’s shirt and continued to undress the girl. Will changed out the memory card and took photographs when she asked him to. She didn’t ask for his help when she draped a clean white sheet over Allison’s body. Their companionable silence was a distant memory. The tension was so great that Sara felt herself getting a headache. She was angry with herself that it mattered. Will Trent was not her friend. His dyslexia, his quirky sense of humor, his dirty clothes—none of this was her concern. All she needed for him to do was get his job done and then go back to his wife.

Out in the hall, the metal door slammed shut. Moments later, Frank Wallace came into the room carrying a cardboard box. He was wearing a long trench coat and a pair of leather gloves. His hair was wet from the rain.

Will said, “Chief Wallace. It’s nice to finally meet you. I was beginning to think you were avoiding me.”

“You wanna tell me why you’ve got half my guys out chasing their tails in the pouring rain?”

“I assume you’ve heard that we found the crime scene where Allison Spooner was stabbed.”

“You test that blood yet? Could be an animal for all I know.”

Will told him, “Yes, I tested it on scene. It’s human blood.”

“All right, so he killed her in the woods.”

“It appears so.”

“I called off the search. You can bring in your own team if you wanna comb through six inches of mud.”

“That’s a very good idea, Chief Wallace. I think I will call in a team.”

Frank was obviously finished with Will. He dropped the box at Sara’s feet.

"Here's all the evidence we've got." She held her breath until he backed away. He smelled rancid, a combination of mouthwash, sweat, and tobacco.

Will said, "I hope you don't mind, Chief Wallace. I've got Detective Adams canvassing the neighborhood and checking with Allison's teachers from school."

"Do whatever you want," Frank grunted. "I'm finished with her."

"Is there a problem?"

"You wouldn't be here if there wasn't." Frank coughed into his gloved hand. Sara winced at the sound. "Lena screwed this whole thing up top to bottom. I'm not covering for her anymore. She's a bad cop. Her work's sloppy. She managed to get somebody killed." He gave Sara a meaningful look. "Somebody else."

She felt hot and cold at the same time. Frank was saying all the things that she wanted to hear—all the things she knew in her heart—but the words sounded dirty coming from his mouth. He was exploiting Jeffrey's death, while Sara was trying to avenge it.

Will said, "Lena told me you spoke with Lionel Harris last night?"

Suddenly, Frank seemed nervous. "Lionel doesn't know anything."

"Still, he might have some personal information about Allison."

"Lionel's daddy raised him right. He knows better than to be sniffing around a little white girl from the college."

Sara felt her mouth open in surprise.

Frank shrugged off her shock. "You know what I'm saying, Sweetpea. There's not a lot that a sixty-three-year-old black man has in common with a twenty-one-year-old white girl. At least not if he knows what's good for him." He nodded toward Allison. "What did you find?"

Sara couldn't find her voice to answer him.

Will provided, "Knife wound to the neck. There's no definitive cause of death yet."

Will caught Sara's eye. She nodded her complicity, though she still felt shocked by what Frank had said. He had never talked this way around her parents. Eddie would have shown Frank the door if Cathy hadn't beaten him to it. Sara wanted to chalk it up to his exhaustion. He certainly looked worse than he had the day before. Every item of clothing he wore, from his cheap suit to his trench coat, was wrinkled as if he had slept in it. His skin sagged off his face. His eyes glistened in the light. And he still hadn't taken off his leather gloves.

Will broke the moment. "Chief Wallace, have you completed your report yet on the incident in the garage?"

Frank's jaw clenched tighter. "I'm working on it."

"Can you run it through for me now? Just the highlights. I'll get the details when you turn in your report."

Frank's voice was gruff, making it clear he didn't like being questioned. "Tommy was in the garage with a knife in his hand. We told him to put it down. He didn't."

Sara waited for more, but it was Will who prompted, "And then?"

Frank gave another sloppy shrug. "The kid panicked. He pushed Lena out of the way. I went to help her. He came toward me with the knife, cut my arm. Next thing I know, Tommy's tearing down the driveway. Brad went after him. I told Lena to go, too." He stopped. "She sure took her time."

"She hesitated?"

"Lena usually runs the other way when there's a fire." He glanced at Sara, as if he expected her to agree. In Sara's experience, the opposite was true. Lena stood as close to the fire as she could. It was the best vantage point from which to watch people burn.

Frank continued. "She trotted after them. Brad ended up being the one to pay for it."

Will leaned against the counter, one hand resting on the edge. His interview style was certainly unusual. Put a beer in his hand and he could be talking football around a barbecue. "Did anyone discharge their weapon?"

"No."

Will nodded slowly, drawing out his next question. "When you opened the garage door, did Tommy already have the knife in his hand?"

Frank leaned down and pulled an evidence bag out of the cardboard box. "This knife."

Will didn't take the bag, so Sara did. The hunting knife was serrated on one side and sharp on the other. The hilt was large. The blade was at least five inches long and an inch and a half wide. It was a miracle Brad was still alive. Without thinking, she blurted out, "This isn't the knife that was used on Allison."

Will took the weapon from Sara. He gave her a look that Tommy Braham had probably gotten every day of his life. He told Frank, "This looks new."

Frank gave the knife a cursory glance. "So?"

"Was Tommy a knife enthusiast?"

Frank crossed his arms again. There was a bead of sweat on his forehead. Even with the colder temperature in the basement, he seemed to be burning up in the coat and gloves. "Obviously, he had at least two. Like the doc said. This isn't the same one that was used on the girl."

Sara would have melted into the floor if she had the power.

Will asked, "What made you suspect Tommy was involved in Allison's murder? Other than the knife in his hand?"

"He was in her apartment."

Will didn't offer any information to the contrary, but Sara saw that he'd managed to get a question answered. If Lena had talked to Frank, then she hadn't mentioned that Tommy lived in the garage, not Allison.

Frank's patience had obviously run out. "Listen, son, I've been doing this a long time. There's two reasons a man does this to a woman: sex and sex. Tommy already confessed. What's the point of all this?"

Will smiled. "Dr. Linton, I know you haven't done a full exam on Allison Spooner, but are there any signs of sexual assault?"

Sara was surprised to find herself back in the conversation. "Not that I can see."

"Were her clothes torn?"

"There was a tear in the knee of her jeans where she fell. Her jacket was cut by the knife."

"Are there any other significant wounds except for the one in her neck?"

"Not that I've found."

"So, Tommy wanted to have sex with Allison. She told him no. He didn't tear her clothes. He didn't try to force her anyway. He puts her on his scooter and

takes her out to the lake. He stabs her once in the neck. And then he dumps her in the lake with the chains and cinder blocks, writes a fake suicide note, and goes back to clean up her apartment. Is that about right, Chief Wallace?"

Frank lifted his chin. Hostility radiated off him like heat from a fire.

Will said, "The note is what's bothering me. Why not just dump her in the lake and leave it at that? It's doubtful anyone would have found her. The lake is pretty deep, right?" He looked at Sara when Frank did not answer. "Right?"

She nodded. "Right."

Will seemed to be waiting for an answer from Frank that wasn't going to come. Sara waited for him to ask about the 911 call, the boyfriend. Will didn't. He just kept leaning against the counter, waiting for Frank to say something. For his part, Frank seemed to be scrambling for an explanation.

He finally came up with "The kid was retarded. Right, Doc?"

Sara told him, "I wish you wouldn't use that word. He—"

"It is what it is," Frank interrupted. "Tommy was stupid. You can't reason with stupid. He stabbed her once? So what. He left a note? So what. He was retarded."

Will let Frank's words hang for a few seconds. "You knew Allison, right? From the diner?"

"I seen her around."

"Have you found her car yet?"

"No."

Will smiled. "Did you process Tommy's car?"

"I hate to break the news to you, Einstein, but the retard confessed. End of story." He looked at his watch. "I can't stick around jerking you off for the rest of the day. I just wanted to make sure you had all the evidence." He nodded to Sara. "You can reach me on my cell if you need me. I gotta get back to Brad."

Will didn't protest the abrupt departure. "Thank you, Chief. I appreciate your cooperation."

Frank couldn't figure out if he was being sarcastic or not. He ignored the comment, telling Sara, "I'll let you know about Brad," before stomping out of the room.

Sara wasn't sure what to say. Will had let all the important questions go unanswered. Jeffrey's style of interviewing had been much more aggressive. Once he had Frank on the ropes, he would've never let the man walk out of the room. She turned to Will. He was still leaning against the counter.

She wasn't going to ignore the hundredth elephant that had just walked into the room. "Why didn't you ask Frank about the boyfriend?"

He shrugged. "An answer doesn't really matter if it's a lie."

"I admit he was being an ass, but he was also being forthcoming." She snapped off her gloves and tossed them into the trashcan. "Did it occur to you that he has no idea Lena's been doctoring all this evidence?"

Will scratched his jaw. "I've found that people tend to hide things for different reasons. They don't want someone else to look bad. They think they're doing the right thing, but they're really not. They're actually hindering an investigation."

Sara had no idea where this was going. "I've known Frank for a long time. Despite that stupid, ignorant thing he said about Lionel, he's not a bad man."

"Sweetpea."

She rolled her eyes. "I know it seems like I'm too close—"

"Those were nice gloves he was wearing."

Sara found herself holding her breath. "I walked right into that, didn't I?"

"Tommy took a beating."

She sighed. Sara's instinct had been to protect Frank. She'd never considered that Will would see this for what it was—hiding evidence. "Frank's hand was cut up pretty badly. They must've sutured him at the hospital."

"I don't imagine they asked very many questions."

"Probably not." Even at Grady, cops were given a free pass on suspicious injuries.

"How dangerous is a gunshot wound if it grazes your hand?"

"Who was shot?"

Will didn't answer. "Let's say your hand was grazed. You didn't get medical attention. You had a first aid kit to clean it out yourself, then you slapped some Band-Aids on it. What are the chances of getting an infection?"

"Extremely high."

"What are the symptoms?"

"It depends on the type of infection, whether or not it gets into the bloodstream. You could be looking at anything from fever and chills to organ failure and brain damage." She repeated her question. "Who was shot?"

"Lena." Will held up his hand and pointed to the palm. "Here on the side."

Sara felt her heart sink, though not for Lena. She was more than capable of taking care of herself. "Frank shot her?"

He shrugged. "It's likely. Did you see the cut on his arm?"

She shook her head again.

"I think he ripped it open on some metal that was sticking out of the garage door."

Sara put her hand on the counter, needing the support. Frank had stood right in front of her and said that Tommy had cut him with the knife. "Why would he lie about that?"

"He's an alcoholic, right?"

She shook her head, but this time it was more from her own confusion. "He never drank on the job before. At least not that I ever saw."

"And now?"

"He was drinking yesterday. I don't know how much, but I smelled it on him when I got to the station. I just assumed that he was shaken up because of Brad. That generation ..." She let her voice trail off. "I guess I glossed it over because Frank's from a time when it was all right to take a couple of drinks during the middle of the day. My husband would've never tolerated it. Not while Frank was on duty."

"A lot has changed since he died, Sara." Will's voice was gentle. "This isn't Jeffrey's police force anymore. He's not here to keep them in line."

She felt tears come to her eyes. Sara wiped them away, laughing at herself. "God, Will. Why am I always crying around you?"

"I'm hoping it's not my aftershave."

She laughed halfheartedly. "What now?"

Will knelt down and started rummaging through the box of evidence. "Frank knows Allison has a car. Lena didn't. Lena knows Allison didn't live in the

garage. Frank doesn't." He found a woman's wallet and opened the clasp. "It's odd that they're not working together on this."

"Frank made it clear he's finished with her. My personal vendetta aside, he has ample reason to cut her loose."

"I gather they've been through a lot. Why cut her off now?"

Sara couldn't think of an answer. Will was right. Lena had done a lot of things in her career that Frank had covered for. "Maybe this is just the last straw. Tommy is dead. Brad was badly injured."

"I talked to Faith on the ride over. There's no Julie Smith that she can find. The cell phone number you gave me was for a throwaway purchased at a Radio Shack in Cooperstown."

"That's about forty-five minutes away."

"Tommy and Allison must've had throwaways, too. Neither one has a record of a phone. We'll need their numbers before we can track back where the phones were purchased, but that's not going to make much of a difference, I think." He held up the knife Frank had given them. "This doesn't appear to have blood on it. Would they clean it during surgery?"

"They'd throw iodine on it, but they wouldn't clean it like this." She studied the weapon. "You'd expect blood around the hilt."

"You would," he agreed. "I'm going to have the local field agent do a lab run for me. Can I leave some samples here so he can take everything when you're done?"

"Nick Shelton?"

"You know him?"

"He worked with my husband all the time." She offered, "I'll call him when I'm finished."

Will held up the suicide note and stared at the words. "I don't understand this."

"It says 'I want it over.' "

He gave her a sharp look. "Thank you, Sara. I know what it says. What I don't understand is who wrote it."

"The killer?" she tried.

"Possibly." Will sat back on his heel, staring at the line of text that ran along the top section of the paper. "I'm thinking there's two people out there—the killer and the 911 caller. The killer did his thing with Allison, and the caller is trying to get him in trouble for it. And then Julie Smith was trying to get Tommy off the hook by enlisting your help."

"It sounds a lot like you've taken him off your list of suspects."

"I thought you didn't like to make assumptions."

"I'm fine when other people do it."

Will chuckled, but he kept his gaze on the note. "If the killer wrote this, who's he telling he wants it over?"

She knelt down to look over his shoulder. "The handwriting doesn't look like Tommy's." She pointed to the "I" at the beginning of the sentence. "See this? In Tommy's confession, he used a formal capital with—" Sara realized how useless her words were to him. "Okay, think about it this way: if the first stroke of the 'I' is like a stem, and there are branches ... Well, not branches, more like bars ..." She let her voice trail off. Trouble visualizing the shape of letters was at the core

of his language problem.

“It’s frustrating,” Will agreed. “If only he had written something easier. Like a smiley face.”

Sara was saved a response by Will’s phone ringing.

“Will Trent.” He listened for at least a solid minute before saying, “No. Keep canvassing. Tell him I’ll be there in a few minutes.” He closed the phone. “This day just keeps getting worse.”

“What’s wrong?”

“That was Lena. We’ve got another dead body.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Will followed Sara in his car as she drove to the campus. He was starting to recognize landmarks, houses with fences and play sets that were familiar enough for him to remember the turns. The campus was new territory, and like most schools, it seemed to follow no particular design. Buildings had been added on when the money was there to construct them. Consequently, the campus sprawled over several acres like a hand with too many fingers.

He had spent all morning with Lena Adams, and he thought he could read her mood by now. Her tone on the telephone had been strained. She was getting to the breaking point. Will wanted to press her a little harder but there was no way he could have Lena meet him at the crime scene right now. Sara had made it obvious that she wasn't going to be in the same room with the woman she believed killed her husband. Right now, Will needed Sara's forensic eye more than he needed Lena's confession.

He dialed Faith's number as he steered his car around the curve of the lake. Will saw the boathouse Lena had pointed out to him earlier. Canoes and kayaks were stacked up against the building.

"You've got me for three more hours," Faith said by way of greeting.

"We've got a second victim. They think his name is Jason Howell."

"That's good news." Faith was hardly the optimistic type, but she was right. A new victim meant a new crime scene, a new set of clues to follow. They had absolutely no useful information on Allison Spooner. The aunt was nowhere to be found. Allison hadn't made any connections at home or school. The only person who seemed to mourn her loss was Lionel Harris from the diner, and he was hardly a close friend. But Jason Howell's death would surely open up new leads. A second body meant a second course of investigation. Find one detail, one person or friend or enemy, that tied together both Allison Spooner and Jason Howell, and usually that detail could lead to the murderer. Even the most careful killer made mistakes. Two crime scenes meant twice as many mistakes.

Faith told him, "You're going to have a hard time getting a warrant for all the names of the students in that dorm building."

"I hope the college will be compliant."

"I hope this baby comes out clutching a bag full of gold."

She had a point. Colleges were notorious for their desire for privacy. "Where are we on the warrant for Allison's room?"

"You mean the real one?" She seemed to be enjoying this. "I faxed it to the station about ten minutes ago. There's no landline to the Braham house, so that's a dead end. Did you get anything from the autopsy?"

He told her about Allison's injury. "It's unusual that the killer stabbed her through the back of the neck instead of slicing through the front."

"I'll run it through ViCAP right now." She meant the FBI's Violent Criminal Apprehension Program, a database designed to detect similarities in criminal

behavior. If Allison's killer had used this method before, ViCAP would have a record of the case.

Will asked, "Can you give Nick Shelton a call, too? He's the local field agent here. Sara knows him. I want him to run some stuff to the Central lab for me. Sara's going to let him know when she's got everything ready."

"What else?"

"I still need that audiotape of the 911 call. I want Sara to listen to the voice and see if it belongs to our Julie Smith."

"Can you say a sentence that doesn't have 'Sara' in it?"

Will scratched his jaw, his fingers finding the scar that ran down his face. He felt jittery again, much as he'd felt when he'd been talking to Sara in the basement of the funeral home.

She said, "You know that Charlie is at Central this week?"

"No." Charlie Reed was on Amanda's team. He was the best forensics guy Will had ever worked with. "Central's an hour away from here."

"You want me to give him a call and see if he can come out?"

Will thought about the garage, the crime scene in the woods. He was working two cases now—one against Lena Adams and Frank Wallace and another against the man who had killed Allison Spooner and possibly their new victim. "I told the local chief I was bringing out a team. Might as well follow through on it."

"I'll give him a call," Faith offered. "ViCAP shows no similar hits on a killer using a knife to cut from the rear through the carotid sheath, the carotid, the jugular, or the carotid and jugular. I cross-referenced the twist, too. No MO matches."

"I guess that's good news."

"Or really bad news," she countered. "That's a clean kill, Will. You don't do that your first time out. I have to agree with Sara on this one. I don't see your retarded kid doing this."

"Intellectually disabled." Now that Sara had pointed it out, the word was starting to grate. Will supposed he should feel some solidarity with Tommy Braham since they both had a problem. "Call me when you hear from Charlie."

"Will do."

Will closed his phone to end the call. Ahead, Sara's SUV took a turn up a circular drive that led to a three-story brick building. She parked behind a campus patrol car at the front entrance. The rain was still unrelenting. She pulled up the hood of her jacket before running up the steps to the entrance.

Will got out of his car and ran up after her, his shoes kicking up puddles. His socks hadn't dried since he'd stepped into the lake this morning. They were in the process of rubbing a large blister on his heel.

Sara waited for him in a small alcove between two sets of glass doors. The sleeves of her jacket were dripping wet. She knocked on the doors. "No one is in the patrol car out front." She cupped her hands to the glass. "Is someone supposed to be here?"

"The security guard was told to remain in the building until we got here." Will punched a few buttons on the keypad by the door. The LCD screen remained blank. He turned around, trying to find a camera.

"Back door's open."

Will looked through the glass. The building was wider than it was deep. A set

of stairs faced the front door. A long hallway shot off to the side. At the back of the building, an exit sign glowed softly over the open fire door.

Sara asked, "Where are the police?"

"I told Lena not to call anyone."

Sara turned to look at him.

"She got the call on her cell phone. Apparently, the campus police have her as an after-hours contact."

"She didn't call Frank?"

"No. Funny, right?"

"'Funny' isn't the word I'd use."

Will didn't respond. Sara's personal ties were clouding her view. She wasn't looking at this as a criminal investigation. With two suspects, you always worked one against the other to see who would flip first to get the better deal. Self-preservation generally won out over loyalty. The garage where Tommy lived painted a grim story for Frank and Lena. At this point, it was just a matter of who would talk first.

Sara looked back through the glass door. "Here he is."

Will saw a small black man making his way up the hall. He was young and skinny, the shirt of his uniform puffing out like a woman's blouse. He gripped his cell phone close to his chest as he approached them. With the other hand, he waved his key card over a pad by the door. The lock clicked open.

Sara rushed in. "Marty, are you all right?"

Will could see why she was worried. The man's face was ashen.

"Dr. Linton," the man said. "I'm sorry. I was just outside trying to catch my breath."

"Let's sit down." Sara helped him to a bench by the door. She kept her arm around his shoulders. "Where's your inhaler?"

"I just used it." He reached his hand out to Will. "Sorry for my state. I'm Marty Harris. I think you met my grandfather this morning."

"Will Trent." Will shook his hand. The man's grip was weak.

Marty waved his phone in the air. "I was talking to Lena about what happened." He coughed. The color was slowly returning to his face. "I'm sorry, it just got me worked up again."

Will leaned his back against the wall. He tucked his hands into his pockets. He had figured out a long time ago that showing his irritation tended to get the exact opposite result he was looking for. "Can you tell me what you told Detective Adams?"

He coughed a few more times. Sara rubbed his back. "I'm all right now," he told her. "It's just hard to recollect it all. I've never seen anything like that in my life."

Will fought to keep his patience. He looked up and down the hallway. The lights were still off, but his eyes were adjusting. There wasn't a camera on the front door. He guessed the entrance keypad was meant to catch students and visitors going into the building. There was a camera over the fire exit in the back, though, and he could see it was tilted up toward the ceiling.

"It was like that when I got here," Marty told him. He put his phone in his shirt pocket and pushed his glasses up his nose.

"When was that?"

"About thirty minutes ago, I guess." Marty looked at his watch. "It seems like it's been a lot longer than that."

"Can you tell me what happened?"

He patted his hand to his chest. "I was making my rounds. I do that every three hours. With the students gone for the holiday, I wasn't checking the dorms. We do drive-bys to make sure the front and back doors are okay, but we don't go in." He coughed into his hand before continuing. "I was at the library when I noticed one of the windows on the second floor was open. The second floor to this building." He paused for breath. "I figured the wind must've pulled it open. Those old windows never shut tight. With the rain, there'd be a lot of water damage if I didn't do something about it." He paused again. Will could see he was sweating despite the fact that the building was cold. "I went up there and saw him, and ..." He shook his head. "I called the emergency number."

"Not 911?"

"We got a direct number we're supposed to call if something happens on campus."

Sara explained, "The dean doesn't like bad publicity."

"Can't get more bad than this." Marty gave a harsh laugh. "Lord, what was done to that boy. The smell is the worst part. I don't think I'll ever get it out of my breath."

Will asked, "Did you come in through the front door or the back door?"

"Front." He indicated the fire exit. "I know I shouldn't'a gone out the back, but I needed air."

"Was the back door locked?"

He shook his head.

Will saw the red warning signs plastered all around the door. "Does the alarm go off when it's opened?"

"Students usually bypass the alarm the first week they're here. We can't keep up with them. The minute we hook it up, they disconnect it again. Lots of engineers and computer folks in this place. They look at it as a challenge."

"They bypass the alarm for fun?"

"It's easier to get to the library that way. The back entrance for the cafeteria is there, too. They're not supposed to go through the loading docks because of safety concerns, but they sneak back through anyway."

Will pointed to the camera mounted over the door. "Is that the only camera in the building?"

"No, sir, and like I said, it was tilted up like that when I got here. There's another one on the second floor that's been tilted up, too."

Will saw how easy it would be to get into the building undetected. As long as you knew where the camera was, you could stand underneath it and use a broom handle or something similar to push it up, then go on your merry way. Still, he asked, "Do you have footage from the cameras?"

"Yes, sir. It's all sent to a central building on campus. I don't have the key, but my boss, Demetrius, is on the way. Should be here in an hour or two." He told Sara, "He's in Griffin with his daddy's people."

Will asked, "What about exterior cameras?"

"The cold got to 'em. They're all out. Half are frozen solid, the rest cracked like walnuts. We had one fall on a student's car the other day. Broke the back

windshield.”

Will rubbed his jaw. “Does anyone else know the cameras are out?”

He thought about it. “Demetrius, the dean, maybe some other people if they happened to look up. Some of the damage is pretty obvious even from the ground.”

“I saw the keypad by the door. Is that the only way to get in through the front?”

“Yeah, and I already checked the logs. I can run a system diagnostic on the keypad. No one’s been in or out the front door since Saturday afternoon. The only key card not scanned out belongs to Jason Howell. The room he’s in is registered to that name, too.” He told Sara, “I don’t know why he’d stay here. Heat’s off. Campus is shut down. Library closed at noon on Sunday. I thought this place was deserted.”

“It’s not your fault,” Sara told him, though Will had some issues about the man opening the exit door. She redeemed herself by asking, “Do you think you could get a list of all the students in this dorm? It might be good if Agent Trent had them.”

“That’s not a problem at all. I can print them up for you right now.”

Will asked, “Do you remember what you touched upstairs?”

“Nothing. The door was open a little. I got this feeling, like this really bad feeling. I pushed open the door with my foot and saw him and ...” He looked down at the ground. “I wish I could take a pill to forget all this.”

Will said, “I’m sorry to push you, Mr. Harris, but do you remember if the lights were on or off?”

“All the switches are downstairs.” He pointed to a set of light switches by the stairs. They were high up, probably to discourage students from flicking them on and off at will. “I turned on the lights before I went up, but then I turned them all back off like I found them.”

“Thank you for your time, Mr. Harris.” Will nodded toward the stairs, indicating he was ready to go.

Sara stood up, but she didn’t leave. “Did you know Jason?”

“No, ma’am. I’d seen that girl at the diner—Allison. You know how Granddaddy is, had her running around every second she was on the clock. I’d smile at her but we never talked. Something like this happens, and you realize you need to be paying more attention to the people around you. I’d hate to think there was something I could’ve done to stop all this.”

Will could tell the man was genuinely distressed. He put his hand on Marty’s shoulder. “I’m sure you did everything you could do.”

They walked back to the stairs. Sara reached into her jacket pocket and pulled out two pairs of paper booties to cover their feet. Will slipped them on, watching her do the same. She pulled on a latex glove and reached up, flipping the light switch. Light came down the stairwell.

Will went first. The right way to do this would be to send in a team to clear the building, but Will knew that the killer was long gone. Bodies didn’t smell when they were fresh.

The building was old, but solid, with an institutional feel that wasn’t exactly welcoming. The stairs went straight up to the third floor, creating a wind chamber for cold air. Will looked down at the black rubber treads. They would

need to be checked for traces of blood. He hoped Faith had managed to get in touch with Charlie Reed. Their killer was smart, and he knew how to cover his tracks. But he didn't have the benefit of a giant lake to wash away his presence this time. If anyone could find trace evidence, it was Charlie.

The view at the top of the second-floor landing was familiar: a long hallway lined with closed doors, but for one. At the end of the hall was a cased opening, the inside obscured by shadows.

"Bathrooms," Sara guessed.

Will turned around and found the security camera mounted high in the corner by the stairs. The lens pointed up toward the ceiling. Jason's killer had probably pressed himself along the stair railing, stood on the bottom step leading to the third floor, and used something to push up the camera.

"You smell that?"

Will took a shallow breath. "He's been here a while."

Sara had come prepared. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a paper mask. "This should help."

Will was torn between his need to be a gentleman and his need to not throw up. "Do you only have one?"

"I'll be okay."

She continued down the hall. Will slipped on the mask. The air got marginally more breathable. Jason Howell's room was closer to the bathroom than the stairs. Their footsteps echoed around them, bouncing off the walls. The closer they got, the stronger the smell became. Will saw that the students all had bulletin boards on their doors. Papers were pinned on top of photographs and messages. The board on Jason's door was empty.

Sara put the back of her hand to her nose. "God, that's bad."

She took a breath through her mouth before going into the room. Will stood in the doorway. He held his breath as the smell of death washed over him.

The kid was lying on his back, bloodshot eyes staring at the ceiling. His face was swollen, almost crimson. His nose was broken. Dried blood circled his nostrils and mouth. One hand dangled to the floor. The thumb was cut. The tip of the pinky finger hung by a few threads.

"Looks like a match." Sara had found Jason's student ID hanging from the closet door. She showed the picture to Will. Even with all the damage, there was no mistaking the resemblance.

Oddly, Jason was clothed in layers—a pair of sweatpants over pajama bottoms; several shirts, a terry cloth housecoat, and a zippered jacket. His body was swollen from the early signs of decomposition. Gases filled his stomach. The skin on his hands was turning green. His shoes were loosely tied but his feet were so swollen that the laces cut into his socks.

Knife wounds punctured his chest. The blood had dried in thick chunks around the material of his jacket. More blood was on the floor, smeared in a streak to the desk opposite the bed. The computer, the notebooks and papers scattered around, were all covered in blood and pieces of brain matter.

Sara put her hand to the boy's wrist. The check for a pulse was routine, though hardly necessary. "I count eight stab wounds to the chest, three more to the neck. The bacteria from the gut is what's causing the smell. His bowel was pierced. He's filled with toxins."

Will asked, "How long do you think he's been dead?"

"Judging by the rigor mortis, at least twelve hours."

"You think we're looking at the same killer?"

"I think whoever killed Jason knew him. This is hatred." She pressed her fingers to one of the wounds in Jason's neck, stretching the skin back into place. "Look at this. There's the same twist at the bottom that I saw on Allison." She checked the other wounds on the neck. "All of them are the same. The killer plunged in the blade, then twisted it to make sure he hit the mark. You can see bruising from the hilt. I'd guess the same type of knife was used. I'll have to get them both on the table, but it's an educated guess that this is the work of the same killer."

"Jason was a lot bigger than Allison. He wouldn't be as easy to overpower."

Gently, she slid her hand under the back of the head. "The skull is fractured." When she pulled her hand back, it was sticky with blood.

"Window's closed," he pointed out. A sizable puddle covered the floor under the sash. Marty had been in the room after all.

Sara had noticed, too. "He did you a favor. The rain could've flooded the floor and washed away the trace."

"Charlie's not going to be happy." Will realized he hadn't told her that a team was coming. "He's our forensics guy. He'll probably want to keep the body here until he's processed the scene."

"I'll let Brock know. Do you want me to do the autopsy?"

He thought he might be stepping on her toes. "If it's not too much of an imposition."

"I'll do whatever you want."

Will didn't know what to say. He was used to the women in his life making things more difficult, not easier. "Thank you."

She asked, "Do you think Jason was Allison's boyfriend?"

"They're close in age. They go to the same school. They both ended up dead by the same killer's hand. I think it's not a big leap." Will asked, "Assuming you hate to hypothesize, what do you think happened here?"

Sara changed into fresh gloves, telling him, "I assume Jason was at the computer when he was hit with something. Statistically, we can guess a baseball bat. I'll know pretty quickly. There will be splinters in his scalp." She pointed to spatter on the wall that Will hadn't noticed before. Unlike the oak tree by the lake, the white walls of the dorm showed clear signs of the violence that was done. "Medium velocity. I don't think the blow was meant to kill him. The killer wanted to stun him." She pointed to the red streaks on the floor. "He was dragged over to the bed and stabbed, but it doesn't make sense."

"Why?"

She looked under the bed. "There should be a lot more blood than this." She indicated a fleshy chunk on the desk. "Obviously, he bit off his tongue—"

Will gagged. "Sorry. Keep going."

"Are you sure?"

His voice sounded unnaturally high even to him. "Yes. Please keep going."

She gave him a careful look before continuing. "It's not uncommon with blows to the back of the head for the victim to bite their tongue. Usually it doesn't come clean off, but it explains the volume of blood on the keyboard. His mouth

would've been engorged with blood." She indicated the wall above the desk. "The spatter here is what you'd expect from the baseball bat making contact with the head, but over by the bed is a different story."

"Why?"

"From the position of the wounds, I can tell that major arteries were hit in the chest and neck." Sara explained, "Think about it this way—Jason's on the bed. We assume he's conscious because of the defensive wounds on his hand. He almost lost his finger. He must've grabbed the knife by the blade. His heart would've been pounding like crazy." She patted her fist to her chest, mimicking the quick beat. "Spray, spray, spray. All over the wall."

Will looked at the wall. She was right. Except for two splotchy-looking stains close to the body, the white paint was hardly marked at all.

Sara suggested, "Maybe the killer was wearing something like a clean suit. He could've put down plastic. He'd have to cover the room, tape the walls. This was really planned."

"I think that's a little complicated." Will had yet to meet a killer who was that fastidious. "Most killers keep it simple. They're opportunistic."

"I wouldn't call taking a couple of cinder blocks, a padlock, and a chain to the middle of the woods opportunistic."

"I just think you're making this too complicated. Couldn't the killer cover Jason's body with something and stab him underneath?"

Sara looked at the body. "The stab wounds are closely patterned. I don't know. What are you talking about? Plastic?" She nodded to herself. "The killer could've covered him in plastic. Look at the floor. There's a drip line here."

Will saw the line. It was irregular, following the shape of the bed.

She said, "Plastic doesn't absorb. The line wouldn't be thin like that. It would come off in sheets."

"Sheets."

Sara leaned down and checked the bed. "Fitted sheet, top sheet."

"Blanket?" Will asked. The kid had been freezing cold. It didn't make sense that he'd go to bed without a blanket.

Sara opened the closet door. "Nothing." She started on the drawers. "I think you're right. It must have been something absorbent that—"

Will walked down the hallway to the bathroom. The lights were off, but he found the switch by the door. The fluorescents flickered overhead. Green light bounced off the blue tiles. Will had never lived in a dorm, but he'd shared a communal bathroom with fifteen other boys until he was eighteen years old. They were all the same: sinks in the front, showers in the back, toilets on the side.

He found a wadded-up blanket in the first stall. Blood coated the blue cotton, making it stiff as cardboard.

Sara came up behind him.

He told her, "Simple."

Will looked for the house with the swing set that marked the turn on Taylor Drive. Though the route was familiar, he was loath to take it. Searching Allison Spooner's room was a necessary chore, but Will's instincts told him that Jason Howell's dorm room held more promising leads. Unfortunately, Will wasn't a

crime scene technician. He didn't have the credentials or equipment to process such a complicated scene. He would have to wait for Charlie Reed and his team to drive over from the Central GBI lab. Two students were already dead and Will had no idea what was motivating the killer. Time was definitely not on his side.

Still, there were procedures to be followed. He had dropped by the station to pick up the warrant to search the Braham house. While he was there, he'd sent Faith the list Marty Harris had printed out of all the students in the dorm. She didn't have time to do all the background checks, but she was going to get started on them now and send the rest of the list to Amanda's secretary before she went to the hospital.

The police station had been oddly quiet. Will guessed they were all either on the street or at the hospital with Brad Stephens, who was still in a medically induced coma. Still, something was going on. The patrolmen milling around the desks hadn't glared at Will with the expected hatred. Marla Simms had handed him the fax without having to be asked. Even Larry Knox had stared at the floor as he walked to the coffee machine to refill his cup.

There were two cars parked in front of the Braham house. One was a police cruiser. The other was a four-door Ford pickup. Will parked behind the truck. Exhaust drifted up from the tailpipe. He could see two figures in the cab. Lena Adams was in the passenger seat. A man was behind the wheel. His window was down, even though the rain hadn't let up. He held a cigarette in his hand.

Will went to the driver's side. His hair was plastered to his head. He was freezing. His socks were still soaking wet.

Lena made the introductions. "Gordon, this is the agent from Atlanta I told you about. Will Trent."

Will shot her a glance that he hoped conveyed his intense level of irritation. Lena was being investigated for her part in Tommy's death. She had no business talking to his father. "Mr. Braham, I'm so sorry to be meeting you under these circumstances."

Gordon held the cigarette to his mouth. He was crying openly, tears streaming down his face. "Get in."

Will climbed into the back seat. There were a couple of fast-food bags on the floor. Work orders with the Georgia Power logo were stacked in an open briefcase on the seat opposite. Even with the open window, smoke hung in the air like a shroud.

Gordon stared ahead at the road. Raindrops popped against the hood of the truck. "I can't believe my boy would do any of this. It's not in his nature to be hurtful."

Will knew there was no use wasting time with kindness. "Can you tell me what you know about Allison?"

He took another hit off the cigarette. "Paid her rent on time. Kept the house clean. I gave her a discount for doing the laundry, looking after Tommy."

"Did he need looking out for?"

Gordon glanced at Lena. "He knows, right?"

Will answered, "I know that he was slow, Mr. Braham. I also know that he held down several jobs and was well respected in town."

The man looked down at his hands. His shoulders shook. "He did, sir. He worked real hard."

"Tell me about Allison."

Gordon's composure came back slowly, but his shoulders were still slumped. When he moved the cigarette to his mouth, it looked as if his hands were weighted down. "Was she raped?"

"No, sir. There were no signs of that."

He let out a ragged, relieved breath. "Tommy had a crush on her."

"Did she feel the same way?"

He shook his head. "No. And he knew it. I taught him early on to be careful around girls. Look but don't touch. He never had any trouble. Girls saw him like a puppy dog. They didn't see that he was a man." He repeated himself, "He was a man."

Will gave him some time before asking, "Allison was living in the house?"

He lit a new cigarette off the old one. Will could feel the smoke clinging to his wet hair and clothes. He made an effort not to cough.

Gordon said, "She rented the garage at first. I didn't want to let her. That's no place for a girl to be living. She started talking about discrimination, said she had lived in worse, so I told her fine. I figured she'd move out in a month."

"How long had she been renting from you?"

"Almost a year. She didn't want to live in the dorm. Said all the girls there were boy crazy, staying up too late. She knew how to flirt to get what she wanted, though. Had Tommy wrapped around her little finger."

Will didn't address the tone of blame in the father's voice. "She wasn't living in the garage, though."

He didn't answer immediately. "That was Tommy. He said it wasn't right for her to be out there when it was so cold, having to run back and forth to get to the bathroom in the middle of the night. He changed rooms with her. I didn't know until after the fact." He blew out a dark plume of smoke that wreathed around his head. "I told you, she had him wrapped around her finger. I should've put my foot down, paid more attention to what was going on." He inhaled sharply, fighting his emotions. "I knew he had a crush on her, but he'd had crushes before. He liked the attention she was giving him. He didn't have a lot of friends."

Will knew he couldn't tell the man details about an active case, especially one that could result in a nasty lawsuit. But he felt for the father, wished he could give him some words of comfort about his son. Instead, he asked, "Did you spend much time at home?"

"Not much. Mostly, I'm at my girlfriend's house. Tommy didn't know, but we were planning on getting married in the spring." He exhaled sharply. "I was gonna ask him to be my best man once I got back from Florida."

Will gave the man a few minutes to collect himself. "Did you know Allison's boyfriend?"

"Jay. James."

Will guessed, "Jason?"

"That's right." He wiped his nose with the back of his hand. "He wasn't around much. I didn't let her have anybody sleep over. Wasn't right for a girl that age to be fooling around."

"Did Tommy know Jason?"

He shook his head, but said, "I guess. I don't know. I wasn't involved in his

life as much as when he was little. He was grown. He had to figure out how to be on his own.” His breath caught as he tried to inhale some smoke. “I know my son. He would never hurt anybody. I know what he did to Brad, but that’s not my boy. I didn’t raise him that way.”

Lena cleared her throat. “I saw what happened, Gordon. Tommy was running, but then he turned around. Brad didn’t have time to slow down. I don’t think your son meant to stab him. I think it was an accident.”

Will chewed the inside of his cheek, wondering if she was lying to help the man feel better or telling the truth.

Gordon seemed to have the same question. He wiped his eyes again. “Thank you. Thank you for telling me that.”

Will asked, “Was Tommy acting differently lately?”

He swallowed hard. “Frank called me a week ago about some mess he’d gotten into. One of the neighbors got mad at him. He never yelled at people before. Never had a temper. I sat him down and talked to him. He said they were giving him grief about Pippy barking too much.” Gordon blew out some smoke. “He loved that stupid dog.”

“Did he drink?”

“Never. He hated the taste of beer. I tried to get him used to it, thought we could sit around on Saturdays, have some brews and watch the game together, but it never took. He got bored. Basketball was his sport. He couldn’t keep up with all the rules for football.”

“Did he have any friends? Was anyone giving him trouble lately?”

“He never met a stranger,” Gordon answered. “But I don’t think there was anybody specific he was close to. Like I said, he was into Allison, and she was sweet to him, but more like you’d be with a little brother.”

“Did they hang out much?”

“I wasn’t here to see it. He talked about her a lot. I won’t deny that.”

“When is the last time you spoke with your son?”

“I guess the night he ...” Gordon didn’t finish the sentence. He took a hit off his cigarette. “He called because he needed permission to use the credit card. He thought Pippy swallowed one of his socks. I told him to take her to the vet.”

“We haven’t found his cell phone.”

“I made him get one of those pay-as-you-go deals. He had a good job. He was a hard worker. He didn’t mind paying his own way.” Gordon flicked his cigarette out into the street. “I can’t be here anymore. I can’t go into that house. I can’t see his things.” He told Lena, “You can go on in there. Take whatever you like. Burn the place down. I don’t care.”

Will opened the door, but he didn’t leave. “Did Tommy collect knives?”

“I never let him near knives. I don’t know where he got one. Do you?”

Will answered, “No, sir.”

Gordon shook out another cigarette from the pack. “He liked to take things apart,” the man said. “I’d get to work and try to write my service orders and the pen wouldn’t work. Tommy would take the springs out. I’d find a bunch of them in his pockets when I was doing laundry. Tore up the motor in the dryer once. I thought it was something to do with his problem, but Sara told me he was playing me. He liked practical jokes. Liked trying to make people laugh.” Gordon wasn’t finished. He glanced into the rearview mirror, looking Will in the

eye. "I knew early on he was different. I knew I wasn't gonna have that kind of life with him, the kind of life fathers have with sons. But I loved him, and I raised him right. My boy is not a murderer."

Lena put her hand on Gordon's arm. "He was a good man," she told him. "He was a very good man."

Gordon put the car in gear, making it clear he didn't want to continue the conversation. Will and Lena got out. They watched the Ford drive up the street.

The rain had slacked off, but Lena still pulled the hood of her jacket up to cover her head. She took a deep breath and let it go slowly. "Tommy didn't kill Allison."

Will had figured that out a while back, but he was surprised to hear the admission. "What brought about this epiphany?"

"I've spent most of the day talking to people who knew him. The same as I would have done if Tommy was still alive." She crossed her arms. "He was a good kid. He ended up in trouble the same way a lot of good kids do—he was at the wrong place at the wrong time. And he had a knife in his hands."

"I think you mean that he was in the right place at the wrong time. Tommy was in *his* apartment. His garage apartment."

She didn't contradict him. "He stabbed a police officer."

"Accidentally, from what I've heard."

"Accidentally," she agreed. "And we had no legal right to go into that garage. Brad got the address, but it's not on the building. I led us here. I was the one who said that the garage was Allison's apartment. That's why Brad looked in the window. That's what started everything." She took a shallow breath. He could tell she was scared, but determined. "How does this work? Do I make a statement? Do I write out a confession?"

Will tried to figure out her grand scheme. It couldn't be this easy. "Let's back up a second. What are you confessing to?"

"The false search of the apartment. I guess that's breaking and entering. My negligence led to a police officer being injured. Two officers. I elicited a false confession. I'm the one who walked Tommy back to the cells. I'm the one who didn't frisk him. The ink cartridge was from my pen. I had some extra ones, so I changed it out, but Tommy got the cartridge from me. And we both know I've been dicking you around all day." She gave a forced laugh. "So, that's obstruction of justice, right?"

"Right," he agreed. "Are you willing to put all that on paper?"

"I'll let you tape it." She pulled the hood off her head and looked up at Will. "What am I looking at? Jail time?"

"I don't know," he admitted, but the truth was she had skated a thin line. Her negligence wasn't willful. The false confession had been taken in good faith. She was cooperating now, even if she'd been recalcitrant before. She wasn't shifting blame. "In the immediate term, I imagine you'll be suspended pending a review of my investigation. You'll have to go in front of the board. They might come down on you hard or they might not. Your pension is probably gone. If it's not, you could take a hit on years of service, get a period of unpaid leave. If they don't pull your badge, this is going to be on your record until you die. Finding someone to hire you might prove difficult. And Gordon Braham might bring a civil suit against you."

None of this seemed to surprise her. She reached into her pocket. "Do I give you my badge now?"

"No," Will told her. "I'm not in charge of that part. I just file my report. There's bound to be some political involvement with your city council and various other civilian boards. As for whether or not you're suspended pending the outcome, I would assume Chief Wallace is the one who gets to decide what to do with you."

She gave a rueful laugh. "I think he's already decided."

Will felt oddly conflicted. He knew that Lena had screwed up, but she wasn't alone in this debacle. The evidence in the garage told a story that she could use to get herself out of this mess, or at least lessen some of the pain. He felt compelled to ask, "Are you sure about this?"

"Tommy was my prisoner. He was my responsibility."

Will couldn't argue the point. "Why did you call Marty Harris after you talked to me?"

She hesitated, and he saw some of her old slyness come back. "I wanted to know the details."

"Which were?"

She gave him a halfhearted account of the same story Will had heard from Marty Harris an hour ago. She told Will, "I got Jason's contact information and called his mother. She lives in West Virginia. She didn't seem too concerned that the police were calling about her son."

"How were you sure about the victim's identity?" Will realized the answer before he finished the sentence. "You went to the school." She must have called Will from the building, a detail Lena had seen fit to leave out. "Well?" he asked.

"I was already there checking Allison's school records when Marty called me." She shrugged. "I needed to see if it was the same killer."

"And?"

"I don't know. It makes sense. Jason was Allison's boyfriend. They both turn up murdered within a day of each other. Tommy doesn't fit into the puzzle anymore."

That at least explained part of her sudden turnaround. Tommy was dead before Jason was killed. Lena would know that he was innocent of the first crime because he couldn't have committed the second one. "Did you close the window in Jason's dorm?"

"I used a glove. I didn't want the rain to wash away any trace. I also covered my shoes and hair. I was careful, but you can get my rule-out samples at the station. They should be on file with the GBI."

Will wasn't going to waste time berating her. "What did you find out at the school? You said you were going through Allison's records."

She took out her spiral-bound notebook and thumbed to the right page. "Allison was taking four courses this semester. I won't bore you with the details—chemistry stuff. I managed to talk to three of her professors. One on the phone and two in person. They say Allison was a good student, kept her head down, did her work. They never noticed her hanging out with a particular group. She was a bit of a loner. Her attendance was perfect. No missed days. Her grades were A's and high B's. Campus security didn't know her name. She's never filed a report with them or been the subject of a report."

"What about the fourth teacher?"

"Alexandra Coulter. She's out of town for the holiday. I left a message on her cell and home."

"Any other known associates?"

"None of them knew about Jason, but it makes sense. He was a couple of years ahead of her, taking graduate classes. She was undergrad. They wouldn't mix except outside of class. She didn't have friends. I tossed around the name Julie Smith because you brought it up earlier. She's not a student."

"Did you get a warrant for searching Allison's records?"

"No one asked for one, so I didn't volunteer." She added, "I also talked to Tommy's boss at the bowling alley. I showed him Allison's picture. He says he's seen her around with another kid—male, dark hair, chubby, obviously Jason Howell. Tommy was giving them free games, but the manager put a stop to it when he found out."

"At least we know they've all met each other," Will said. "What else?"

"There aren't any Julie Smiths in town. I checked the phone directory. There are four Smiths—three in Heartsdale, one in Avondale. I called all four numbers. None of them know a Julie or are related to a Julie. Are you going to tell me who she is?"

"No," Will said, but only because he didn't know the answer himself. "Have you heard from Allison's aunt yet?"

"Nothing. I called the Elba detective a few minutes ago. He seemed annoyed to hear from me again, said he'd call when he had something to say."

"Annoyed because he thought you were pushing him?"

"He doesn't strike me as the type who likes a woman telling him what to do." He should try Will's job. "What else?"

"I've talked to the neighbors, everybody but Mrs. Barnes, who lives there." She pointed at the yellow ranch house across the street. There was an old Honda Accord parked by the mailbox. "There's no mail in the box, her newspaper's been taken in, and her car isn't in the carport, so I assume she's out doing chores."

"What about the Accord?"

"I looked in the windows. It's spotless. I can run the tag through the computer."

"Do that," he told her. "What did the other neighbors say?"

"Exactly what our guys found when they canvassed the street yesterday. Tommy was great. Allison was quiet. None of them socialized; this is a pretty old street. Not a lot of kids."

"Any criminal activity?"

"Not a lot. There are two foreclosures. The kid at the end of the block was caught joyriding in his mama's Cadillac two weeks ago. Two houses over, there's an ex-crack addict living with his grandparents. He's been clean as far as we know. Three doors the other way is a Peeping Tom who's in a wheelchair. He doesn't get out as much as he used to since his father took the ramp off the front porch."

"And this seemed like such a nice neighborhood."

"Only two people were home when Brad got stabbed." She pointed to a house two doors down from the Barnes residence. "Vanessa Livingston. She was late

for work because her basement flooded. She was waiting on her contractor and looking out the window right when Brad was stabbed."

"And she saw ...?"

"Exactly what I saw. Brad was chasing after Tommy. Tommy turned. He had the knife here." She held her hand at her waist. "Brad was stabbed."

"And the second neighbor?"

"Scott Shepherd. Professional gambler, so he's on the computer all day. He didn't see anything until after the fact. Brad on the ground. Me beside him."

"Frank apprehending Tommy?"

She pursed her lips. "You want to talk to Shepherd?"

"Is he going to tell me that Frank was beating Tommy or is he going to tell me that he can't remember?"

"He told me that he didn't see Frank. He went into the house and called the station."

"Not 911?"

"Scott's a volunteer fireman. He knows the direct number for the station."

"Lucky for you."

"Yeah, I feel really lucky right now." Lena flipped her notebook closed. "That's all I've got. Gordon says there's a spare key under the mat. I guess I should go home and call around for a lawyer."

"Why don't you help me instead?"

She held his gaze. "You just told me I'm going to lose my badge."

"You've still got it in your pocket, right?"

"Don't bullshit me, man. There's only two other days in my life I can think of that were worse than this one—the day my sister died and the day I lost Jeffrey."

"You're a good detective when you want to be."

"I don't think that's going to matter anymore."

"Then what've you got to lose?"

Will walked up the driveway, listening for Lena's steps behind him. He didn't really need her help, but Will hated to be lied to. Frank Wallace was knee-deep in this crap, and seemed content to let one of his officers take the fall for his own bad leadership. Will didn't feel any loyalty to Lena, but the thought of a drunk, crooked cop running this town's police force did not sit well with him.

Will found the key under the front doormat. He was opening the door when Lena joined him on the porch steps.

He asked, "Have you heard anything about Detective Stephens?"

"No change. I guess that's good."

"Why didn't you call Chief Wallace about the body in the dorm?"

She shrugged. "Like you said, I'm only a good cop when I choose to be."

Will pushed open the front door. Lena went in first. Her hand was high on her side, a motion she probably didn't realize she'd made. Will had seen Faith take this same stance many times. She'd been a beat cop for ten years. There were some things your muscles couldn't unlearn.

The living room was right off the entrance. The furniture was old and sad, duct tape keeping the stuffing in the cushions. The carpet was an orange shag that went into the hallway. Will could feel it clinging to his shoes as he walked back to the kitchen. The carpet gave way to yellow linoleum. Gordon hadn't

bothered to update anything except the stainless steel microwave that rested on top of an old Formica table.

"Dishes," Lena said. Two plates, two forks, and two glasses were in the drainer in the sink. Allison had shared a meal with someone before she died, then cleaned up after herself.

Lena pulled a paper towel from the roll and covered her hand so she could open the refrigerator. There was a line of blue painter's tape down the middle. Store-brand sodas filled each shelf. There was no food except for a dried-up orange and a Jell-O pudding cup. Lena opened the freezer. The same taped line split the compartment, but the moisture had weakened the adhesive. One side was stacked full of frozen dinners. The other had a box of Popsicles and some ice cream sandwiches.

Will used the edge of his palm to raise the lid on the kitchen trashcan. He saw two empty boxes of Stouffer's French bread pizza. "I'll ask Sara about stomach contents."

"Tommy would've had more time to digest."

"True." He used the toe of his shoe to push open a pair of louvered doors, expecting to find a pantry but finding a toilet, small shower, and even smaller sink. The bathroom was by the back door. He assumed this was the toilet tenants used when they rented the garage. It certainly looked like a young man had used the facilities. The sink was filthy. Hair clogged the shower drain. Towels were strewn on the floor. A pair of dingy-looking briefs was wadded up in the corner. There was one sock on the floor, a footie that went up to the ankle. Will imagined the other sock was slowly making its way through Pippy's digestive track.

Will realized Lena wasn't behind him anymore. He walked through the dining room, which had a glass table and two chairs, and found her in a small study off the family room. The room looked hastily abandoned. Stacks of papers lined the floor—magazines, old bills, newspapers. Gordon must have been using this as a dumping ground for all the paperwork associated with his life. Lena checked the desk drawers. From what Will could see, they were piled with more invoices and receipts. The lone bookshelf in the room was bare and dusty except for a plate that contained a moldy, unrecognizable piece of food. A glass was beside it, the liquid dark and murky.

The carpet showed tracks from a vacuum cleaner but it still had the same grungy feel as the rest of the house. There was an ancient-looking computer monitor on the top of the desk. Lena pressed the power button, but nothing happened. Will leaned down and saw that the thing was not connected to a power supply. Or a computer.

Lena noticed this, too. "He probably took the computer to Jill June's. That's his girlfriend."

"Did you see a laptop in the garage?"

She shook her head. "Could Tommy even use one?"

"He probably ran the machines at the bowling alley. That's all computer controlled." Will shrugged because he didn't know for certain. "Gordon disconnected the landline. I doubt he was springing for Internet service."

"Probably." Lena opened the last drawer in the desk. She held up a sheet of paper that looked like a bill. "Fifty-two dollars. This place must be better

insulated than it looks.”

Will guessed she had found a power or gas bill. “Or Allison kept the heat turned down. She grew up poor. She was willing to live in the garage. She probably wasn’t big on wasting money.”

“Gordon’s pretty cheap himself. This place is a dump.” She dropped the bill on the desk. “Moldy food on the shelf. Dirty clothes on the floor. I wouldn’t walk through this carpet with my shoes off.”

Will silently agreed. “The bedrooms are probably upstairs.”

The design of the house was a typical split-level, with the stairs running off the back of the family room. The railing was coming loose from the wall. The carpet was worn to the backing. At the top of the stairs, he saw a narrow hallway. Two open doors were on one side. A closed door was on the other. At the mouth of the hall was a bathroom with pink tile.

Will glanced into the first room, which was empty but for some papers and other debris stuck into the orange shag carpet. The next room was sparsely furnished, slightly larger than the first. A basket of folded clothes was on the bare mattress. Lena pointed to the empty closet, the opened drawers in the chest. “Someone moved out.”

“Gordon Braham,” Will supplied. He looked at the basket of neatly folded clothes. For some reason it made him sad that Allison had done the man’s laundry before she died.

Lena slipped on a latex glove before trying the last room. Her hand went up to her gun again as she pushed open the door. Again, there were no surprises. “This must be Allison’s.”

The room was cleaner than the rest of the house, which wasn’t saying much. Allison Spooner hadn’t been the neatest woman on the planet, but at least she managed to keep her clothes off the floor. And there were a lot of them. Shirts, blouses, pants, and dresses were packed so tightly into the closet that the rod bowed in the middle. Clothes hangers were hooked on the curtain rod and the trim over the closet door. More clothes were draped over an old rocking chair.

“I guess she liked clothes,” Will said.

Lena picked up a pair of jeans in a pile by the door. “Seven brand. These aren’t cheap. I wonder where she got the money.”

Will could hazard a guess. The clothes he’d worn as a kid generally came from a communal pile. There was no guarantee you’d find a good fit, let alone a style you liked. “She probably had hand-me-downs all her life. First time away from home, making her own money. Maybe it was important to her to have nice things.”

“Or maybe she was shoplifting.” Lena tossed the jeans back onto the pile. She continued the search, lifting the mattress, sliding her hand between clothes, picking up shoes and putting them back in place. Will stood in the doorway, watching Lena move around the room. She seemed more sure of herself. He wanted to know what had changed. Confession was good for the soul, but her newfound attitude couldn’t be solely traced back to her revelation about Tommy. The Lena he’d left this morning was ready to burst into tears at any moment. The one thing she was sure about was Tommy’s guilt. Something else had been weighing her down, but now it was gone.

Her certainty was making him suspicious.

"What about that?" Will pointed to the bedside table. The drawer was cracked open. Lena used her gloved hand to open it the rest of the way. There was a pad of paper, a pencil, and a flashlight inside.

"You ever read Nancy Drew?" he asked, but she was ahead of him. Lena used the pencil to shade the paper on the pad.

She showed it to Will. "No secret note."

"It was worth a try."

"We can toss this place, but nothing's jumping out at me."

"No pink book bag."

She stared at him. "Someone told you Allison had a pink book bag?"

"Someone told me she had a car, too."

"A rusted red Dodge Daytona?" she guessed. She must have heard about the BOLO Faith put on the car this morning.

"Let's try the bathroom," he suggested.

He followed her up the hallway. Again, Will let her conduct the search. Lena opened the medicine cabinet. There was the usual array of lady things: feminine aids, a bottle of perfume, some Tylenol and other pain relievers as well as a brush. Lena opened the packet of birth control pills. Less than a third of the pills remained. "She was current."

He looked at the prescription label on the birth control. The logo at the top was unfamiliar. "Is this a local pharmacy?"

"School dispensary."

"How about the prescribing doctor?"

She checked the name and shook her head. "No idea. Probably from her hometown." Lena opened the cabinet under the sink. "Toilet paper. Tampons. Pads." She checked inside the boxes. "Nothing that shouldn't be here."

Will stared at the open medicine cabinet. Something was off. There were two shelves and space at the bottom of the cabinet that served as a third. The middle shelf seemed devoted to medication. The birth control packet had been wedged in between the Motrin and Advil bottles, which were shoved to the far end of the shelf close to the hinge. The Tylenol was on the opposite side, also shoved to the end. He studied the gap, wondering if there was another bottle that was missing.

"What is it?" Lena asked.

"You should get your hand looked at."

She flexed her fingers. The Band-Aids were looking ragged. "I'm fine."

"It looks infected. You don't want it getting into your bloodstream."

She stood up from the cabinet. "The only doctor in town rents space at the children's clinic. Hare Earnshaw."

"Sara's cousin."

"He wouldn't exactly welcome me as a patient."

"Who do you normally see?"

"That's not really any of your business." She pulled back the cheap mini-blind on the window. "There's a car parked in Mrs. Barnes's driveway."

"Wait for me outside."

"Why do you—" She stopped herself. "All right."

Will walked behind her down the hall. When he stopped outside Allison's room, Lena turned. She didn't say anything, but continued down the stairs. Will

didn't think there was anything of note in the girl's room. Lena had done a thorough search. What struck Will the most was what was missing: There was no laptop. No schoolbooks. No notebooks. No pink backpack. No sign that a college student was living here except for the enormous amount of clothing. Had someone taken Allison's school things? More than likely, they were in her Dodge Daytona, whereabouts unknown.

Will heard the front door open and close. He looked out the window and saw Lena heading down the driveway toward the cruiser. She was on her cell phone. He knew she wasn't calling Frank. Maybe she was looking for a lawyer.

He had more pressing things to think about right now. Will went to the bathroom and used the camera on his cell phone to take a picture of the medicine cabinet. Next, he went downstairs to Tommy Braham's bathroom. Will stepped over the towels and underwear to get to the medicine cabinet. He opened the mirrored door. An orange plastic pill bottle was the only thing inside. Will leaned in. The words on the label were small. The light was bad. And he was dyslexic.

He used his phone to take another picture. This time, he sent the image to Faith with three question marks in the message.

Sara had kept his handkerchief again. Will looked around for something to use so his fingerprints wouldn't get on the bottle. Tommy's underwear and dirty sock were not an option. Will rolled off some toilet paper from the roll stuck on the back of the toilet and used it to pick up the bottle. The cap wasn't securely screwed down. He opened the top and saw a handful of clear capsules with white powder inside. Will shook one into his hand. There was no writing on the side, no pharmaceutical logo or maker's mark.

In movies, cops always tasted the white powders they found. Will wondered why drug dealers didn't leave piles of rat poison lying around just for this particular reason. He put the bottle on the edge of the sink so he could photograph the capsule in his hand. Then he took a closer shot of the prescription label and sent both images to Faith.

As a rule, Will stayed away from doctors. He couldn't read them his insurance information when he called to make an appointment. He couldn't fill out their forms while he was sitting in the waiting room. One time, Angie had been kind enough to give him syphilis and he'd had to take a regimen of pills four times a day for two weeks. Consequently, Will knew what a prescription label looked like. There was always an official logo from the pharmacy at the top. The doctor's name and date were listed, the Rx number, the patient's name, the dosage information, the warning stickers.

This label seemed to have none of those things. It wasn't even the proper size—he'd guess it was half the usual height and shorter in length. There were plenty of numbers typed across the top, but the rest of the information was written in by hand. A cursive hand, which meant Will didn't know if he was staring at heroin or acetaminophen.

His phone rang. Faith asked, "What the hell is that?"

"I found it in Tommy's medicine cabinet."

"'Seven-nine-nine-three-two-six-five-three,' " she read. "'Tommy, do not take any of these' is written across the middle in cursive. Exclamation point at the end. The 'do not' is underlined."

Will said a silent prayer of thanks that he hadn't tasted the white powder. "Is the handwriting feminine?"

"Looks like it. Big and loopy. Slanted to the right, so she's right-handed."

"Why would Tommy have a bottle of pills that said don't take them?"

"What about the three letters at the bottom? Looks like 'H-O-C' or 'H-C-C' ...?"

Will stared at the fine print in the corner of the label. The words were so blurry that his head started to ache. "I have no idea. The last photo is as tight as I can get. I'm going to get Nick to take it to the lab with the other stuff. Anything on Jason Howell?"

"He's worse than Allison, if that's possible. No phone. No street address, just a PO box at the school. He's got four thousand dollars in a savings account out of a bank in West Virginia."

"That's interesting."

"Not as much as you'd think. The amount's been going down slowly over the last four years. I'd guess it's some kind of college fund." She told him, "He also has a car registered in his name. Ninety-nine Saturn SW. Green. I already put out a BOLO."

That was at least something. "I'll check at the school to see if it's there. How are the background checks going on all the students who lived in Jason's dorm?"

"Slow and boring. None of these kids even have parking tickets. My mother had gotten me out of a DUI and a shoplifting charge by the time I was that age." She laughed. "Please promise me you won't remind me of that when my children get into trouble."

Will was too shocked to promise anything. "Did you track down the 911 audio?"

"They said they'd email it to me but it hasn't shown up yet." Her breath was short, and he guessed she was walking through the house. "Let me do a computer search for those initials on the pill bottle."

"I'll ask Gordon if his son was taking any medication."

"Are you sure you should do that?"

"Meaning?"

"What if Tommy was selling illegal drugs?"

Will had a hard time imagining Tommy Braham as a drug kingpin. Still, he admitted, "Tommy knew everybody in town. He was always walking the streets. It'd be a perfect cover."

"What does the dad do for a living?"

"I think he's a lineman for Georgia Power."

"How are they living?"

Will glanced around the crappy kitchen. "Not very well. Gordon's truck is about ten years old. Tommy was living in a garage without a toilet. They were renting out a room to help make ends meet. The house must have been really nice thirty years ago, but they haven't done much to keep it that way."

"When I did the sweep on Tommy, I found a checking account at the local bank. His balance was thirty-one dollars and sixty-eight cents. Did you say the dad was in Florida?"

He saw where she was going with this. Florida was the beginning of a major drug corridor that went from the Keys up into Georgia and on to New England and Canada. "This doesn't strike me as a drug thing."

"That knife wound to the neck sounds gang to me."

Will couldn't deny she was right.

Faith asked, "What else do you have?"

"Detective Adams has seen fit to accept her part in Tommy Braham's suicide."

For once, Faith didn't have a quick comeback.

"She said that Tommy didn't kill Allison, and it's her fault he managed to kill himself in custody, and that she'll take all the blame."

Faith made a thinking noise. "What's she hiding?"

"What *isn't* she hiding?" Will countered. "She's lied and covered up so much that it'd be like pulling a piece of string on a ball of yarn." He went into the kitchen, hoping to find a plastic bag. "Allison had a lot of nice clothes."

"What was she studying in college?"

"Chemistry."

"How do you manage to dress yourself in the morning?" Faith sounded frustrated by his slowness. "Chemistry? Synthesizing chemicals to produce more complex products, like turning pseudoephedrine into methamphetamine?"

Will found a box of Ziplocs in the last drawer he checked. "If Allison was cooking meth, or shooting it, she was being careful about it. She didn't have any needle marks. There aren't any pipes or drug paraphernalia around the house or in the garage. Sara will do a tox screen as part of the autopsy, but I'm not buying it."

"And Tommy?"

"I'll have to call Sara." He waited for her to say something snarky about his using Sara's name too many times.

Miraculously, Faith let the opportunity pass. "There's no H-O-C or H-C-C in Grant County. I'll try the number at the top of the label. Eight digits. Too long for a zip code, too short for zip-plus-four. One digit too many for a phone number. One too little for Social Security. Let me plug it in and see if I get anything." Will sealed the pill bottle in the plastic bag as he waited for the results.

Faith groaned. "My God, does every single search have to turn up porn?"

"It's God's gift to us."

"I'd rather have a live-in nanny," she countered. "I'm not finding anything. I can make some phone calls around the state. You know how some of the yokels are slow to enter their case files into the network. I'm just waiting around for Mama to come pick me up and take me to the hospital."

"I'd appreciate anything you feel like doing."

"If I watch one more home-remodeling show, I'm going to come down there and hope someone puts a knife in the back of my neck. And I've got the worst gas. I feel like—"

"Well, I should go now. Thanks again for your help." Will closed his phone to end the call. He locked up the house and put the pill bottle in his Porsche.

Lena was still on the phone, but she got off when she saw Will. "Honda belongs to a Darla Jackson. She's on parole for kiting some checks two years ago. She's already paid it off. The charge will roll off her sheet in January."

"Did you talk to her?"

Lena glanced over his shoulder. "I think we're about to get our chance."

He turned around. An elderly woman was making her way down the driveway

of the house across the street. She leaned heavily on a walker with a wire basket on the front. Bright yellow tennis balls were stuck on the back legs. The front door to her house opened, and a woman dressed in a pink nurse's uniform called, "Mrs. Barnes! You forgot your coat!"

The old woman didn't seem concerned, though she was wearing nothing more than a thin housedress and slippers. The wind was blowing so hard that the hem kicked up as she navigated the steep drive. Fortunately, the rubber soles of her terry cloth slippers kept her from sliding down the concrete.

"Mrs. Barnes!" The nurse jogged down the driveway with the coat. She was a big girl with broad shoulders and ample cleavage. She was out of breath when she finally caught up to the old woman. She wrapped the coat around her shoulders, saying, "You'll catch your death out here."

Lena approached the women. "Mrs. Barnes, this is Agent Trent from the Georgia Bureau of Investigation."

Mrs. Barnes did everything but wrinkle her nose. "What do you want?"

Will felt like he was back in third grade and being yelled at for various schoolboy atrocities. "I'd like to talk to you about Allison and Tommy, if you have a minute."

"It seems like you've already made up your mind about that."

Will glanced back at her mailbox, remembering the street number from one of the incident reports. "Someone from your house called the police about Tommy's dog barking. Your name wasn't on the report."

"That was me," the nurse volunteered. "I look after Mrs. Barnes in the evenings. Usually I'm not here until seven, but she needed help with some chores and I didn't have anything better to do."

Will hadn't realized how late in the day it was. He checked his cell phone and saw it was almost three o'clock. Faith had a little over an hour left before she went to the hospital. He asked the nurse, "You're here every night?"

"Every night but Thursday, and I get the last Sunday of the month off." Will had to slow down her words in his head to understand what she was saying. The woman had more of a twang than anyone Will had yet to meet in Grant County.

Lena took out her pen and notebook. She asked the nurse, "Can you tell me your name?"

"Darla Jackson." She reached into her pocket and pulled out a business card. Her fingernails were bright red press-ons that complemented her caked-on makeup. "I work out of the E-Med Building over on Highway 5."

Lena pointed to the ancient Accord parked in front of the house. She already knew the answer, but she asked, "Is that yours?"

"Yes, ma'am. It ain't much, but it's paid for. I pay all my bills on time." She gave them a meaningful look, and Will gathered that Mrs. Barnes didn't know about the bad checks.

Lena handed Will the card. He looked down at it for a few seconds before asking Darla, "Why did you call the police about Tommy?"

She opened her mouth to answer, but Mrs. Barnes took over, directing her words toward Will. "That boy never did anybody any harm. He had the sweetest heart and the most gentle disposition."

Will put his hands in his pockets, feeling like the cold was going to snap his fingers in two. He needed to find out more about Tommy's sudden mood change

in case Faith was right about the drugs he'd found in the kid's medicine cabinet. "The incident report says that Tommy was yelling at someone. I take it that was you, Ms. Jackson?" The nurse nodded, and Will wondered why Darla's name hadn't been listed in the report. It seemed odd that the cop hadn't recorded it along with all the other details. "Can you tell me what happened?"

"Well, first off, I didn't know he was retarded," she said, almost like an apology. "As a registered nurse, I try to be more compassionate with people of special needs, but that dog was just yapping its head off and Mrs. Barnes was trying to go to sleep—"

"I have terrible insomnia," the old woman interjected.

"I guess I let my temper get the best of me. I went over there to tell him to quiet it down, and he told me he couldn't and I said that I'd call the pound if he didn't find a way and they'd make that dog real quiet. As in dead quiet." She seemed embarrassed. "Next thing I know, I hear this loud noise. I look out the front window and it's cracked. You can see I put some tape on it." Will looked up at the house. The glass in the window had a crooked silver line of tape along the bottom. "That wasn't in the report."

Mrs. Barnes took over. "Lucky for us it was Carl Phillips they sent. I taught him in the fifth grade." She put her hand to her chest. "We all agreed it was best to handle this with Gordon when he got back from Florida."

Will asked the nurse, "You're here every night. Does that include Sunday night and last night?"

"Yes. I've been up with Mrs. Barnes for the last three days. Her new medication has been giving her an awful time with her insomnia."

"It's true," the woman agreed. "I can't even get my eyes to close."

"Did you see anything happening over at the house? Cars coming and going? Did Tommy use his scooter for anything?"

"The bedroom's at the back of the house," Darla explained. "We were both back there all night on account of it's close to the toilet."

"Darla, please," Mrs. Barnes warned. "There's no need for them to hear about that."

Lena asked, "Did either of you know Allison Spooner? She lived across the street in Tommy's house."

They both became more circumspect. Darla offered, "I saw her around."

"Did you see her boyfriend?"

"Sometimes."

"Did you know his name?"

Darla shook her head. "He was in and out a lot. I heard them screaming sometimes. Arguing. Struck me as the type of boy with a temper."

In Will's experience, teachers were pretty good at making accurate snap judgments of people. He asked, "What about you, Mrs. Barnes?"

"I saw him once or twice" was all she offered.

"Did you ever hear him fighting with Allison?"

She touched her fingers to her ear. "I don't hear very well."

Will thought she was being uncharacteristically polite, since she'd certainly heard the dog barking. Of course, not many people wanted to speak ill of the dead. He imagined Mrs. Barnes would've had plenty to say about Allison Spooner last week. "Have you seen her car in the driveway recently?"

"Gordon asked her to park it in the street because it was leaking oil," Mrs. Barnes said. "I haven't seen it there in a while. At least not this weekend."

"Me neither," Darla confirmed.

"What about the boyfriend's car? Did you notice what he was driving?"

Both women shook their heads. Again, Darla spoke. "I'm not good with those things. It was a station wagon. Green or blue. I know that's not real helpful."

He asked, "Did Allison ever have any friends come around? Men or women?"

Darla offered, "Just that boyfriend. He was a beady-eyed little thing."

Will felt a drop of rain hit the top of his head. "Did you ever talk to him?"

"No, but I can spot a loser a mile away." She gave a shockingly rough laugh. "I sure have dated plenty of 'em in my life."

"The point is," Mrs. Barnes interjected, "Tommy did not hurt that girl." She glared at Lena. "And you know that."

Lena said, "I do."

That shut her up. She glanced back at the nurse. "I think I should go now."

Will started, "Mrs. Barnes—"

She cut him off. "My son is a lawyer. Any more questions you have for me should be directed to him. Come, Darla. It's time for my show."

With that, she twisted the walker and began the slow climb back up her driveway. Darla shrugged an apology before she followed.

Will said, "I don't think I've ever had an elderly woman in a walker lawyer up to me before."

There was a buzzing in the air, like a bunch of cicadas decided to start singing at the same time. The rain didn't fall so much as turn into a light mist. Will blinked, feeling beads of water forming on his eyelashes.

Lena asked, "What now?"

"I guess that's up to you." Will looked at his phone again to check the time. Charlie would be here soon. "You can go back to the college with me or you can go look for a lawyer."

She didn't have to think about her answer. "My car or yours?"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

They'd barely left Taylor Drive when the sky opened up. Visibility was short. Lena kept the speedometer just below thirty as she navigated the flooded streets. The cold was making her injured hand ache. She flexed her fingers, trying to get some blood circulating. There was definitely an infection. She felt hot and cold at the same time. A slow ache was building in the back of her head.

Still, she felt better than she'd felt in a long time. Not just because she'd taken responsibility for Tommy, but because she had found a way to get herself free one last time. And it *would* be the last time. Lena was going to do things the right way from now on. She wasn't going to take shortcuts. She wasn't going to take risks.

Frank couldn't fault her for falling on her own sword, and if he did, then he could go screw himself. Will Trent had figured out everything that happened in the garage, but he couldn't prove it without Lena and Lena wasn't going to talk. That was her leverage over Frank. That was her ticket to freedom. If Frank wanted to drink himself to death, if he wanted to risk his life out on the street, then that was on him. She washed her hands of it.

The death of Tommy Braham was the only thing that still weighed on her. She needed to talk to a lawyer about how to handle things with the county, but she wasn't going to fight them. She deserved to be punished. Tommy was her prisoner. Lena had just as good as handed him the means to take his life. Working the system, finding a loophole, was out of the question. Maybe Gordon Braham would sue her or maybe not. All Lena knew was that she was finished with this town. As much as she loved being a cop, as much as she craved the adrenaline rush, the feeling that she was doing a job that hardly anybody else in the world wanted to do—or could do—she had to move on.

Will shifted in the seat beside her. He'd been standing in the rain half the day. His sweater was wet. His jeans had never really dried. You could say a lot of things about the man, but you couldn't claim he wasn't determined.

She asked, "When are we going to do this? My confession, I mean."

"Why the rush?"

She shrugged. He wouldn't understand. Lena was thirty-five years old and she was looking at having to start her life back over again from scratch in the worst job market since the Great Depression. She just wanted to get it over with. The not knowing was the hard part. She was getting out, but how much blood was she going to have to leave on the table?

He told her, "You can still work a deal."

"You have to have something valuable to get a deal."

"I think you do."

She didn't acknowledge the fact. They both knew taking down Frank would make her landing a lot softer. But Frank had leverage Will didn't know about. For this to work, Lena had to keep her mouth closed. It was too late to back out

now.

He said, "Tell me about the drug situation in town."

The question surprised her. "There's not much to say. Campus security handles most of the small infractions at the school—pot, a little coke, a tiny bit of meth."

"What about in town?"

"Heartsdale is pretty upscale. Rich people are much better at hiding their addictions." She slowed down as she came to the red light on Main Street. "Avondale is all right, about what you'd expect—mostly middle-class people, working moms smoking meth after they put the kids to bed. Madison is the sore spot. Very poor. High unemployment, one hundred percent federal lunch assistance for all the kids. We've got a couple of small gangs running meth. They tend to kill each other, not civilians. There's not much money in the police budget for setting up sting operations. We catch them when we can, but they're like cockroaches. You take out one and there are ten more waiting to take their place."

"Do you think Tommy might have been dealing drugs?"

Her laugh was genuine. "Are you kidding me?"

"No."

"Absolutely not." She shook her head, vehement. "If he was, Mrs. Barnes would've beat Nurse Darla to the phone. There were too many people in his life who were watching him too closely."

"What about Allison? Could she have been using?"

Lena considered the question more seriously. "We haven't uncovered anything that says drugs with her. She was barely getting by, living in a dump of a house. Her grades were good. She hadn't missed a day of school. If she was selling drugs, she was doing a bad job, and if she was using drugs, she was holding on pretty well."

"All good points." He changed the subject. "It's really convenient that Jason Howell died before we could question him."

She stared up at the light, wondering if she should just run it. "I guess the killer was afraid he would talk."

"Maybe."

"Did Sara find anything?"

"Nothing remarkable."

Lena glanced at Will. He was good at leaving things out.

He shrugged. "We'll see what she finds in the autopsies."

The light finally turned. Lena wrenched the wheel to the side. The back tires slipped as she pressed on the gas. "Listen, I know you're sleeping with her."

Will gave a surprised laugh. "All right."

"It's not a bad thing," she allowed, even though it hurt her to admit it. "I knew Jeffrey. I worked with him most of my career. He wasn't the kind of guy who went around sharing his feelings, but with Sara, everyone knew the score. He'd want her to find somebody. She's not the type of person who's good at being alone."

He didn't speak for a few seconds. "I guess that's a nice thing for you to say."

"Yeah, well, I'm not holding my breath for her to say anything nice about me." Lena turned the windshield wipers on high as rain slammed into the car.

"I'm sure she's told you a lot of stories."

"What would she tell me?"

"Nothing good."

"Is she right?"

It was Lena's turn to laugh. "You're always asking questions that you already know the answer to." Her cell phone started ringing, filling the car with the opening lines of Heart's "Barracuda." She checked the caller ID. Frank. Lena sent the call to voice mail.

Will asked, "Why does the school have your direct number to call when there's a problem?"

"I know a lot of the guys on the security staff."

"From when you worked there before?"

She was about to ask him how he'd found out about that, but Lena didn't think she'd get much of an answer. "No, I know them from working as the liaison. The guys who were there when I was are all gone."

"Frank sure does let a lot of the job fall to you."

"I can handle it," she said, but then realized that didn't matter anymore. From now on, the only early morning phone calls that came to her house were going to be wrong numbers.

"What's the security setup on campus? The same as when you were there?"

"It changed a lot after Virginia Tech."

Will was familiar with the college massacre, the deadliest in American history.

She explained, "You know how institutions are—they're reactive, not preventative. The bulk of the murders at Virginia Tech took place in the engineering building, so all the other schools tightened down security around their classrooms and labs."

"The first victims were killed in their dorm."

"It's hard to police that. Students have to have key cards to get in and out, but it's not a foolproof system. Look at what they did at Jason's dorm. How stupid is that to cut a fire alarm?" Her phone started ringing again. Frank. Lena sent it to voice mail.

"Someone's trying to get in touch with you."

"You're right." Lena realized she was starting to talk like Will Trent. Maybe that wasn't a bad thing considering he was running circles around her. She slowed the car to fifteen miles per hour as the rain rocked the car. Water flooded across the road, making the asphalt look rippled. The windshield wipers couldn't keep up. She slowed the car to a stop, saying, "I can't see in front of me. Do you want to drive?"

"I can't do any better than you. Let's wait it out and talk about our murderer."

Lena put the car in park. She stared at the whiteness ahead. "Do you think we're looking at a serial killer?"

"You have to have at least three victims on three different occasions for it to qualify as a serial."

Lena turned in her seat to face him. "So, we've got to wait for a third body?"

"I hope it doesn't come to that."

"What about your profile?"

"What about it?"

She tried to remember his earlier questions. "What took place? Two kids

murdered, both with knives, both while they were alone. Why did it happen? The killer planned it out. He brought the knife. He knew the victims, probably knew Jason better than Allison because he was obviously furious when he killed him."

Will continued, "He has a car. He knows the town, the topography of the lake and the placement of the cameras in the dorm. So, he's someone who went to the school or goes to the school now."

She shook her head, laughing at herself. "This is the problem with profiles. You could be talking about me."

"It's possible a woman committed these crimes."

Lena gave him a tight smile. "I was with my boyfriend Jared last night and with you all day."

"Thanks for the alibi," Will told her. "But I'm being serious. Allison was small. A woman could have overpowered her. A woman could have floated her out into the lake, then chained her down with the cinder blocks."

"You're right," she admitted. "Women like knives. It's more personal." Lena had carried a knife herself a few years ago.

Will asked, "Who are the women we've come up against on this case?"

She listed them out. "Julie Smith, whoever she is. Vanessa Livingston, the woman whose basement was flooded. Alexandra Coulter, one of Allison's professors. Allison's aunt Sheila, who hasn't returned my calls yet. Mrs. Barnes from across the street. Darla the nurse with the long red nails."

"Mrs. Barnes gives Darla a pretty tight alibi. She says she was up with her all night both nights."

"Yeah, well, my uncle Hank says he never sleeps, but every time I stay over I hear him snoring like a freakin' chainsaw." Lena took out her notebook. Heat rushed through her body, but not from the infection in her hand. She kept her notebook angled away from Will as she thumbed past the 911 transcript, then quickly went to the page where she'd recorded Darla's details. "The cell number of the 911 caller is a 912 area code. Darla's is a 706."

"Did her accent sound unusual to you?"

"Kind of trashy, but she's obviously pulled herself up."

"She didn't sound Appalachian to you, did she?"

Lena stared at him openly. "She sounded like everyone I grew up with in south Georgia. Where are you getting Appalachia?"

"Do you know any women in town who moved down from the mountains in the last few years?"

She guessed this was another bit of information he was going to keep to himself. Two could play at that game. "Now that you mention it, we had some hillbillies a while back but they loaded up their truck and moved to Los Angeles."

"Beverly Hills?" He chuckled appreciatively before throwing out one of his sudden subject changes. "You should have your hand looked at."

Lena looked down at her injured palm. Her skin was sweating so badly that the Band-Aids were peeling off. "I'll be all right."

He told her, "I talked to Dr. Linton about gunshot wounds today."

"You two kids know how to have fun."

"She says the probability of an untreated gunshot wound getting infected is

very high.”

No shit, she wanted to say. Instead, she told him, “Let’s go back to the profile.”

He hesitated long enough to let her know he wasn’t happy about letting someone else change the subject. “What’s the sequence of events?”

Lena tried to wrap her brain around the question. “We already went through what happened to Allison. With Jason, I guess the killer came into the dorm, moved the cameras, stabbed him, then left.”

“He covered Jason’s body with a blanket. He knew there would be a lot of blood.”

That was new. “Where was the blanket?”

“I found it in the bathroom at the end of the hallway.”

“You should check the drains, the—” She stopped herself. Will would know to do all of these things. He didn’t need her help. “There were four questions for the profile, right?”

“The last one is, you have to ask yourself who would have done these things in this order for these reasons.”

“Allison was killed before Jason. She could’ve been a warning that Jason didn’t heed.”

“Jason was holed up in his dorm room. We don’t even know if he heard about the murder.”

“So, the killer is antsy, worried that the message hasn’t gotten through.” A thought occurred to her. “The suicide note. The killer left it as a warning. ‘I want it over.’ ”

“Right,” he agreed, and she assumed he’d figured this out a while ago without telling her.

Still, she said, “It would make sense that the killer would be angry with Jason for not taking Allison’s death as a warning. He was stabbed at least eight or nine times. That speaks to a lot of anger.”

Will looked up at the sky. “Rain’s let up.”

Lena sat up in the seat, sliding the gear into drive. She rolled the car slowly forward. The road was still flooding. Streams of water gushed back toward Main Street. “Both Allison and Jason were students. They could be mixed up in something to do with the school.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. A grant. There’s all kinds of government money going in and out of there. Defense spending. The engineering school works on medical devices, nanotechnology. The polymer labs are testing all kinds of adhesives. We’re talking hundreds of millions of dollars.”

“Would a grad student have access to the money?”

She thought about it. “No. The doctoral candidates might, but the grad students basically do shitwork around the labs and the undergrads can’t wipe their own asses without getting permission. I used to date a guy who was in one of the master’s programs. They’re not involved in anything remotely interesting.”

They had reached Jason Howell’s dorm. There were two black vans parked outside. They each had the GBI logo on their doors and CRIME SCENE UNIT emblazoned in white on the sides. Despite herself, Lena felt excited, like a bloodhound who’d caught a scent. The sensation quickly faded. She had spent

countless hours at this school studying for a degree that she would probably never get to use. At best, her education would go toward being one of those annoying people who point out everything they get wrong on *CSI*.

Will looked at his cell phone. "I need to make a quick call to my partner, if you don't mind."

"Sure." Lena parked the car. The rain was still pounding down, and she bolted from the car and ran up the steps, holding down the hood of her jacket with both hands.

Marty was sitting inside reading a magazine. She knocked on the door. He jerked up his head, his glasses tilting on his nose. He buzzed her in with his card.

He said, "You look bad."

Lena was taken aback by the comment. She ran her fingers through her hair, feeling a damp that hadn't come from the rain. "It's been a long day."

"For you and me both." Marty sat back on the bench. "I'll be glad when it's over."

"Anything happening?"

"They got three men upstairs. Two more went over to the parking decks. The guy in charge, he's got a handlebar mustache like he's outta the circus. He found some car keys up in the room and drove around clicking the alarm until it went off."

Lena nodded her approval, thinking the guy was pretty smart for a circus freak.

Marty admitted, "I never checked the parking decks. He was parked on the third level by the ramp."

Lena gave him a pass. "I never checked the decks when all the kids were gone, either."

"Uh-oh. Here he comes." Marty reached over and pressed his key card against the pad.

Will pushed open the door, stamping his feet on the floor. "Sorry," he apologized. "Mr. Harris, thank you for giving us your time today. I'm sorry we're taking you away from your family."

"Demetrius told me to stay here as long as you need me."

"Can you tell me who was on shift last night?"

"Demetrius. He's my boss. We've been switching back and forth so we each get some time off for the holiday." He put down the magazine. "He doesn't remember anything, but he'll be happy to talk to you whenever you want."

Lena thought there were more important things for Will to work on right now. "Marty told me that one of your people found Jason's car over in the deck. They're looking at it now."

Will smiled. She could almost feel his relief. "That's good. Thank you, Mr. Harris."

He offered, "Demetrius is at the office pulling all the security tapes for you. I can drive you over if you want."

Will glanced at Lena. Staring at videotaped footage for hours on end hoping to find two seconds of a clue was the kind of mind-numbing work that could make you want to put a bullet in your head. Lena wanted to be at that car combing through the carpet fibers, looking for traces of blood or fingerprints, but there

was no point.

She volunteered, "I'll go look at the tapes if you want."

"It's not going to be fun."

"I think I've had enough fun lately."

Lena sat in the interrogation room at the police station where she had talked to Tommy Braham two days before. She had rolled in the television cart with the old VCR and newer digital equipment that they sometimes used to record interviews. The film from the campus security cameras was a combination of both—digital for the outside cameras and regular VCR tape for inside. Demetrius, the chief of security, had given her everything he had.

As far as Lena knew, she was the only person in the station right now except for Marla Simms, who never left her desk, and Carl Phillips, who was back in the cells working as booking officer for the night. Carl was a big guy who didn't take a lot of crap off anybody, which was why Frank had stuck him with booking duty. Carl was incredibly honest. Frank was doing everything he could to keep the man away from Will Trent.

Lena had already gotten the story from Larry Knox, who gossiped like a woman. She knew Carl had protested kicking out some of the more talkative prisoners in the cells after Tommy's body was found. Frank had told Carl to leave if he didn't approve, and Carl had taken him up on the offer. The only prisoners Frank hadn't let go were either comatose or stupid. Top among this last designation was Ronald Porter, a twat of a man who'd beaten his wife so many times that her face had caved in. Frank had found a way to bully Ronny into keeping quiet. He was trying to push Carl around. He was lying to Will Trent. He was hiding evidence, probably postponing the delivery of the audio from the 911 tape. He thought he was blackmailing Lena.

The old man had a lot on his plate.

Lena rubbed her eyes, trying to clear her vision. The room was stuffy and hot, but that wasn't the problem. She was pretty sure she had a fever. Her hand was already sweating through the fresh Band-Aids she'd found in the first aid kit. The flesh underneath was raw and hot. She had heard from Delia Stephens that they were going to wake Brad in the morning. Lena would go over first thing and find a nurse to take a look at her injury. She'd probably need a shot and have to answer a lot of questions.

There would be worse questions tonight. She would have to tell Jared what was going on. At least part of what was going on. Lena didn't want to burden him with the whole truth. And she hadn't laid herself in front of an oncoming train for nothing. Losing Jared on top of giving up her badge was the kind of sacrifice she was not willing to make.

Lena turned back to work. The videotapes she'd been watching for the last two hours ranged from tedious to boring. She should've just gone home but Lena felt a weird sense of duty toward Will Trent. He'd made her into a reluctant Cinderella. Lena figured it would take until midnight to watch all these tapes, around the same time her badge turned into a pumpkin.

She had found the good stuff early on. According to the time code, last night at eleven-sixteen and twenty-two seconds, the fire door at the back of Jason's

building was opened. Lena was familiar with the layout from her own days with campus security. The dorm, the cafeteria, and the back of the library formed an open U with loading docks in the middle. The school didn't let students use the area as a shortcut because a kid had fallen off one of the docks several years ago and broken his leg in three places. The resulting lawsuit had been a hard blow, and they'd blown even more money putting in xenon lights that lit up the place like a Broadway stage.

The camera over the exit door recorded in color. The light coming through the door when it was opened showed xenon blue. Then the camera jerked and showed the ceiling with a pie-shaped wedge of blue light cutting the darkness. The door was closed, and the ceiling went dark.

At eleven-sixteen and twenty-eight seconds, a figure came into the second-floor hallway. The camera wasn't night-vision equipped, but the light from the open dorm room picked out the form. Jason Howell's clothes were bulky, the same as Lena had seen when the kid was lying dead in his bunk. Jason looked around nervously. His movements were panicked. He had obviously heard a noise, but he dismissed it easily enough. At eleven-sixteen and thirty-seven seconds, he went back into his room. From the sliver of light in the hall, she could tell he'd left his door slightly ajar.

The killer took his time climbing the stairs. Maybe he wanted to make sure Jason was caught truly unaware. It wasn't until eleven-eighteen on the dot that the second-floor camera tilted up. The killer wasn't as adept this time. Lena imagined he'd slipped on the stairs. The camera had only tilted slightly, at an angle rather than straight up, and she worked the pause until she caught sight of the tip of a wooden baseball bat. The rounded end was easily distinguishable, but the Rawlings logo gave it away. She recognized the lettering style from her softball days.

At eleven-twenty-six and two seconds, the xenon light once again flashed against the first-floor ceiling as the exit door opened. The killer had taken roughly eight minutes to end Jason's life.

Marla knocked on the door as she walked into the room. Lena paused the tape she was staring at—the digital film of the empty parking lot in front of the library. "What is it?"

"You've got a visitor." Marla turned on her heel and left.

Lena tossed down the remote, thinking Marla Simms was one person she would not miss when she left this place. Actually, now that she gave it some consideration, Lena could not name one person in town she couldn't live without. It seemed odd to feel so detached from a group of people who had comprised her world for the last several years. Lena had always thought of Grant County as her home, the police force as her family. Now, she could only think about how good it would feel to finally be rid of them.

She pushed open the metal fire door and walked into the squad room. Lena stopped when she saw the woman waiting in the lobby, instantly recognizing Sheila McGhee from the picture Frank had taken out of Allison's wallet. They had all been sitting on a bench in front of the student center. The boy Lena now knew was Jason Howell had his arm around Allison's waist. Sheila sat beside her niece, close but not too close. The sky was deep blue behind them. The leaves had started to fall.

In person, Sheila McGhee looked thinner, harder. Lena had thought from the photo that she was local town trash, and now she guessed Sheila was the Elba, Alabama, version of the same. She was the sort of stick thin you got from eating too little and smoking too much. Her skin hung limply from the bones of her face. Her eyes were sunken. The woman in the photo had been smiling. Sheila McGhee looked like she would never smile again.

She nervously clutched her purse in front of her stomach as Lena approached. "Is it true?"

Marla was at her desk. Lena reached across and pressed the buzzer to open the gate. "Why don't you come back?"

"Just tell me." She grabbed Lena's arm. She was strong. The veins along the back of her hand looked like braided pieces of twine.

"Yes," Lena confirmed. "Allison is dead."

Sheila wasn't convinced. "She looked like a lot of girls."

Lena covered the woman's hand with her own. "She worked at the diner down the street, Mrs. McGhee. Most of the cops who work here knew her. She was known to be a very sweet girl."

Sheila blinked several times, but her eyes were dry.

"Come back with me," Lena offered. Instead of leading her to the interrogation room, she went into Jeffrey's office. Oddly, Lena felt a sudden pang of loss. She understood that somewhere in the back of her mind, she'd thought that in ten, maybe fifteen years, she'd rightfully have this office. Lena hadn't realized the dream was even there until she'd lost it.

Now wasn't the time to dwell on her own broken dreams. She indicated the two chairs on the other side of the desk. "I'm so sorry for your loss."

Sheila sat on the edge of the seat, her purse in her lap. "Was she raped? Just tell me right out. She was raped, wasn't she?"

"No, she wasn't raped."

The woman seemed confused. "Did that boyfriend of hers kill her?"

"No, ma'am."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, ma'am." Lena sat down beside her. She kept her hand in her lap. The skin was hotter than before. Every heartbeat shot a throb through her fingers.

Sheila said, "His name's Jason Howell. She's been seeing him a couple of years. They weren't getting along lately. I don't know what was going on. Some kind of disagreement or something. Allison was torn up about it but I told her to just let him go. Ain't no man worth that kind of misery."

Lena flexed her hand. "I've just come from the college, Mrs. McGhee. Jason Howell is dead. He was murdered last night."

She looked as shocked as Lena had felt when she'd heard the news from Marty. "Murdered? How?"

"We think he was killed by the same man who murdered your niece."

"Well..." She shook her head, confused. "Who would kill two college students? They didn't have a dime between them."

"That's what we're trying to figure out." Lena paused, giving the woman time to recover. "If you could think of anybody in Allison's life, a person she mentioned, maybe something she'd gotten mixed up in that she couldn't—"

"That don't even make sense. What could Allison do to anybody? She never

hurt nobody.”

“Did she ever tell you about her friends? Talk about anybody in her life?”

“There was that Tommy. He’s retarded, got a thing for her.” Realization dawned. “Have you talked to him?”

“Yes, ma’am. We cleared him of the crime.”

She kept clutching the purse in her lap. “What about that landlord? Seemed like he had a jealous girlfriend.”

“They were both in Florida when the crime was committed.”

Tears moistened her eyes but didn’t fall. She was obviously trying to think of someone else who could have done this. Finally, she gave up, taking a short breath and letting it out between her lips. Her shoulders slumped. “None of this makes sense. None of it.”

Lena kept her own counsel. She had been a cop for fifteen years and she had yet to work a murder case that made much sense. People always killed for the stupidest reasons. It was depressing to think that life held such little value.

Sheila opened her purse. “Can I smoke in here?”

“No, ma’am. Would you like to go outside?”

“Too damn cold.” She chewed at her thumbnail as she stared at the wall. The rest of her nails were chewed to the quick. Lena wondered if Allison had picked up the habit from her aunt. The girl’s nails had been painfully short.

Sheila said, “Allison had a professor she was mad at because he gave her a bad grade.”

“Do you remember his name?”

“Williams. She’s never made a C on a paper in her life. She was pretty upset about it.”

“We’ll look into that,” Lena told her, but she’d already talked to Rex Williams. He’d been in New York with his family since Saturday afternoon. A call to Delta confirmed his alibi. “Did Allison have a car?”

Her eyes shifted to the floor. “It was her mama’s. She kept it in Judy’s name because the insurance was cheaper that way.”

“Do you remember the make and model?”

“I don’t know. It was old, held together by spit and rust. I can look it up when I get home.” She clutched her purse as if she was ready to leave. “Do you need me to do that now?”

“No,” Lena told her. She was fairly certain Allison drove a red Dodge Daytona. “Did you talk to your niece much on the phone?”

“Once a month. We got closer after her mama passed.” A look crossed her face. “I guess it really is just me now.” She swallowed hard. “I got a son in Holman stamping out license plates. About the only thing he’s ever done right in his life.”

She meant Holman State Prison in Alabama. “What’s he in for?”

“Being stupid.” Her anger was so palpable that Lena resisted the urge to lean back in her chair. “He tried to rob a liquor store with a water pistol. That boy’s been in prison more days than he’s been out.”

“Is he affiliated with a gang?”

“Well, who the hell knows?” she demanded. “Not me, that’s for sure. I ain’t talked to him since they sent him up. Washed my hands of it all.”

“Was he close to Allison?”

"Last time they were together was when she was thirteen, fourteen. They were out swimming and he held her head under the water until she threw up. Little shit ain't no better than his daddy." She started rummaging around in her purse, but then seemed to remember she couldn't smoke. She pulled out a pack of gum and shoved two pieces into her mouth.

"What about Allison's father?"

"He's living in California somewhere. He wouldn't know her if she passed him on the street."

"Was she seeing a counselor here at school?"

Sheila gave her a sharp look. "How did you know about that? Was it the counselor did it?"

"We don't know who did it," Lena reminded her. "We're looking into all angles. Do you know her counselor's name?"

"Some Jew. A woman."

"Jill Rosenberg?" Lena knew the psychiatrist from another case.

"That sounds like it. Do you think she could'a done it?"

"It's not likely, but we'll talk to her. Why was Allison seeing Dr. Rosenberg?"

"She said the school made her."

Lena knew freshmen were required to see a counselor once a semester, but after that, attendance was left to them. Most students found better ways to spend their time. "Was Allison depressed? Was she ever suicidal?"

Sheila looked down at her torn fingernails. Lena recognized the shame in her face.

"Mrs. McGhee, it's all right to talk about it in here. All of us want to find out who did this to Allison. Even the smallest bit of information might help."

She took a deep breath before confirming, "She cut her wrists eight years ago when her mama died."

"Was she hospitalized?"

"They kept her for a few days, gave her some outpatient therapy. We were supposed to keep it up, but there ain't no money for doctors when you can barely put food on the table."

"Did Allison seem better?"

"She was good off and on. Like me. Probably like you. There are good days and bad days, and as long as there aren't too many of either, you get along with your life fine."

Lena thought that was one of the most depressing ways to live your life that she had ever heard. "Was she taking medication?"

"She said the doctor gave her something new to try. Far as I could see, it wasn't helping much."

"Did she complain about school? Work?"

"Never. Like I said, she put on a good face. Life is hard, but you can't get down about every shitty thing that happens to you."

"I found a picture of you in Allison's wallet. She was with you and Jason. It looked like you were all sitting on a bench in front of the student center."

"She kept that in her wallet?" For the first time, Sheila's features relaxed into something close to a smile. She searched her purse again and found a photograph that was a match for the one in her niece's wallet. She stared at the image a long while before showing it to Lena. "I didn't know she kept a copy for

herself.”

“When was it taken?”

“Two months ago.”

“September?”

She nodded, smacking her gum. “The twenty-third. I had a couple of days off and thought I’d drive over and surprise her.”

“What was Jason like?”

“Quiet. Arrogant. Too touchy. He kept holding her hand. Stroking her hair. Would’ve drove me up the wall having some boy pawing me like that, but Allison didn’t care. She was in *love*.” She put enough sarcasm in her voice to make the word sound obscene.

Lena asked, “How much time did you spend around Jason?”

“Ten, fifteen minutes? He said he had a class, but I think he was nervous around me.”

Lena could understand why. Sheila didn’t seem to have a high opinion of men.

“What made you think Jason was arrogant?”

“He just had this look on his face like his shit don’t stink. You know what I’m saying?”

Lena had a hard time reconciling the chubby grad student she had seen on Jason’s student ID with the arrogant prick Sheila was painting. “Did he say anything specifically?”

“He’d just bought her this ring. It was cheaper than dirt, and not good for her color, but he was all puffed out like a peacock about it. Said it was a promise ring to buy her a nicer one by Thanksgiving.”

“Not by Christmas?”

She shook her head.

Lena sat back in the chair, thinking about what the woman had said. You didn’t give people Thanksgiving Day gifts. “Did either of them say anything about expecting some money to come in?”

“Ain’t no money coming in for either one of ‘em. They were poor as church mice.” Sheila snapped her fingers. “What about that old colored man at the diner?”

Lena had thought Frank Wallace was the only person who still used that word. “We’ve talked to Mr. Harris. He’s not involved in this.”

“He was hard on her, but I told her it was good she was learning how to work with the colored. You look around big corporations now and they’re filled with black people.”

“That’s true,” Lena said, wondering if the woman thought her brown skin was the product of a bad home-tanning experiment. “Did Allison have other friends that she talked about?”

“No. There was just Jason all the time. Her whole world was wrapped up in him, even though I kept telling her not to put all her eggs in one basket.”

“Did Allison date anyone in high school?”

“Nobody. She was always about her grades. All she cared about was getting into college. She thought it would save her from ...” She shook her head.

“Save her from what?”

A tear finally fell from her eye. “From ending up exactly the way she did.” Her lip started to tremble. “I knew I shouldn’t let myself hope for her. I knew

something bad would happen.”

Lena reached over and took the woman’s bony hand. “I’m so sorry about this.”

Sheila straightened her spine, making it clear she didn’t need comforting. “Can I see her?”

“It’d be better if you waited until tomorrow. The people who are with her now are taking care of her for you.”

She nodded, her chin dipping down once, then jerking back up again. Her eyes were focused somewhere on the wall. Her chest rose and fell, a slight wheeze to her breath from years of smoking.

Lena looked around the room, giving the woman some time to pull herself together. Until yesterday, she hadn’t been in Jeffrey’s office since his death. All his stuff had been sent to the Linton house after he died, but Lena could still remember what the room had looked like—the shooting trophies and photographs on the walls, the neatly stacked papers on the desk. Jeffrey had always kept a small framed picture of Sara by the phone. It wasn’t the sort of glamour shot you’d expect a husband to have of his wife. Sara was sitting on the bleachers at the high school. Her hands were tucked into a bulky sweatshirt. Her hair was blowing in the wind. Lena supposed the scene had a deeper meaning, just like her picture of Jared at the football stadium. Jeffrey tended to stare at the picture a lot when he was in the middle of a difficult case. You could almost feel his desire to be home with Sara.

The door cracked open. Frank looked in. He was visibly angry, fists clenched, jaw so tight with fury it looked like his teeth might break. “I need to see you.”

Lena felt a chill from his tone, like the temperature in the room had dropped twenty degrees. “I’ll be there in a minute.”

“Now.”

Sheila scrambled to stand, taking her purse with her. “I’ll be going.”

“You don’t have to rush.”

“No.” She glanced nervously at Frank. There was fear in her voice, and Lena suddenly understood that Sheila McGhee was a woman who had been on the receiving end of a lot of anger from the men in her life. “I’ve taken up your time when I know you’ve got better things to do.” She took out a piece of paper and handed it to Lena as she rushed toward the door. “This is my cell phone number. I’m staying in the hotel over in Cooperstown.” She turned away from Frank as she left the room.

Lena asked, “Why did you do that? She was obviously scared.”

“Sit down.”

“I don’t—”

“I said sit!” Frank slammed her into the chair. Lena nearly fell back onto the floor. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

He kicked the door closed. “What the fuck are you doing?”

Lena glanced out the window into the empty squad room. Her heart was in her throat, the pounding making it hard for her to talk. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You told Gordon Braham that Tommy didn’t mean to stab Brad.”

She rubbed her elbow. It was bleeding. “So?”

“Goddamn it!” He pounded his fist on the desk. “We had a deal.”

“He’s dead, Frank. I was trying to give his father some peace.”

“What about *my* peace?” He raised his fists in the air. “We had a fucking deal!”

Lena held up her hands, afraid he would hit her again. She’d known Frank would be mad, but she had never seen him this furious in her life.

“Stupid.” He paced in front of her, fists still clenched. “You’re so fucking stupid.”

She told him, “Lookit, calm down. I took the blame for everything. I told Trent that it was all my fault.”

He stared, slack-jawed. “You did what?”

“It’s done, Frank. It’s over. Trent’s on to the homicides. That’s where you want him. We both know Tommy didn’t kill that girl.”

“No.” He shook his head. “That’s not true.”

“Have you been to the college? Jason Howell was murdered last night. There’s no way—”

He gripped his fist in his hand like he had to stop himself from punching her. “You said Tommy’s confession was solid.”

Lena’s voice took on a pleading tone. “Listen to what I’m saying.” She could barely catch her breath to speak. “I’ll take the fall for everything. Dereliction of duty. Negligence. Obstruction. Whatever they come up with, I’ll take it. I already told Trent you didn’t have anything to do with it.” He started shaking his head again, but Lena didn’t stop talking. “It’s just me and you, Frank. We’re the only witnesses and our stories will be exactly the same, because I’ll say whatever you want me to say. Brad didn’t see what happened in the garage. For better or worse, Tommy’s not going to come back from the grave and tell anybody different. It’s all gonna be whatever we tell them.”

“Tommy—” He put his hand to his chest. “Tommy killed—”

“Allison was killed by someone else.” Lena didn’t know why he couldn’t accept this. “Trent doesn’t care about Tommy anymore. He’s all excited about a serial killer.”

Frank’s hand dropped. All the color left his face. “He thinks—”

“You don’t get it, do you? Listen to what I’m saying. This case just went into the stratosphere. Trent’s got his lab guys down here processing Jason Howell’s dorm top to bottom. He’s going to have them in Allison’s room, the garage, out at the lake. Do you think he’s going to care about some stupid spic cop who let a kid kill himself in her custody?”

Frank sat heavy in Jeffrey’s chair. The springs squeaked. How many times had she sat in this office with Jeffrey and heard that chair groan as he sat back? Frank didn’t deserve to be here. Then again, neither did Lena.

She said, “It’s over, Frank. This is the end of the line.”

“There’s more to it, Lee. You don’t understand.”

Lena knelt down in front of him. “Trent knows the 911 transcript was changed. He knows Tommy had a phone that’s missing. He probably knows you took that picture from Allison’s wallet. He sure as hell knows Tommy went back into those cells with my pen and used it to cut his wrists.” She put her hand on his knee. “I already told him he can tape my confession. You were at the hospital. No one will blame you.”

His eyes worked back and forth as he tried to read her face.

“I’m not working a scam here. I’m telling you the truth.”

"The truth doesn't matter."

Lena stood up, frustrated. She was handing him everything on a platter and he was shoving it back in her face. "Tell me why not. Tell me where this blows back on anybody but me."

"Why couldn't you just follow my orders for once in your miserable fucking life?"

"I'm taking the fall!" she yelled. "Why can't you get that through your head? It's me, all right? It's my fault. I didn't stop Tommy from running out into the street. I didn't stop him from stabbing Brad. I screwed up the interrogation. I badgered him into writing a false confession. I let him go back into the cells. I knew he was upset. I didn't frisk him. I didn't put him on suicide watch. You can fire me or I can resign or whatever you want. Take me in front of the state board. I'll swear on a stack of Bibles that it was all my fault."

He stared at her as if she was the stupidest human being walking the face of the earth. "That easy, huh? You do all that and then you just walk away."

"Tell me where I'm wrong."

"I told you to stick to the story!" He banged his hand so hard against the wall that the glass rattled in the window. "Goddamn it, Lena." He stood up. "Where's that boyfriend of yours, huh? You think you're gonna squirm out of this so easy? Where's Jared?"

"No." She pointed her finger in his chest. "You don't talk to him. You don't ever say anything to him ever. You hear me? That's the deal. That's the only thing that keeps my mouth shut."

He slapped away her hand. "I'll tell him whatever I damn well please." He started to leave. Lena grabbed him by his arm, too late remembering his injury from the garage.

"Shit!" he screamed, his knees buckling. He swung his fist around, slamming it into her ear. The inside of Lena's head clanged like a bell. She saw stars. Her stomach clenched. She tightened her grip on his arm.

Frank was on all fours, panting. His fingers dug into the skin on the back of her hand. Lena tightened her grip so hard that the muscles screamed in her arm. She leaned down to look at his gnarled old face. "You know what I figured out this morning?" He was breathing too hard to answer. "You have something on me, but I've got even more on you."

His mouth opened. Saliva sprayed the floor.

"You know what I've got?" He still didn't answer. His face was so red that she could feel the heat. "I've got proof about what happened in that garage."

His head jerked around.

"I got the bullet you shot me with, Frank. I found it in the mud behind the garage. It's going to match your gun."

He cursed again. Sweat poured down his face.

"Those classes I've been taking? The ones you've been making fun of?" She took pleasure in telling him, "There's enough of your blood at the scene for them to get an alcohol level. What do you think they're going to find? How many swigs did you take from that flask yesterday?"

"That don't mean anything."

"It means your pension, Frank. Your health insurance. Your good fucking name. You stuck around all these extra years, and it won't mean a damn thing

when they fire you for drinking on the job. You won't even be able to get hired on at the college."

He shook his head. "It's not gonna work."

Lena took some liberties with the truth. "Greta Barnes saw you give Tommy that beat-down. I bet that nurse of hers can tell some stories, too."

He gave a strained laugh. "Call them in. Go ahead."

"If I were you, I'd be careful."

"You don't see it."

Lena stood up and wiped the grit off her pants. "All I see is a tired old drunk."

He struggled to sit up. His breathing was labored. "You were always so sure you were right that you couldn't see the truth if it was standing there in front of you."

She took the badge off her belt and threw it on the floor beside him. The Glock she carried was her own, but the bullets belonged to the county. Lena ejected the magazine and thumbed out each round. The bullets gave off satisfying pings as they hit the tile floor.

He said, "It's not over."

She pulled back the slide and ejected the last round in the chamber. "It is for me."

The door was stuck. She had to yank it open. Carl Phillips stood at the back of the squad room. He tipped his hat at Lena as she walked out of the office.

Marla swiveled in the chair, her arms crossed over her large chest as she tracked Lena's progress through the room. She leaned down and pressed the buzzer for the gate. "Good riddance."

There should have been some kind of pull, some kind of loyalty, that made Lena look back, but she walked out into the parking lot, inhaling the wet November air, feeling like she had finally freed herself from the worst kind of prison.

She took a deep breath. Her lungs shook. The weather had cleared up a little, but a strong, cold wind dried the sweat on her face. Her vision was sharp. There was a buzzing in her ears. She could feel her heart rattling in her chest, but she forced herself to keep moving.

Her Celica was parked at the far end of the lot. She looked up Main Street. The waning sun was making a brief appearance, giving everything a surreal blue cast. Lena wondered how many days of her life had been spent going up and down this same miserable strip. The college. The hardware store. The dry cleaners. The dress shop. It all seemed so small, so meaningless. This town had taken so much from her—her sister, her mentor, and now her badge. There was nothing else that she could give. Nothing left to do but start over.

Across the street, she saw the Heartsdale Children's Clinic. Hareton Earnshaw's billion-dollar Beemer was parked in the lot, taking up two spaces.

Lena passed her Celica and kept walking across the street. Old man Burgess waved at her from the front window of the dry cleaners. Lena waved back as she climbed the hill to the clinic. Her hand was killing her. She didn't think she could wait to go to the hospital tomorrow morning.

During Sara's tenure, the clinic had always been well maintained. Now, the place was starting to go downhill. The driveway hadn't been pressure-washed in years. The paint on the trim was chipped and faded. Leaves and debris clogged

the gutters so bad that water flowed down the side of the building.

Lena followed the signs to the rear entrance. There were cheap stepping-stones laid in the dead grass. At one time, there had been wildflowers back here. Now there was just a mud track leading to the creek that ran through the back of the property. The torrential rains had turned it into a fast-flowing river that looked ready to flood the clinic. Erosion had taken hold. The channel was wider now, at least fifteen feet across and half as deep.

She pressed the buzzer by the back door and waited. Hare had been renting space in the building since Sara left town. Lena had to think that Sara would've never let her cousin work alongside her when she owned the clinic. They were close, but everybody knew Hare was a different kind of doctor from Sara. He saw it as a job, whereas Sara saw it as a calling. Lena was hoping this was still the case, that a doctor like Hare would view her as a billable office visit instead of a blood enemy.

Lena pressed the buzzer again. She could hear the bell ringing inside along with the quiet murmur of a radio. She tried to flex her hand. There was less movement now. Her fingers were fat and swollen. She pulled back her sleeve and groaned. Red streaks traced up her forearm.

"Shit," Lena groaned. She put her hand to her cheek. She was burning up. Her stomach was sour. She hadn't felt right for the last two hours, but it all seemed to be catching up with her at once.

Her phone started to ring. Lena saw Jared's number. She gave the buzzer by the door one last push before answering. "Hey."

"Is this a bad time?"

She paced in front of the door. "I just quit my job."

He laughed like she had told an unbelievable joke. "Really?"

She leaned her back against the wall. "I wouldn't lie to you about that."

"Does that mean you'd lie about other things?"

He was kidding, but Lena felt her heart drop when she thought about how all of this could've blown up in her face. "I want to get out of town as soon as possible."

"All right. We'll start packing tonight. You can move in with me and we'll figure out later what you're going to do."

Lena stared at the river. She could hear the rush of the current. The sound was like boiling water in her ears. Even though the rain had stopped, the river was still rising. She conjured the image of a huge wave crashing down the hill, flooding out the street and taking away the police station.

"Lee?" Jared asked.

"I'm all right—" Her voice caught. She couldn't start crying now or she'd never stop. "I should be home in an hour or two." Her throat started to tighten. "I love you."

She ended the call before he could answer. Lena looked at her watch. There was a doc-in-the-box in the drugstore over in Cooperstown. Maybe she could find a physician's assistant who needed some cash and wouldn't ask questions. She pushed away from the wall just as the back door opened.

Lena said, "Oh."

"I didn't see your car out front."

"I'm parked across the street." Lena held up her hand, showing the dangling

Band-Aids. "I ... uh ... kind of have a problem I can't take to the hospital."

There was none of the expected reluctance. "Come on in."

The smell of bleach hit Lena as she walked into the building. The cleaning staff had been thorough, but the stench made her stomach turn.

"Go into exam one. I'll be right there."

"All right," Lena agreed.

Being in the doctor's office seemed to give her body permission to hurt. Her hand was throbbing with every heartbeat. She couldn't pull her fingers into a fist. There was a high-pitched noise in her ears. Then another one. She realized she was hearing sirens.

Lena bypassed the exam room and went to the front of the building to see what was going on. The pocket door to the front office took some coaxing to open. The blinds were drawn, the room dark. She turned on the lights and saw the source of the odor.

Two gallon jugs of bleach were on the desk. Leather gloves soaked in a stainless steel bowl. Cotton swabs and paper towels littered the floor. A wooden baseball bat was laid out on a sheet of brown craft paper. Blood was embedded in the letters around the Rawlings logo.

Lena put her hand to her gun, but she was too late. She felt a drop of blood trickle down her neck before her body registered the pain of the cold steel of a knife pressing into her skin.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Charlie Reed bounded down the dorm stairs with a smile showing under his mustache. He was in a white clean suit, covered head to toe in Tyvek. "Glad you're here. We were just about to start the magic."

Will tried to return his smile, but the effort failed. Charlie was a forensics expert. He had the luxury of looking at cases through the lens of a microscope. He saw bone and blood that needed to be photographed, analyzed, and catalogued, where Will saw a human being whose life had been ended by a cold-blooded killer who seemed to be doing a very good job of evading justice.

Despite Will's earlier hopes, none of the evidence they'd found so far had been useful. Jason Howell's Saturn station wagon was remarkably tidy. Aside from some breath mints and a couple of CDs, there was nothing personal in the car. The blanket Will had found in the bathroom stall held more promise, but that had to be analyzed in the lab. This process could take a week or more. The hope was that the killer had injured himself or leaned against the blanket, leaving trace evidence that might link him to the crime. Even if Charlie found DNA in the material that did not belong to Jason, they could only run it through the database and hope that their killer was in the system. More often than not, DNA was a tool used to rule out suspects, not track them down.

"This next bit should go a little faster." Charlie leaned down and rummaged through one of the open duffel bags at the bottom of the stairs. He found what he was looking for and told Will, "Suit up. We should be ready in five minutes." He bounded back up the steps two at a time.

Will grabbed one of the folded clean suits from the pile at the bottom of the stairs. He tore the package open with his teeth. The suit was meant to limit skin and hair transfer to the crime scene. It had the added bonus of making Will look like a giant, elongated marshmallow. He was tired and hungry. He was pretty sure he smelled, and though his socks were dry now, they had dried in such a way as to feel like sandpaper rubbing across the blister on his heel.

None of this mattered. Every second that ticked by gave Jason and Allison's killer the freedom to move about freely, planning his escape or, worse, planning his next murder.

Will glanced at Marty Harris. The man was still guarding the front door with his usual degree of thoroughness. Marty's head was back against the wall, glasses askew. His soft snores followed Will up the stairs.

Charlie knelt in the middle of the hallway, adjusting a fixture on top of a tripod. There were three more tripods spaced evenly across the hall, going all the way to the bathroom. Similarly Tyvek-suited men all adjusted gauges as Charlie told them to go up or down. They had been here for hours. Photographing the scene, graphing the measurements of the hall, the bathroom, Jason's room, his desk and his bed. They had documented every item from the inside out. Finally, they had given Dan Brock permission to remove the body.

Once Jason was gone, they had taken more photos, diagrammed more graphs, and finally started bagging any evidence that seemed pertinent to the case.

Jason's laptop was toast, soaked to the core. There was a Sony Cyber-shot with some provocative photos of Allison Spooner in her underwear. All of Jason's schoolwork and notebooks seemed to be what you'd expect. His Dopp kit contained the normal toiletries and no prescription bottles. The strongest drug he had in the room was an expired bottle of Excedrin PM.

Jason's cell phone was more interesting, if not more helpful. The contacts list contained three numbers. One belonged to Jason's mother. She wasn't pleased to be talking to the police twice in one day about a son she apparently didn't care that much about. The second number dialed the main switchboard to the physical engineering building, which was closed for the holiday. The third belonged to a cell phone that rang once, then announced that the voice mailbox was full. The cell phone company had no record of who the number belonged to—it was a pay-as-you-go deal—an expected revelation considering none of these kids seemed to have good enough credit to get a phone in their own names.

Will assumed the cell phone with the full mailbox belonged to Allison Spooner. She had called Jason fifty-three times over the weekend. Nothing came in after Sunday afternoon. Jason's only outgoing call had been made to his mother three days before he died. Of all the details that Will had discovered about the victims in this case, Jason Howell's sad, lonely life was the most depressing.

"Almost ready," Charlie said, the excitement building in his voice.

Will stared into the hallway, wishing he never had to see this place again. The dingy tan linoleum on the floors. The scuffed and dirtied white walls. Making it worse was the lingering smell of Jason's body, even though the kid had been removed several hours ago. Or maybe it was all in Will's mind. There were crime scenes he had visited years ago that felt like they'd left their mark on his nasal passages. Just thinking about them could evoke a certain odor or bring a sour taste into the back of his throat. Jason Howell would forever be trapped in the pantheon of Will's bad memories.

"Doug, move that a little to the left," Charlie said. He'd divided the crime scene into three areas: the hall, Jason's room, and the bathroom. They had all agreed that their best bet was finding something in the hallway. The group of assembled men hadn't needed to articulate the problems associated with looking for DNA in a communal boys' bathroom, but Will could tell none of them were looking forward to crawling around on that particular floor.

Charlie tinkered with the light on the tripod. "This is the ME-RED I told you about."

"Nice." Will had already gotten an earful about the extremely fascinating qualities of the Mobile Electromagnetic Radiation Emitting Diode, which as far as Will could tell was fancy jargon for a gigantic black light that had a longer range than the Wood's lamps that had to be carried around by hand. The lights would pick up visible traces of blood, urine, and semen, or anything else that contained fluorescent molecules.

For the traces that were less visible, Charlie and his team had sprayed the hallway with Luminol, a chemical that reacts to the presence of iron in blood. Crime shows had made the general public well aware of the blue glow emitted

by Luminol when the lights were turned off. What they hadn't shared was that the glow usually lasted around thirty seconds. Long-exposure cameras had to be used to record the process. Charlie had set these up on tripods in all four corners of the hallway and staggered more around the entrance to Jason's dorm room. For good measure, he had tilted the security camera back down to capture it all in real time.

Will stood at the mouth of the stairs, watching the team make last-minute adjustments. He wondered if the murderer had paused here on the stairs to psych himself up for the kill. It was all so premeditated, so well thought out. Enter through the back door. Push up the cameras. Go up the stairs. Weapons in hand. Gloves on. Plan ready: Incapacitate Jason with the bat. Drag him to the bed. Cover him with the blanket. Stab him repeatedly. Hide the blanket in case it contained any trace evidence. Go back down the stairs. Leave by the back door.

Was it really as calculated as that? What went through a person's mind before they went to someone's dorm room, their home, and fractured their skull with a baseball bat? Would the killer's pulse quicken? Would his stomach tighten the way Will's did when he thought about the gruesome crime scene? There had been so much blood, so much brain and tissue, spattered around the room that Charlie and his team had been forced to make a grid so that they could clear a path to fully document the carnage.

What kind of person could stand over that bed and methodically stab another human being?

And what about poor Jason Howell? Lena was probably right that the killer had known Jason well enough to hate him. Despise him. What kind of trouble had the kid gotten himself into that he would become the object of such fury?

"I think we've got it." Charlie grabbed a handheld video camera and pulled Will toward Jason's room. He told Doug, "Go get the lights." Doug took off down the stairs and Charlie explained the plan to Will. "First we'll see what the Luminol brings out, then we'll go to the black light."

"Ready?" Doug called.

"Ready," Charlie yelled back.

The hall went dark. The Luminol responded quickly. Dozens of small, elongated circles glowed blue just outside Jason's open doorway. They were smeared where the killer had tried to wipe them up, but the pattern was easy to follow. The drops revealed his movements. After stabbing Jason to death, the killer had walked out of the room, heading toward the stairs, then changed his mind and doubled back toward the bathroom.

"The original plan was probably to take the blanket with him," Charlie said. He held the video camera low, documenting the drips. Will could hear the steady, slow click of the long-exposure cameras capturing the evidence.

He asked, "What about this?" A larger stain, more like a puddle, was on the floor just beside the bathroom entrance. Three feet above it was a patterned mark on the wall.

Charlie twisted up the LCD screen of the camera. Will saw the images in double as he recorded the luminescent blobs. "Our killer comes out of the room, heads toward the stairs, then he realizes the blanket is dripping. He goes toward the bathroom, but first—" Charlie pointed the camera toward the glowing stain

on the floor. "He leans something against here. I'd guess a bat or a club. That's the mark on the wall." Charlie zoomed in close to the wall where the top of the weapon had rested. "Uh-oh, fingerprint."

Charlie got down on his knees and pointed his camera at an almost perfect circle. "Gloved, it looks like." He zoomed in closer. The glowing dot started to fade. "We're losing it."

The Luminol's reaction time varied depending on the content of iron in the blood. The dot slowly disappeared, then the puddle on the floor was gone. Charlie muttered a curse as the hall was plunged back into darkness.

Charlie rewound the camera to look at the print again. "He was definitely wearing gloves."

"Latex?"

"Leather, I think. There's a grain." He showed Will the LCD, but the light was too intense for him to see anything but a blob. "Let's see if it still shows up under the diodes." He called, "Black light, please."

There were a couple of popping noises, then a steady hum. The hallway lit up like a Christmas tree, illuminating every protein-based fluid ever left here.

"Impressive, right?" Charlie's lips glowed a bright blue, probably from the Vaseline in his lip balm. He knelt down on the floor. The blood trail that had glowed so brightly minutes before was barely visible. "Our killer did a good job cleaning up after himself." He took a few more photographs. "Good thing he didn't use bleach or we wouldn't be able to see any of this."

"I don't think he planned to leave a mess," Will said. "Our guy is careful, but the only things he probably brought with him were the weapons—the knife and a bat or club. He used the blanket on the bed to catch the spatter. He tried to leave with it, then like you said, he changed his mind because it was dripping." Will felt himself smile as he remembered, "There's a supply closet beside the stall where I found the blanket."

"You're a genius, my friend." They both went into the bathroom. Charlie flipped on the lights. Will clamped his hands over his face, feeling like his eyeballs were being stabbed.

"Sorry about that," Charlie apologized. "I should've warned you to close your eyes and open them slowly."

"Thanks." Spots exploded in front of his eyes with every blink. Will put his hand on the wall so he wouldn't trip over his own feet.

Charlie stood in front of the supply closet with his video camera. "We can check the photographs, but I'm sure this door was closed when we got here." His hands were still gloved. He carefully turned the knob.

The closet was shallow, a metal shelving unit taking up most of the space. There was nothing unusual about the contents of the shelves: gallon jugs of cleaning products, a box of rags, sponges, two toilet plungers, a mop tucked into a rolling yellow bucket. Two spray bottles hung from a bungee cord on the back of the door. Yellow liquid for spot-cleaning stains. Blue liquid for windows and glass.

Charlie documented the contents of the shelves with the camera. "These cleaners are industrial grade. They're probably thirty percent bleach."

Will recognized the Windex label on one of the spray bottles. He had the same cleaner at home. It contained vinegar to help cut the grease. "You can't mix

vinegar and bleach, right?"

"Right. It forms a chlorine gas." Charlie followed Will's gaze to the spray bottle. He laughed as he made the connection. "I'll be right back."

Will let out a deep breath that he felt like he'd been holding for the last two days. Bleach glowed just as brightly as blood when sprayed with Luminol, obscuring any evidence. Vinegar, by contrast, formed a natural bond with iron, making it more visible when it was sprayed. That explained why the spots in the hall glowed with such intensity. The killer had used the Windex to clean up the floor. He might as well have drawn an arrow to the bloodstains.

Charlie was back with Doug and another assistant. They worked in tandem, taking photographs and handing Charlie the brush and powder to check the Windex bottle for fingerprints. Charlie was methodical, starting from the top down, going from one side of the bottle to the other. Will had expected him to find fingerprints immediately. The bottle was half full. The janitorial staff must have used it. The closet wasn't locked. The students would have access.

"It was wiped down," Will guessed. The trigger and the area around the grip were clean.

"Don't give up on me yet," Charlie mumbled. The brush swept back and forth across the label. All of them knelt down as Charlie dusted the bottom surface.

"Bingo," Will whispered. He could see a partial fingerprint on the bottom of the bottle. The black practically glowed against the dark blue liquid.

"What do you see?" Charlie asked. He took a flashlight out of his pocket and shone it on the clear plastic. "Holy Christ. Good catch, eagle eye." He traded the flashlight for a piece of clear tape. "It's a partial, probably the pinky finger." He sat back on his heels so he could transfer the tape to a white card.

Will said, "His gloves would've been bloody. He had to take them off to clean the floor."

Charlie stood up with Doug's help. "We'll drive this to the lab right now. I can wake some people up. It'll take time, but it's a good print, Will. This is a solid lead." He told his assistant, "The other evidence is in the van. There's a pill bottle in my tackle kit. Grab that, too."

Will had forgotten about the bottle in Tommy Braham's cabinet. "Did you field-test the capsules?"

"I did." Charlie started down the hall toward the stairs. The black lights bounced off their white Tyvek suits. "It's not coke, meth, speed, or any of the usual suspects. Was the kid into sports?"

"I don't think so."

"It could be a steroid or a performance enhancer. A lot of younger guys are using those to bulk up now. The Internet makes them easy to get. I sent some photos back to Central to see if they recognize the label or capsules. A lot of these dealers are into branding. They keep their labels consistent so their product gets advertised."

Tommy didn't strike Will as interested in weight lifting, but he'd been a skinny kid. Maybe he wasn't happy with that. "Did you find any fingerprints on the bottle?"

Charlie stopped at his tackle box. He pulled out the pill bottle, which had been sealed in a proper evidence bag instead of the Ziploc Will had found in the kitchen. "I lifted two sets. The first was adult, probably male. The second was a

partial webbing.” He indicated the skin between his thumb and index finger. “I don’t know if it’s male or female, but I’d guess whoever wrote those words on the label held it in her hands while she did. I’m saying ‘her’ because it looks like a woman’s handwriting.”

“Can I keep the bottle? I want to show it around and see if anybody recognizes it.”

“I already have some of the capsules in the van.” Charlie gave him the bag as they walked down the stairs. “You still want a lift to the Braham house? I think I can spare one of my guys to process the garage now.”

“That’d be great.” Will had forgotten his Porsche was still at the Taylor Drive house. He checked the time on his phone. Knowing it was already past ten o’clock made Will feel even more exhausted than he had before. He thought about Cathy Linton’s dinner invitation and his stomach rumbled.

Downstairs, Marty was awake by the door. He was talking to a large man who was his exact opposite except in skin color.

“You Agent Trent?” The man slowly made his way over. He was built like a linebacker who’d gone to seed. “Demetrius Alder.”

Will was too busy unzipping his clean suit to shake the man’s hand. “Thank you for cooperating with us today, Mr. Alder. I’m sorry we’ve kept you out so late.”

“I gave Lena all the tapes. I hope she comes up with something.”

Will assumed he would have heard from her hours ago if Lena had found anything of note in the security footage. Still, he told Demetrius, “I’m sure they’ll prove useful.”

“The dean wanted me to give you his number.” He handed Will a card. “He had me check all the buildings. We didn’t find anything else. All the dorms are empty. Somebody’s coming to fix the cameras first thing after the holiday.”

Will sat down so he could pull off the rest of the suit. He remembered something Marty had said earlier. “What about the car that was hit by the security camera?”

“It was parked in the loading dock. Good thing it was empty. Camera busted straight through the hatchback window.”

“Hatchback?” Will stopped worrying about the suit. “What kind of car was it?”

“I think it was one’a them old Dodge Daytonas.”

The rain had turned into a light sleet by the time Charlie’s van reached the tow yard. Gusts of wind shook the vehicle. Water pooled in the parking lot. There was no way to get to the front door without getting soaked. Will felt his socks getting wet again. The blister on his heel was so raw that he was starting to limp.

“Earnshaw’s,” Charlie said, and Will guessed he meant the sign glowing over the building. There was a whippet-thin older man standing in the doorway dressed in bib overalls and a baseball cap. He held the door open for them as they ran into the building.

“Al Earnshaw.” The man offered his hand to both of them. He told Will, “You’re Sara’s friend, right? My sister’s told me a lot about you.”

Will guessed that explained the man's uncanny resemblance to Cathy Linton. "She's been very kind to me."

"Sure she has." Al bellowed a good-natured laugh, but he slapped Will on the arm hard enough to throw off his balance. "Car's in the back." He motioned them toward the door behind the counter.

The shop was large, with the usual array of girlie calendars and posters of sexy, bikini-clad ladies washing cars. There were six lifts, three on each side. The tool chests were neatly lined up, their covers locked down tight. Al had turned on the propane heaters, but the cold was still biting. The roll-up doors in the back rattled from the wind. Allison's Dodge Daytona was on the ground by the last lift. The back windshield was buckled in the center, just as Demetrius had said.

Will asked, "Did you call Allison to let her know you had her car?"

"We don't call people when we tow them. Signs are up all over the school with our number. I figured the owner got a ride home for the holiday and we'd get a call when they got back and saw the vehicle wasn't there." Al offered, "Tommy's Malibu is on the lot if you want to see it."

Will had forgotten about the young man's car. "Did you figure out what was wrong with it?"

"Starter was stuck again. He was crawling under there and hitting it with a hammer to get it unstuck." Al shrugged. "I went ahead and fixed it. Gordon's truck doesn't have much more life left in it. He'll need something to drive." He took a rag out of his pocket and wiped his hands. The gesture had the hallmark of a nervous tic. His hands were as clean as Will's.

Will asked, "Did you know Tommy well?"

"Yep." He tucked the rag into his pocket. "I'll leave you guys to it. Just holler if you need me."

"Thank you."

Charlie walked over to the car. He put his tackle box on the floor and opened the lid. "Sara?" he asked.

"She's a doctor in town." He corrected, "I mean, Atlanta. She works at Grady Hospital. She grew up here."

Charlie handed him a pair of latex gloves. "How long have you known her?"

"Little while." Will took a longer time putting on the gloves than the task warranted.

Charlie got the message. He opened the car door. The hinges squealed loudly. Lionel Harris had been right about the condition of the Daytona. It was more rust than paint. The tires were bald. The engine hadn't been started in days but the smell of burning oil and exhaust filled the air.

"I guess the rain got to it," Charlie said. The dash was a sturdy molded plastic, but the cloth seats were wet and moldy. A stream of water had poured in from the busted hatchback, soaking the carpets, flooding the footwells. Charlie pulled up the front seat and water sloshed onto his pants. School papers floated in the murky liquid. The ink had washed away. "This is going to be fun," Charlie muttered. He was probably wishing he was back at the campus with his fancy lights. "I suppose we should do this right." He took his video camera out of the tackle box. Will walked around the car while he got everything ready.

The trunk was held down with a frayed bungee cord. The glass was safety-

coated with a transparent sheet that held the shattered pieces of the window together. Will had a spiderweb view inside the messy trunk. Allison was as sloppy as Jason was neat. Papers were scattered around, their ink smudged from the rain. Will saw a flash of pink. "That's her book bag." He reached down to loosen the bungee cord.

"Hold on, now." Charlie backed him off. He checked the rubber gasket around the window to make sure it was doing its job. "Looks like it held," Charlie told him. "Still, be careful. You don't want a sheet of glass coming down on your head."

Will figured there were worse things that could happen. He waited patiently as Charlie focused the camera on Will, narrating in an official-sounding voice for the benefit of the tape. "This is Agent Will Trent with the Georgia Bureau of Investigation. I'm Charles Reed, also with the bureau. We are at Earnshaw's Garage on Highway 9 in the city of Heartsdale, which is in Grant County, Georgia. It's Tuesday, November twenty-sixth, at approximately ten thirty-two in the evening. We are about to open the trunk of a Dodge Daytona reportedly belonging to murder victim Allison Spooner." He nodded, indicating Will could finally proceed.

The bungee cord was stretched to its limit. Will had to put some muscle into unhooking it from the bumper. The hatchback was heavy, and he remembered Lionel saying the pistons were blown. Allison had used a broken-off broom handle to prop it open. Will did the same. Tiny pieces of glass rained down as he opened the hatch all the way.

"Hold for just a second," Charlie said, zooming in on the book bag, the papers, and fast-food trash.

Finally, he gave the okay to remove the bag.

Will grabbed the strap. The bag had some heft to it. Despite the pink, the fabric looked waterproof. Under the camera's watchful eye, he pulled back the thick zipper. There were two heavy books on top, perfectly dry. From the drawings of molecules on the outside, Will assumed these were Allison's chemistry texts. There were four spiral-bound notebooks, each with different-colored covers. Will flipped through these for the camera, the pages blurring. He guessed these were Allison's class notes.

"What's that?" Charlie asked. A slip of paper was sticking out of the blue notebook.

Will unfolded the page. It was half a sheet of college-ruled paper. The side edge showed where it had been ripped away from the spiral. There were two lines of text on the page. All caps. Ballpoint pen. Will stared at the first word, trying to make out the shapes of the letters. His reading was always worse when he was tired. His eyes refused to focus. He held up the paper to the camera, asking, "You want to do the honors?"

Thankfully, Charlie didn't find the request odd. He narrated in his camera voice, "This is a note found in the pink book bag reportedly belonging to the victim. It reads, 'I need to talk to you. We'll meet at the usual place.'"

Will looked back at the words. Now that he knew what they said, he could better make out the letters. He told Charlie, "The 'I' looks familiar. It's similar to the one written on the fake suicide note." He pointed to the torn bottom half of the page for the benefit of the video camera. "The note found at the lake was

written on the bottom half of a torn sheet of paper.” Will recalled Charlie’s words, “ ‘I need to talk to you. We’ll meet at the usual place.’ And then you add the last part from the fake suicide note, which is ‘I want it over.’ ”

“Makes sense.” Charlie’s voice changed again as he announced that he was stopping the tape. Wisely, he didn’t want to record their speculation for a future defense attorney to show in court.

Will studied the letters on the page. “You think a man or a woman wrote this?”

“I have no idea, but it doesn’t match Allison’s handwriting.” Will guessed he was using the girl’s class notes as a comparison. Charlie continued, “I saw some of Jason’s homework in his room. He wrote in all caps like that.”

“Why would Allison have a note like this from Jason?”

Charlie guessed, “He could’ve been an accomplice to her murder.”

“Could be.”

“And then the killer decided he didn’t want to leave any witness.”

Will’s brain was starting to hurt. The theory didn’t add up.

Charlie offered, “I’m not a professional, but I’d say the writing in Allison’s journal matches the writing on the pill bottle.”

“Her journal?”

“The blue notebook. It’s obviously some kind of journal.”

Will thumbed through the pages. Slightly less than half the notebook was filled. The remaining pages were blank. He checked the printing on the front of the plastic cover. The number 250 was in bold type with a circle around it. He assumed that was the number of total pages. “Doesn’t this seem like a weird choice for a diary?”

“She was twenty-one. Were you expecting one of those girly leather-bound lock-and-key deals?”

“I guess not.” Will flipped through the pages. Allison’s handwriting was awful, but her numbers were legible. There were dates at the top of each entry. Some entries were as long as two paragraphs. Sometimes, there was just a stray line or two. He flipped to the last entry. “November thirteenth. That was two weeks ago.” He checked the other dates. “She was pretty consistent up until that point.” He flipped to the front page. “The first entry was on August first. That’s a pretty short diary.”

“Maybe she starts a new one every year on her birthday.”

Will remembered Sara’s notation on the whiteboard at the funeral home. Allison Spooner’s birthday was two days before Angie’s. “She was born in April.”

“Can’t blame me for trying.” Charlie picked up his camera. “I guess we should get some of this on tape. Anything pop out at you?”

Will stared at the open journal. Allison’s handwriting looked like a series of loops and squiggles. He patted his pocket. “I think I left my glasses in my glove compartment.”

“Bummer.” Charlie turned off the camera. “I’ll run you by your car so you can get started. Between this and the Braham place, I’m going to be pulling an all-nighter, too.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Lena felt another ripple of tremors working its way through her body. It was like an earthquake, a slow rumble and then the world turned upside down. Her teeth started to chatter around the gag in her mouth. Her muscles quivered, working their way into full spasm. Her feet kicked. She saw flashes of light. There was no use fighting it. She could only lie there and wait for the sensation to pass.

With agonizing slowness, the spasms subsided. Her body began to relax. Her jaw loosened. Her heartbeat slowed, flopping in her chest like a fish caught in a net.

How had she let herself get into this situation? How had she been so easily fooled?

She was hog-tied, an entire length of rope wrapped around her body, her hands, her feet. Even without the bindings, she doubted she could do anything but lie there and sweat. Her clothes were saturated. The concrete beneath her had wicked the moisture so that she was surrounded by a pool of her own making.

And it was cold. It was so damn cold that even without the shaking, her teeth wanted to chatter. She could barely feel her hands and feet. Dread filled her body when she thought about another attack coming on. She wasn't going to be able to hold on much longer.

Was it the infection in her hand? Was that the reason she couldn't stop shaking? The throbbing had turned into a stabbing pain that ebbed and flowed with no discernible pattern. Her life wasn't flashing in front of her eyes, but she couldn't stop thinking about what had brought her here. If she managed to get out of this place, if she managed somehow to get free, then everything had to change. The fear flooding through her body had brought with it a clarity that Lena had never known. For so long, she had tricked herself into thinking that she held back the truth to protect other people—her family, her friends. Now she could see that she was only protecting herself.

If Brad managed to pull through, she would apologize to him every day for the rest of her life. She would tell Frank that she was wrong about him. He was a good man. He'd stuck by Lena all these years when a smarter man would've dropped her for the worthless friend she was. Her uncle had gone through hell with Lena. She had pushed him away so many times that it was a miracle he was still standing.

And she had to find a way to get Sara Linton alone. Lena would bare her soul, confessing her complicity in Jeffrey's death. She hadn't killed him with her own hands, but she had put him in harm's way. Lena had been Jeffrey's partner. She was supposed to have his back, but she had stood silently by while she watched him walk into the fire. She had practically pushed him in that direction because she was too much of a coward to face it on her own.

Maybe that was what was causing the seizures. The truth was like a shadow

creeping through her soul.

Lena twisted around her good hand to reach her watch. The rope bit into her wrist. The pain barely registered as she pressed the button for the light.

Eleven fifty-four.

It was almost midnight.

Lena knew she had left the station around six. Jared would be wondering where she was. Or maybe Frank had gotten to him. Maybe Jared was on his way home to Macon right now.

Jared. The truth would lose him to her forever.

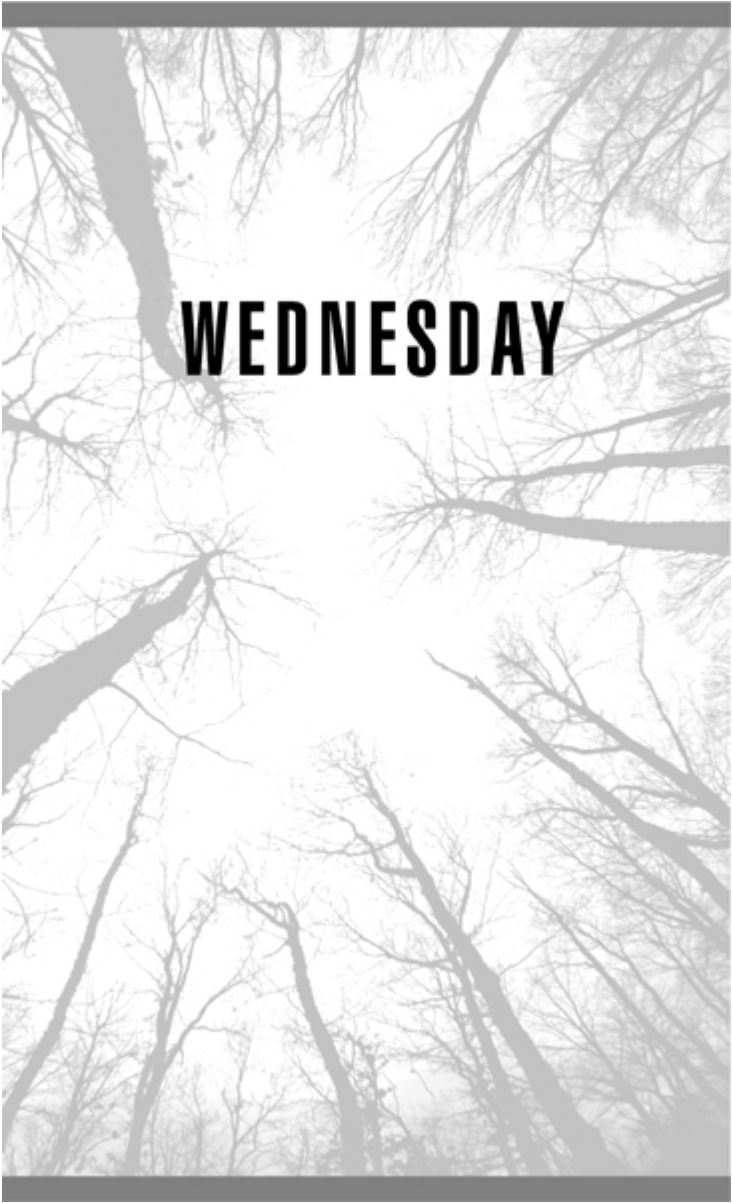
The punishment fit the crime.

Her jaw clenched. She closed her eyes, feeling another wave coming on. The tremble moved down her shoulders, through her arms and into her hands. Her feet kicked. She felt her eyes roll back. There were noises. Grunting. Screaming.

Slowly, Lena opened her eyes. She saw darkness. Her mind suddenly came back to her. She was tied up. She was gagged. Sweat covered her body. The stench of sweat and urine filled the air. She pressed the button on her watch. In the soft glow she could see the skin of her wrist. Red lines streaked up toward her shoulder, toward her heart. She looked at the display.

Eleven fifty-eight.

It was almost midnight.



WEDNESDAY

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Sara listened to the kitchen clock tick as the hands moved past midnight. She had been sitting at the table staring at the pile of dirty dishes stacked in and around the sink for longer than she cared to remember. It wasn't just lethargy that kept her rooted to the chair. Her mother's kitchen makeover included two dishwashers that were so modern it was impossible to tell whether or not they were running, yet she still insisted on hand washing her china and all the pots and pans. Or, insisted that Sara do the chore, which made Cathy's anachronistic ways even more outrageous.

The mindless task should have been a welcome end to Sara's day. Working at Grady Hospital was like trying to stand still on a spinning merry-go-round. The flow of patients never ebbed, and Sara generally was juggling twenty cases at any given time. Between consultations and her usual workload, she saw an average of fifty to sixty patients during any twelve-hour shift. Slowing all this down, focusing on just one patient at a time, should have been an easier task, but Sara found that her mind worked differently now.

She realized that the constant pressure of the ER was a gift in many ways. When Sara had lived in Grant County, her life had taken on a far more leisurely pace. She usually ate breakfast with Jeffrey in the morning. Two or three times a week, they had supper with her family. Sara was the team doctor for the local high school football team. She helped coach volleyball in the summer. Her free time was infinite if she managed her schedule right. Going to the grocery store could take several hours if she ran into a friend. She clipped articles from magazines to share with her sister. She'd even joined her mother's book club, until they started reading too many serious books to make it fun anymore.

By contrast, the fast pace of her work in Atlanta kept Sara from thinking about her life too much. Usually by the time she finished dictating her charts, all she could do was drag herself home and take a bath before falling asleep on the couch. Her days off were equally wasted with what she now saw was busywork. Her chores were something to get out of the way quickly. She scheduled lunches and dinners so that she didn't have too much time alone with herself. Alone with her thoughts.

All of her usual crutches had disappeared in the basement of Brock's funeral home. An autopsy certainly required a great deal of attention, but after a point, the motions were rote. Measure, weigh, biopsy, record. Neither Allison Spooner nor Jason Howell had left any remarkable clues in their deaths. The only thing that bound them together was the knife that had been used to kill them. The stab wounds were nearly identical—each made by a small, sharp blade that had been twisted before it was removed to ensure maximum damage.

As for Tommy Braham, Sara had found only one item that stood out: the boy had a small metal spring in the front pocket of his jeans, the type that you usually found in a ballpoint pen.

The hall light snapped on. Cathy yelled, "Those dishes aren't going to wash themselves."

"Yes, Mama." Sara glared at the kitchen sink. Hare had come for dinner, but she guessed the spread put on was really intended for Will. Cathy loved cooking for an appreciative audience and Will certainly fit that bill. Her mother had used every piece of china in the house, serving coffee in teacups with saucers, which Sara thought was very sweet until her mother informed the table that Sara was going to wash every last piece. Hare had brayed like a donkey at the expression on her face.

"Try twitching your nose while you stare at them," Tessa offered as she came into the kitchen. She was dressed in a billowing yellow nightgown that formed a tent over her belly.

"You could always offer to help."

"I read in *People* magazine that dishwater is bad for the baby." She opened the refrigerator and stared at the mountains of food inside. "You should've watched the movie with us. It was funny."

Sara sat back in her chair. She wasn't up for a romantic comedy right now. "Who called a while ago?"

Tess pushed around the Tupperware containers lining the shelves. "Frank's ex. You remember Maxine?" Sara nodded. "He's still refusing to go to the hospital."

Frank had suffered a mild heart attack at the police station this afternoon. Fortunately, Hare was down the street at the diner or things might have been a lot worse. Five years ago, Sara would have rushed to Frank's side. Today, when she had heard the news at the funeral home, all she could muster was sadness. "What did Maxine want?"

"Same as usual. To complain about Frank. He's a stubborn old coot." Tessa put a tub of Cool Whip on the table and went back to the fridge. "You all right?"

"I'm just tired."

"Me too. Being pregnant's hard work." She sat down across from Sara with a leg of fried chicken in her hand. She scooped it into the Cool Whip.

"Please tell me you're not going to eat that."

Tessa offered her the leg.

Despite her better judgment, Sara tried the ungodly mix. "Wow. It's sort of salty and sweet at the same time." She passed the leg back to her sister.

"I know, right?" Tessa dipped it into the tub again and took a bite. She chewed thoughtfully. "You know, I pray for you every night."

Sara laughed before she could catch herself. She apologized as quickly as she could. "I'm sorry. I just ..."

"Just what?"

She thought now was as good a time as any for the truth. "I didn't think you really believed in all that."

"I'm a missionary, you dumbass. What do you think I've been doing with my life for the last three years?"

Sara struggled to dig herself out of an ever-deepening hole. "I thought you wanted to go to Africa and help children." She didn't know what else to say. Her sister had always enjoyed life. Sometimes it felt like Tessa was enjoying it for both of them. Sara had always had her mind on school and then work. Meanwhile, Tessa dated whom she pleased, slept with whoever struck her fancy,

and never made apologies for any of it. "You have to admit that you're not a typical missionary."

"Maybe not," she allowed, "but you've got to believe in something."

"It's hard to believe in a God who would let my husband die in my arms."

"You can't fall off the floor, Sissy. If somebody throws you a rope, then you better start climbing."

Cathy had told Sara as much when she'd first lost Jeffrey. "I'm glad you've found something that gives you peace."

"I think you've found something, too." Tessa had finished the chicken leg, but she used the bone to spoon up more Cool Whip. "You're different from when you first got here. You're doing the work that you want to do."

"I don't know about that."

"Where's Will?"

Sara groaned. "Please don't start that again."

"The next time you see him, take that band out of your hair. You look prettier with it down."

"Please, please stop."

Tessa reached out and took her hand. "Can I tell you something?"

"As long as it's not advice on chasing after a married man."

She squeezed Sara's hand. "I'm really in love with my husband."

Sara gave a careful "Okay."

"I know you think Lem is boring and too earnest and too self-righteous, and believe me, he can be all those things, but a thousand times a day, I hear a song, or I think of something funny, or Daddy says one of his stupid puns, and the first thing that comes into my head is 'I want to tell Lem about this.' And I know that halfway around the world, he's thinking the same thing." She paused. "That's what love is, Sara, when there are so many things about you that you only want one person in the world to know."

Sara remembered how that felt. It was like being wrapped in a warm blanket.

Tessa laughed. "Good Lord, I'm gonna start crying. When Lem gets home, he's gonna think I'm some kind of basket case."

Sara put her hand over Tessa's. "I'm glad you've found someone." Her words were genuine. She could see that her sister was happy. "You deserve to be loved."

Tessa smiled knowingly. "So do you."

Sara chuckled. "I walked right into that."

"I'd better get to bed." She groaned as she stood. "Wash your hands. You smell like chicken and Cool Whip."

Sara smelled her hands. Her sister was right. She stared again at the full sink, thinking she might as well start on the dishes so she could go to bed. She groaned as loudly as Tessa had when she got up from the table. Her back was hurting her from leaning over all day. Her eyes were tired. She rummaged under the cabinet for the dish liquid, hoping that her mother was out so she would have a legitimate excuse to leave the dishes until morning.

"Crap," Sara mumbled, finding the Dawn behind a full box of dishwashing powder that her mother had never opened. She heard footsteps in the hall. "Did you come back for the Cool Whip?" she asked. Tessa didn't answer, but Sara was sure that she was there. "Don't tell me you're here to help." She went into the

hall and saw not Tessa, but Will Trent.

"Hey."

He stood in the center of the hall. His leather briefcase was at his side. There was something different about him that Sara couldn't quite put her finger on. He looked the same. He was even wearing the same clothes she'd seen him in for the last two days. There was definitely something wrong, though. He had a sadness about him that cut straight through.

She waved him into the kitchen. "Come on in." Sara put the dish liquid on the counter. Will hovered in the kitchen doorway.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Your sister let me in. I was staring through the window in the door trying to figure out if y'all were still awake. I know it's late." He stopped, his throat working as he swallowed. "It's really late."

"Is everything okay?"

He nervously moved his briefcase from one hand to the other, then back again. "Please tell your mother I'm sorry I couldn't make it to dinner. We had a lot to do, and I—"

"It's all right. She understands."

"Did the autopsies—" He stopped again, wiping his forehead with his sleeve. His hair was wet from the rain. "I was thinking while I was driving over here that maybe Jason's murder was a copycat."

"No," she told him. "The wounds were identical." Sara paused. Obviously, something awful had happened. "Let's sit down, okay?"

"That's all right, I—"

She sat down at the table. "Come on. What's wrong?"

He glanced back toward the front door. She could tell he didn't want to be here, but he seemed incapable of leaving.

Sara finally took his hand and pulled him to the chair. He sat, the briefcase in his lap. "I'm sorry about this."

She leaned forward, resisting the urge to hold his hand. "Sorry for what?"

He swallowed again. She let him speak in his own time. His voice was low in the large room: "Faith had her baby."

Sara put her hand to her mouth. "Is she all right?"

"Yeah, she's fine. Both of them are fine." He took his cell phone out of his pocket and showed her a picture of a red-faced newborn in a pink knit hat. "I guess it's a girl."

Faith had given the baby's weight as well as her name in the message. Sara told him, " 'Emma Lee.' "

"Eight pounds, six ounces."

"Will—"

"I found this." He put the briefcase on the table and opened the locks. She saw a stack of papers, an evidence bag with a red seal. He pulled a college notebook with a blue plastic cover from one of the pockets. Black fingerprint powder spotted the cover. "I tried to clean it up," he said, wiping the grime on the front of his sweater. "I'm sorry. It was in Allison's car and I ..." He flipped through the pages, showing her the scrawled handwriting. "I can't," he said. "I just can't."

She realized that Will hadn't looked at her once since walking into the room. He had such an air of defeat about him, as if every word that came from his mouth caused him pain.

Sara's purse was on the counter. She got up and found her reading glasses. She told Will, "Mama fixed a plate for you. Why don't you eat something and I'll start on this?"

He stared at the notebook in front of him. "I'm not really hungry."

"You've already missed supper. If you don't eat that food, my mother will never forgive you."

"I really can't—"

Sara opened the warming drawer. Her mother had cooked for an army again, this time roast beef, potatoes, collards, green beans, and snap peas. The cornbread was wrapped in aluminum foil. Sara put the plate in front of Will, then went back to get silverware and a napkin. She poured a glass of iced tea and found some lemon in the refrigerator. While she was up, she turned on the oven so that she could warm the cherry cobbler sitting on the counter.

She sat down across from Will and opened the notebook. She looked at him over her glasses. He hadn't moved. "Eat," she said.

"I really—"

"That's the deal," she told him. "You eat. I read." She stared at him, making it clear that she wasn't going to back down.

Reluctantly, Will picked up the fork. She waited until he had taken a bite of potatoes to open the spiral-bound notebook.

"Her name's on the inside of the cover with the date, August first." Sara went to the first page. "'August first. Day one.'" She thumbed through the pages. "Each entry has the same format. Day two, day three ..." She flipped to the back. "All the way to day one hundred four."

Will didn't comment. He was eating, but she could tell he was having difficulty swallowing. Sara could not imagine his frustration over having to have the journal read to him. He clearly took it as a personal failure. She wanted to tell him it wasn't his fault, but obviously, asking for Sara's help had taken so much out of him that she couldn't risk pushing him any further.

She returned to the first page. "'Day one,'" she repeated. "'Prof. C was sarcastic today. Cried later for about twenty minutes. Just couldn't stop. Was really annoyed in Dr. K's class because D behind me kept passing notes to V and I couldn't concentrate because they kept laughing.'" "

She turned the page. "'Day two. Cut myself shaving my leg pretty bad. Hurt all day. Was two minutes late for work but L didn't say anything. Felt paranoid all day that he was going to yell at me. Can't take him being mad.'" "

Sara kept reading, page after page of Allison's thoughts on L at the diner and J who had forgotten that they were supposed to meet for lunch. Every notation described Allison's feelings about the situation, but never in florid detail. She was either happy or sad or depressed. She cried, usually for a period of time that seemed unusually long given the circumstances. Despite the emotional revelations, there was something clinical about the telling, as if the girl was an observer watching her life go by.

Getting through the entire journal took over an hour. Will finished his supper, then ate most of the cobbler. He folded his hands on the table and stared straight ahead at the wall. He paced until he realized the distraction slowed down her reading. When Sara's voice started to falter, he got her a glass of ice water. Eventually, he noticed the dishes in the sink, and she read over her

shame as he turned on the faucet and started cleaning. Her legs started to cramp from sitting so long. Sara ended up standing by him at the sink, so at least there was the appearance of her helping. Will had made it through all the pots and pans and was starting on the china when Sara finally reached the last entry.

“Day one hundred four. Work was all right. Concentration bad all day. Slept nine hours last night. Took a two-hour nap during lunch. Should have studied. Felt guilty and depressed all day. No word from J. I guess he hates me now. Can’t blame him.” She looked up at Will. “That’s it.”

He glanced up from the bread plate in his hands. “I counted all the pages. There are two hundred fifty.”

She checked the front cover, noting the page count. The girl hadn’t torn out any pages. Sara told him, “She stopped writing two weeks before she died.”

“Something happened two weeks ago that she didn’t want to write down.”

Sara put the notebook on the table and grabbed a towel. Will was doing a much more thorough job than Sara ever had. He changed out the water often and dried everything as he went along. There wasn’t much space left on the counters, so he’d made educated guesses about where things went. Sara would have to go back through and put the pots and pans in their proper place, but she didn’t want to do that in front of Will now.

He saw the towel in her hands. “I’ve got this.”

“Let me help.”

“I think you’ve helped enough.” She thought he was going to leave it at that, but Will told her, “It’s been worse today than usual.”

“Stress is a contributing factor—when you get tired or if something emotional happens.”

He scrubbed hard at the plate in his hands. Sara saw that he hadn’t bothered to roll up his sleeves. The cuffs of his sweater were soaked. He said, “I’ve been trying to dig a new sewer line to my house. That’s why my laundry is behind.”

Sara had been expecting a non sequitur, but she’d hoped he could hold off for a few moments longer. “My father built this house with money from people who try to do their own plumbing.”

“Maybe he can give me some pointers. I’m pretty sure the trench I started is filled in by now.”

“You didn’t use a trench box?” Sara stopped drying the plate. “That’s dangerous. You shouldn’t go past four feet without shoring up the sides.”

He gave her a sideways glance.

“I’m my father’s daughter. Call me when you’re back in Atlanta. I know my way around a backhoe.”

He picked up a bread plate. “I think you’ve done me enough favors to last a good long while.”

Sara watched his reflection in the window over the sink. His head was down as he concentrated on the task at hand. She reached back and loosened her ponytail. Her hair fell to her shoulders.

She said, “Go sit down. I can finish the washing.”

Will glanced up at her, then did a double take. She thought he was going to say something, but he picked up another plate and dunked it into the soapy water instead. Sara opened the drawer to put away the silverware. Her hair hung down in her face. She was glad for the cover.

He said, "I hate leaving dishes lying around."

She tried for levity. "Don't let my mother hear that. She'll never let you leave."

"I had this foster mother named Lou once." Will waited for her to look up in the window. "She worked all day at the supermarket, but she came home at noon to fix me lunch no matter what." He rinsed the plate and handed it to Sara. "She always got home after I'd gone to bed, but one night I heard her come in. I went into the kitchen and there she was in her uniform—it was brown, too tight for her—and she was standing in front of the sink. It was piled with all the plates and dishes and leftover food from lunch. I hadn't done anything while she was gone. I just watched TV all day." He glanced up again at Sara's reflection. "Lou was standing there looking at the mess in the sink and just bawling. Like, the kind of crying you do with your whole body." He took the next dish off the pile. "I went into that kitchen and cleaned every single dish I could find, and for the rest of the time I was there, I never made her have to clean up after me again."

"Did she try to adopt you?"

He laughed. "Are you kidding? She left me alone all day except for lunch. I was eight years old. They took me away when the school counselor noticed I hadn't been to class in two months." He pulled the drain on the sink. "She was a nice lady, though. I think they let her have an older kid."

Sara asked the question before she could stop herself. "Why weren't you ever adopted? You were an infant when you entered the system."

Will kept his hand under the stream of water as he adjusted the temperature. She thought he was going to ignore her question, but he finally said, "My father had custody of me at first. The state took me away after a few months. They had good reasons." He plugged the drain so the sink could fill. "I was in the system for a while, then an uncle showed up and tried to make a go of it. He meant well. I hope he meant well. But he wasn't really equipped to take care of a child at that point in his life. I was in and out of his house, in and out of foster homes and the children's home. Eventually, he gave up. By that time I was six years old and it was too late."

Sara looked up. Will was staring at her reflection again.

He said, "You've heard about the six-year rule, right? You and your husband were trying to adopt. You must've heard it."

"Yes." Sara felt a lump in her throat. She couldn't look at him. She dried the saucer again, though not a drop of water was left on the surface. The six-year rule. She'd heard the phrase in her pediatric practice, long before Jeffrey had ever suggested they adopt. A child who had been in the system more than six years was considered tainted. Too many bad things had happened to him by then. His memories were too fixed, his behaviors too ingrained.

Years ago, someone in Atlanta had heard this warning, too. Probably from a friend or maybe even a trusted family doctor. They had gone to the children's home, seen six-year-old Will Trent, and decided he was too broken.

He asked, "Does that journal sound like a twenty-one-year-old girl's journal to you?"

Sara had to clear her throat so she could speak. "I'm not sure. I didn't know Allison." She forced herself to think about his question. "It seems off to me."

"It doesn't sound like a 'Dear Diary' sort of thing." He started on the last stack of dishes. "It's more like a long list of complaints about people, professors, her job, lack of money, her boyfriend."

Sara admitted, "She sounds kind of whiny."

"The point of whining is so other people hear you and feel sorry for you." He asked, "Does she sound depressed?"

"There's no doubt about that. The journal makes it clear that she was having a very rough time of it. She tried to kill herself once before, which points to at least one depressive episode in her past."

"Maybe she was in a suicide pact with Jason and a third person."

"That's a pretty awful way to die if you want to kill yourself. Pills would be much easier. Hanging. Jumping off a building. Also, I think if there was a pact, they'd do it together."

"Did you find any signs of drug use on Tommy, Allison, or Jason?"

"No outward signs. They were all healthy, of average or above average weight. The blood samples and tissues are on their way to Central. We'll get something back in a week to ten days."

"Charlie and I were kicking around this theory that Jason could have been involved in Allison's murder. We're pretty sure the killer used him to lure Allison to the lake. Or at least his handwriting." He turned off the water and wiped his hands on his jeans as he walked to his briefcase. "This was tucked inside the journal."

Sara took the plastic evidence bag he gave her. There was a note inside. "That paper looks familiar." She read the words. " 'I need to talk to you. We'll meet at the usual place.' "

Will added the phrase from the suicide note. " 'I want it over.' "

Sara sat down at the table. "Jason wrote Allison's fake suicide note."

"Or, he wrote the entire note to somebody else, and that somebody tore off the bottom half and left it in Allison's shoe as a warning to him." He saw the flaw. "But then why did Allison have it in her notebook?"

"No wonder your brain is tired." Sara's head was starting to ache just thinking about it.

Will took another plastic bag out of his briefcase. "I found this in Tommy's medicine cabinet. Charlie field-tested it, but he's not sure what's inside."

Sara rolled the pill bottle around to read the label through the plastic. "That's strange."

"I was hoping you'd know what it is."

" 'Tommy, do not take these,' " she read. "I'm not a handwriting expert, but it seems to me that Allison wrote this. Why would she tell Tommy not to take them? Why not just throw them away?"

Will didn't offer her a quick answer. He sat back in his chair, staring at her. "They could be poison, but if you had poison, why would you stab somebody in the neck?"

"What are these letters on the bottom of the label?" Sara unclipped her reading glasses from her shirt so she could see. "H-C-C. What does that mean?"

"Faith tried to run the initials through the computer, but I'm not sure how effective the search was. The picture I took wasn't very good and ..." He indicated his head as if there was something wrong with it. "Well, you know I

wasn't much help."

"Have you ever had your vision checked?"

He gave her a puzzled look, as if she should know better. "Needing glasses isn't my problem. I've had this all my life."

"Do you get headaches when you read? Feel nauseated?"

He gave a half-shrug and a nod. She could tell she wasn't going to get much more time on the subject.

"You should see an ophthalmologist."

"It's not like I can read the chart."

"Oh, sweetheart, I can shine a light into your eyes and tell if your lens is focused."

Her endearment hung awkwardly between them. Will stared at her. His hands were on the table. He was nervously twisting his wedding ring.

Sara scrambled to hide her embarrassment. She grabbed the pill bottle and held it up for him. "Look at the small print for me." Will held her gaze a moment longer before looking at the bottle in her hand. "Now, stay still." She carefully slid her glasses onto his head, then held up the pill bottle again. "Is that better?"

Will obviously didn't want to, but he looked at the bottle anyway. He glanced back at Sara, surprised, before he looked at the bottle again. "It's sharper. It's still not right, but it's better."

"Because you need reading glasses." She put the bottle back on the table. "Come to the ER when you get back to Atlanta. Or we can go to my old place tomorrow. You've probably seen the children's clinic across from the police station. I used to have special eye charts for—" Sara felt her mouth drop open.

"What is it?"

She took back her glasses and read the fine print on the label again. "H-C-C. Heartsdale Children's Clinic." Sara had been considering all the illegal reasons behind the bottle of pills and none of the legal ones. "This is part of a drug trial. Elliot must be running it out of the clinic."

"A drug what?"

She explained, "Pharmaceutical companies have to do drug trials on medicines they want to bring to market. They pay for volunteers to participate in the studies. Tommy must have volunteered, but I can't see him meeting the protocols. If there's one rule that governs these studies, it's that the participants have to give informed consent. There's no way Tommy could do that."

Will sounded skeptical. "Are you sure that's what this is?"

"The number at the top of the label." She pointed to the bottle. "It's a double-blind study. Each enrollee gets assigned a random number by the computer that says whether they get the real drug or the placebo."

"Have you done a trial before?"

"I've done a few at Grady, but they were surgical or trauma related. We used IVs and injections. We didn't have placebos. We didn't give out pills."

"Did it work the same way as a regular drug trial?"

"I suppose the procedures and reporting would be the same, but we were working in trauma situations. The intake protocols were different."

"How does it work if it's not in a hospital?"

Sara put the bottle back down on the table. "The pharmaceutical companies

pay doctors to run studies so that we can have yet another cholesterol-lowering drug that works about as well as the twenty other cholesterol-lowering drugs that are already on the market.” She realized her voice was raised. “I’m sorry I’m so angry. Elliot knows Tommy. He knows he’s disabled.”

“Who’s Elliot?”

“He’s the man I sold my practice to.” Sara kept shaking her head, disbelieving. She had sold her practice to Elliot so that the children in town would be helped, not experimented on like rats. “This doesn’t make sense. Most studies don’t even involve children. It’s too dangerous. Their hormones aren’t fully developed. They process medications differently than adults. And it’s almost impossible to get parents to consent to their children being tested with experimental drugs unless they’re deathly ill and it’s a last-ditch effort to save them.”

Will asked, “What about your cousin?”

“Hare? What does he have to do with this?”

“He’s an adult doctor, right? I mean, his patients are adults?”

“Yes, but—”

“Lena told me he rents space at the clinic.”

Sara felt sucker-punched. Her first instinct was to defend Hare, but then she remembered that stupid car he’d forced her to look at in the pouring rain. She had seen a BMW 750 in an Atlanta showroom that retailed for over a hundred thousand dollars.

“Sara?”

She pressed her lips tightly together to keep herself from talking. Hare at her clinic pushing pills on her kids. The betrayal cut like glass.

Will asked, “How much money can a doctor make from running a drug trial?”

Sara had trouble forming words. “Hundreds of thousands? Millions if you go around and speak at conferences.”

“What do the patients get?”

“Participants. I don’t know. It depends on what stage the trial is in and how long you have to participate.”

“There are different phases?”

“It’s based on risk. The lower the phase, the higher the safety risk.” She explained, “Phase one is limited to around ten or fifteen people. Participants could make ten to fifteen thousand dollars depending on the trial, whether it’s in-patient or not. Phase two expands to around two or three hundred people who get four or five grand each. Phase three is less dangerous, so the money is lower. They enroll thousands of people for hundreds of dollars.” She shrugged. “The amount of money they make depends on how long the trial lasts, whether they need you for a few days or a few months.”

“How long do the big trials last?”

Sara put her hand on Allison’s notebook. No wonder the girl had been obsessed with recording her moods. “Three to six months. And you have to submit journals on your progress. It’s part of the supporting documentation to track side effects. They want to know your moods, your stress level, whether you’re sleeping and how much. You know all those warnings you hear at the end of the drug commercials? That’s straight out of the journals. If one person reports headaches or irritability, it has to be included.”

“So, if Allison and Tommy were both involved in a drug trial, their records

would be at the clinic?”

She nodded.

Will took a moment to think it through. He picked up the bottle again. “I don’t think this is going to be enough to get a search warrant.”

“You don’t need one.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Lena heard the steady sound of dripping water. She opened her mouth around the gag as if she could catch the drops. Her tongue was so swollen that she was afraid she'd choke on it. Dehydration kept her body from sweating. The only thing she had to fight the cold were her shivers, and her muscles were so weak they were refusing to comply. When she pressed the button for the light on her watch, the blue glow captured the red streaks in her wrist like a burning brand in her flesh.

She shifted, trying to take some of the weight off her shoulder. Sitting up was not an option. The room spun too much. Either her arms ached or her legs shot through with pain every time she tried. Because her hands and feet were tied together, every movement required a coordination that she no longer possessed. She stared into the darkness, thinking about the last time she had gone for a run outside. It had been unseasonably warm. The sun had been high on the horizon, and when she jogged around the track at the college, she could feel the heat beating down on her face, then her back. Sweat dripped off her. Her skin was hot. Her muscles were primed. If she thought about it long enough, she could almost hear her shoes on the track.

Not shoes on a rubber track. Shoes on wooden steps.

Lena strained to hear the footsteps making their way down into the basement. There was a sliver of light underneath the door in front of her. Scraping sounds indicated something heavy was being moved—metal across concrete. Probably storage shelves. The sliver of light glowed brighter under the door. Lena closed her eyes as she listened to a key scraping in the deadbolt lock. The door opened, and Lena slowly opened her eyes, letting them adjust to the blinding fluorescents.

At first, there was a halo behind the woman's head, but then Darla Jackson's features came into view. Lena saw the streaked hair, the fake fingernails. Oddly, Lena's first thought was to wonder how the woman had managed to viciously murder two people without breaking her nails. She must redo them every night.

Darla walked down the stacked cinder blocks that served as stairs to the lower part of the basement. She knelt on the floor in front of Lena, checking to make sure the rope was still tightly tied. Incongruously, she put her hand to Lena's forehead. "Still with us?"

Lena could only stare. Even if her mouth wasn't gagged, she doubted she could say anything to the nurse. Her throat was too dry. Her brain was having difficulty holding on to one thought at a time. She couldn't form the words to articulate her questions. Why had Darla done this? Why had she killed Jason? Why had she killed Allison? It didn't make any sense.

"You're in the basement of the clinic." Darla pressed her fingers to Lena's wrist, for all intents and purposes acting like a caring nurse instead of a savage murderer. Hours ago, Lena had interrupted Darla cleaning blood off the bat that

had slammed into the back of Jason Howell's head. She was bleaching the gloves she had used, trying to hide evidence. And now she was checking Lena's pulse and trying to see if she had a fever.

Darla told her, "This is some kind of bomb shelter or tornado shelter or something." She looked at her watch a few seconds longer. "I doubt Sara remembers it's even down here. I found it a while ago when I was looking for a place to stash some files."

Lena glanced around the room. With the light on, she could see the concrete walls, the small metal door. Darla was right. They were in a bunker.

"I never liked Tolliver much," the nurse said. "I know a lot of people blamed you for what happened, but he could be a prick, let me tell you."

Lena kept staring, wondering why the woman was picking now to open her soul.

"And Sara's no better. Thinks she walks on water because she got that medical degree. I used to babysit her when she was little. Nothing but a little know-it-all."

Lena didn't bother to try to disagree.

"I never wanted to kill you," Darla said. Lena felt a laughing sound in her throat that came out more like a groan. "I just gotta get out of town, and I know you won't let me do that if I let you go."

She had that right.

"Daddy had a heart attack." She sat back on her heels. "You know Frank's my daddy, right?"

Lena felt her eyebrows go up. A flood of adrenaline let her brain think for the first time in hours. Frank had mentioned his daughter when they were driving away from Allison Spooner's homicide scene. Did he know then that Darla had committed the crime? He sure as hell was covering up for her. Lena couldn't even remember all the things he had hidden from Will. The photograph. Tommy's phone. The 911 call. Was this what Frank meant when he said that Lena couldn't see what was right in front of her? Christ, he was right. She didn't know the truth when it was staring her in the face. How many other clues had she missed? How many other people were going to be hurt because Lena was so blind?

"Do you carry a purse?"

The question was so strange Lena thought she was hearing things.

"A pocketbook?" Darla asked. "Where do you keep your keys?"

Lena didn't answer.

"I can't take that piece-of-shit Accord out of town. The engine light's been on for weeks. I thought I'd get a new one once the checks cleared, but ..." She checked Lena's pockets and found her key ring. Her house key was on there, in addition to the keys for Frank's Town Car and Lena's Celica. "You got any money on you?"

Lena nodded because there was no use lying.

Darla checked Lena's back pocket and pulled out two twenties. "Well, I guess that'll pay for gas." She tucked the cash into the front pocket of her uniform. "I'm gonna have to ask Daddy for some money. I really hate that." She smoothed down the pink material of her uniform. "I guess I should feel some remorse about what's happened, but the truth is that I just don't want to get caught. I

can't go to prison. I can't be trapped like that."

Lena kept staring at her.

"If they'd'a just left me alone and kept quiet, none of this would've happened."

Lena tried to swallow. She could hear her heart doing that weird, flopping beat in her chest. She must be more dehydrated than she thought. Her hands and feet were numb. Her legs tingled. Her body was shutting down blood flow to the extremities in order to keep the core functioning.

"Daddy and me don't get along too good." Darla tucked her hand into the front pocket of her smock. "I get the feeling most days he'd prefer you was his daughter, but we don't get to choose our family, do we?" She pulled out a syringe. "This is Versed. It'll take some of the anxiety off and put you to sleep. I'm sorry I don't have enough to put you to sleep for good, but this should make it easier. You're not gonna live much longer—maybe five or six hours. That infection in your hand's spreading pretty quick. You're probably already feeling your heart slowing down."

Lena felt her throat try to swallow.

"What happens is, your body starts to shut down. Your nerves go crazy. Usually there's a lot of pain. Sometimes you're awake for it, sometimes you're not. Do you want the shot?"

Lena looked at the capped syringe. What kind of choice was that?

"Nobody's gonna come save you. The clinic's not gonna open again until next Monday, and by then the smell's the only thing that's gonna let them know you're here." She glanced over her shoulder. "I guess I should leave the door exposed so they don't have to look much. Some of the people here ain't been too bad."

Lena tried to speak, to form the only word that mattered in all of this: *why*?

"What's that?"

Lena groaned the word again. Her lips couldn't meet because of the gag, but the question was clear enough to her ears. "Why?"

Darla smiled. She understood what Lena was asking, but she wasn't about to give an answer. Instead, she repeated her offer, waving the syringe in the air. "You want it or not?"

Lena shook her head, vehement. She couldn't black out. She couldn't let go. Her consciousness was the only thing she had any power over.

Darla took the cap off the syringe and jabbed the needle into Lena's arm anyway.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Sara waited in her car for Will to come down from the apartment over the garage. He had asked for a few minutes to change into clothes that were less dirty than the ones he'd worn all day. Sara had welcomed the time to regain her composure. Her anger had settled to a low simmer, but she would've thrown the car in gear and driven to Hare's house right now if not for Will. Why was she surprised that her cousin was mixed up in something so seedy? Hare had never hidden the fact that he liked having money. Sara liked it, too, but she wasn't willing to sell her soul in the process.

The car door opened. Will climbed behind the wheel. He was wearing a white button-down shirt and a fresh pair of jeans. He gave her an odd look. "Did you wash my clothes?"

Sara laughed at the suggestion. "No."

"All my clothes are washed. And ironed." He picked at the crease on his jeans. "And starched."

She knew only one person who ironed jeans. "I'm sorry. My mother enjoys doing laundry. I can't explain it."

"It's fine," he said, but she could tell by his strained tone that he was slightly put out.

"Did she mess anything up?"

"No." He adjusted the seat so his head wasn't pressed into the ceiling. "I've just never had anybody wash my clothes for me before." The gearshift had a learning curve, but he figured it out quickly, putting the engine into drive. He turned off the windshield wipers as he pulled into the street. The rain had slackened off. Sara could actually see the moon peeking out between the clouds.

He said, "I was thinking about the suicide note."

"What about it?"

"How about if Jason wrote it, and Allison was supposed to deliver it to a drop?"

"You think they were blackmailing somebody?"

"It's possible," Will said. "Allison may have changed her mind about the blackmail without telling Jason."

"So, she tears off the bottom part of the note, the bit that says, 'I want it over,' to leave at the drop for the killer?"

"But the killer has already made up his mind to kill her. He's followed her into the woods. We know he's opportunistic. He used the blanket when he killed Jason. Maybe he saw the note as another opportunity." Will glanced at Sara. "The fake suicide note was in Jason's handwriting at the scene of Allison's death. Except for Tommy getting mixed up in all of this, the first person who would've been interviewed is the boyfriend."

She finally put it together. "The killer wanted to frame Jason for Allison's murder. If they were trying to blackmail him, that certainly would've gotten

Jason off his back.”

“Tell me about these drug trials. How do they work?”

“They’re complicated, and they’re not all bad.” She felt the need to tell him, “We need drug trials. We need new medicine and new breakthroughs, but pharmaceutical companies are corporations with shareholders and CEOs who like to get paid. There’s more money in finding the next Viagra than curing cancer.” She added ruefully, “And it’s a hell of a lot more profitable to treat diseases like breast cancer rather than prevent them from happening in the first place.”

Will slowed the car. Even without the rain, the street was still flooded. “Don’t they need Viagra to fund the cancer stuff?”

“Last year, the top ten pharmaceutical companies spent seventy-three billion dollars on advertising and less than twenty-nine billion on research. Tell me where their focus is.”

“Sounds like you know a lot about this.”

“It’s a pet peeve of mine,” she admitted. “I never wanted free pens and notepads with drug logos on them. I wanted medication that worked and that my patients could afford.”

Will stopped the car. “You know, I think I’m going the wrong way.”

“It’s a circle.”

He put the car in reverse, then made a wide U-turn. Sara knew exactly where they were. If they had gone a few yards farther down the street, they would’ve passed her old address.

“So,” Will said. “How does it work? The drug company gets a new drug it wants to test, and then what?”

She couldn’t think how to acknowledge his kindness, so she answered his question instead. “There are two types: drugs of affluence, or lifestyle, and drugs of need.” He gave her a look. “I’m not making that up. It’s Big Pharma’s designation. The need drugs are what we tested at Grady. They’re for serious or life-threatening illnesses, chronic diseases. Usually, universities and research hospitals handle need drugs.”

He slowed the car again to navigate the deep water. “And affluence?”

“Generally, that’s handled by your average everyday doctor or lab. There are all kinds of announcements in medical journals. What you’d do is petition to run a study. If you’re approved, the drug company sets you up and pays for everything. TV, radio, and print ads. File clerks and office furniture. Pens and paper. And then, when it’s over, they pay the doctor to fly around the world talking about how fabulous their new drug is, all the while insisting that he’s incorruptible because he doesn’t own stock in the company.” She thought about Elliot and his Thanksgiving vacation. “That’s where the real money is. Not the stock, but the expertise. If you’re involved in an early phase of a study, you can make hundreds of thousands of dollars just by opening your mouth.”

“So, why wouldn’t a doctor want to do this if it’s so much money?”

“Because if you do it right, there’s not a lot of money in it. I mean, yes, you make money, but you’re doing paperwork, not medicine. We all know it’s a necessary evil, but it can be a really bad side of the business. Some doctors set up research mills. The drug reps call them ‘high-end rollers,’ just like in Vegas. Their clinics can have fifty different studies going on at the same time. There are

a handful in downtown Atlanta, conveniently near the homeless shelter.”

“I bet there are a lot of students at the college who are looking to make some fast money.”

“Some of my indigent patients enroll in study after study. It’s the only thing that keeps them from starving. But it’s big business if you work it right. There are websites for professional guinea pigs. They fly around the country raking in sixty, eighty grand a year.”

“The doctors don’t track the patients to make sure they’re not gaming the system?”

“All you have to show is your license, sometimes not even that. They stick your name in a file. From then on, you’re a number. Everything they collect on you is self-reported. You can tell them you’re a stockbroker with insomnia and acid reflux when you’re really a homeless wino looking for pocket money. They’re not running background checks. There’s no central database of names.”

“So, Tommy answers an ad and tries to enroll in one of these trials. Then what?”

“They would screen him both medically and psychologically. There’s different criteria for each study, and each participant has to meet the guidelines, or protocols. If you’re really smart, you can fudge your way onto a study.”

“Tommy wasn’t really smart.”

“No, and he wouldn’t have passed the psych evaluation if it was properly administered.”

“Wouldn’t the doctor be in charge of that?”

“Maybe, maybe not. There are good doctors out there who do it right, but the bad doctors never see the trial participants. They’re just paperwork that has to be signed off on. They usually go in on a Sunday and ‘review’ all three hundred cases before the enforcement rep gets there Monday morning.”

“Who takes care of everything then, nurses?”

“Sometimes, but it’s not required that they have any medical training. There are CROs, Clinical Research Organizations, that offer temp staffing for doctors running studies. At least they have some training. There was a doctor in Texas who had his wife doing everything. She accidentally switched the trial drug with medication for her dog. One doctor had his mistress in charge. She told the participants to double up on missed doses and half of them ended up with permanent liver damage.”

“Okay, so Tommy makes it through the psych evaluation. Then what?”

“He goes through the medical workup. He was healthy; I’m sure he passed that. Next, he gets the pills. He has to keep his journal. He goes in to give blood and urine or just to check in, probably once a week. The person who talks to him takes his journal and her report, what’s called source notes, then enters them into the case report. The doctor only sees the case report.”

“Where would the system break down?”

“Exactly where you said. Tommy obviously had a reaction to the medication. He was getting into arguments with people, which we know from the police incident reports. His altered mood would have shown up in his journal. Whoever interviewed him during his office visits would immediately know something was wrong.”

“And if this person wanted to hide the fact that Tommy was in trouble?”

"They could lie on the case report form. It's entered into the computer and transmitted directly to the drug company. No one would know anything was wrong unless they compared it to the source material, which gets boxed and put into storage as soon as the study ends."

"Would it ruin the study if Tommy was wiggling out?"

"Not necessarily. The doctor could classify him as a protocol violation. That means he doesn't meet the guidelines for being enrolled in the study. Which, with his disability, he didn't belong in anyway."

"What about Allison?"

"Her suicide attempt should've exempted her, but if she didn't self-report, they wouldn't know."

"Who gets in trouble for Tommy being enrolled in the study?"

"No one, really. You can always plead ignorance to the ethics committee. By law, every study has to have an internal review board that's in charge of maintaining ethical standards. They're comprised of people from the community. Doctors, lawyers, local businessmen. And always a priest or a minister, for some reason."

"The ethics committee gets paid by the drug company, too?"

"Everybody gets paid by the drug company."

"What about Tommy? When does he get his money?"

"At the end of the study. If they paid them ahead of time, most of them wouldn't come back."

"So, if the trial was nearing the end, then Tommy had a payday coming. And Allison, too. Maybe Jason Howell."

Sara didn't want to think about who had the biggest money motivation in this sordid mess. "For a three-month trial, it wouldn't be out of the question that they would each be looking at around two to five thousand dollars for their participation."

Will pulled into the parking lot of the clinic. He put the gear in park. "So, where's the problem? We've got doctors making lots of money. Participants getting paid. Tommy shouldn't have been in the study but it's not like he was going to bring the whole thing down. Why would anyone kill two people over this?"

"The key is going to be finding out how many more participants were experiencing mood alterations like Tommy. Allison was depressed. You can read that in her journal. Tommy was acting out lately, getting into arguments when he never had before. He killed himself in jail. I don't want to let Lena off the hook, but he could've been suicidal from the medication. In a study, if you get clusters of adverse events, it's immediately shut down."

"So, it would be in the doctor's best interest not to have one of these adverse clusters. Not if he stood to make a lot of money on the trial."

Sara pursed her lips, thinking of Hare. "Right."

She stared out the window at the clinic. The front door was illuminated by the headlights. She could see the familiar layout of the lobby.

Will got out of the car and walked around to get the door for her. "I probably shouldn't go inside with you. I know you're the rightful owner and I've got your permission and all that, but the law is very strict about me looking through medical records. You're going to have to play the concerned citizen and tell me

what you find.”

“It’s a deal,” she agreed, though it occurred to her that he wouldn’t be much help reading the records anyway.

Sara walked to the front door with her keys in her hand. She couldn’t remember the last time she had been inside the building, but she didn’t have time to reflect. Just as she slid the key into the lock, she turned toward the police station. The movement was natural, something she had done every morning because Jeffrey usually waited across the street to make sure she got safely inside.

The streetlights were bright, the night air crisp, finally clear of rain. She saw a shadow standing by the window to Jeffrey’s office. The man turned. Sara gasped. Her knees started to give.

Will got out of the car. “Sara?”

She ran without thinking, pushing past Will, going down the hill toward the station. “Jeffrey!” she screamed, knowing it was him. His broad shoulders. His dark hair. The way he walked like a lion ready to pounce. “Jeffrey!” She stumbled as she reached the parking lot. The asphalt ripped her jeans. Her palms were scraped.

“Aunt Sara?” Jared jogged toward her with his father’s easy gait. He knelt in front of her, hands on her shoulders. “Are you okay?”

“I thought you were—” She put her hand to Jared’s face. “You look—” She threw her arms around his shoulders and pulled him as close as she could. Sara couldn’t help herself. She wept like a child. All the memories she had kept at bay for so long came flooding back. It was almost too much to bear.

Jared rubbed her back, soothing her. “It’s all right,” he whispered. “It’s just me.”

His father’s voice. Sara wanted to close her eyes and pretend. To lose herself completely. How many times had she stood in this parking lot with Jeffrey? How many mornings had they driven to work together, kissed each other goodbye in this very parking lot? And then he would stand at the door to the station, watching her make her way up the hill, checking to see that she got inside safely. Sometimes, she could feel his eyes following her, and it took everything Sara had not to run back across the street for another kiss.

Jared asked, “Are you all right?” There was a tremor in his tone. She was scaring him. “Aunt Sara?”

“I’m sorry.” She dropped her hands into her lap. She didn’t know why she was apologizing, but she kept repeating the words. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s all right.”

“I thought you were—” She couldn’t finish the sentence. Couldn’t say his father’s name.

Jared helped her stand up. “Mama says I look just like him.”

Sara couldn’t stop the tears streaming down her face. “When did you find out?”

“It’s kind of hard to hide.”

She laughed, the sound high-pitched and desperate in her ears. “What are you doing here?”

He glanced at Will. Sara hadn’t noticed him walk up. He stood a few feet away, obviously trying not to intrude. She told him, “This is ...” She forced

herself to say the name. "This is Jeffrey's son, Jared Long. Jared, this is Will."

Will's hands were shoved deep in his pockets. He nodded at the boy. "Jared."

"Why are you here?" Sara asked. "Is it because of Frank?"

Jared scratched his eyebrow with his thumb and forefinger. Sara had seen Jeffrey make the same gesture countless times. It meant he was upset, but didn't quite know how to talk about it. Jared looked at Will again. There was something going on between them that Sara couldn't follow.

She repeated her question. "Why are you here?"

Jared's voice cracked. "Her car is here. I don't know where she is."

"Who?" Sara asked, but she already knew the answer. Lena's Celica was still in the lot.

"She was supposed to be home six hours ago." He directed his words to Will. "I've been to the hospital. I tried to get in touch with Frank. I can't find anybody who knows where she is."

"No," Sara breathed.

"Aunt Sara—" Jared reached for her but she put her hand flat to his chest, holding him back.

"You can't be seeing her."

"It's not what you think."

"I don't care. It's wrong."

He reached for her again. "Aunt Sara—"

She stepped back, stumbling into Will. "You can't do this."

"It's not what you think."

"Not what I think?" she demanded, her voice rising in anger. "What am I thinking, Jared? That you're sleeping with the woman who murdered your father?"

"It's not like—"

Will grabbed Sara by her waist as she lunged at Jared. "She killed him!" Sara screamed, pushing Will away. "She killed your father!"

"He killed himself!"

She raised her hand to slap his face. Jared stood absolutely still, facing her, waiting for the blow. For her part, Sara felt frozen. She couldn't strike him, but she couldn't drop her hand, either. It divided the air between them like a knife waiting to fall.

"He was a cop," Jared said. "He knew what the dangers were."

She dropped her hand, because now she really wanted to hurt him. "Is that what she told you?"

"It's what I know, Aunt Sara. My father loved being a cop. He was doing his job, and it got him killed."

"You don't know who she really is. You're too young to understand what she's capable of."

"I'm not too young to know I love her."

His words were like a punch to her chest. "She killed him," Sara whispered. "You don't know what she took from me. From you."

"I know more than you think."

"No, you don't."

Jared's voice turned sharp. "He was doing his job, and he pissed off the wrong people, and nobody could've stopped him. Not you, not Lena, not me, not

anybody. He made his own decisions. He was his own man. And he was stubborn as hell. Once he made up his mind, there was no talking him out of doing exactly what he wanted to do."

Sara didn't realize she was backing up until she felt Will behind her. She gripped his arm, forcing herself not to falter. "She's twisted the story to fool you into feeling sorry for her."

"That's not how it is."

"She's a master at manipulating people. You can't see that now, but it's true."

"Stop saying that." Jared tried to take her hand. "I love her. And Jeffrey loved her, too."

Sara couldn't speak to him anymore. She couldn't be here. She turned into Will, burying her head in his chest. "Get me out of here. Please, just take me home."

Jared said, "You can't leave. I need your help."

Will kept his arm around Sara as he guided her across the street.

Jared jogged to keep up. "You've gotta help me find her. I don't know where she is."

Will's voice was hard. "You need to move on, son."

"Somebody sliced her tires. She's not answering her cell phone."

Will kept his arm around Sara, helping her up the hill. She looked down at the grass on the front lawn. The roots had been washed out. Clumps of mud slipped beneath her shoes.

Jared said, "She called me on her cell at six o'clock. She said she'd be home in an hour." He tried to block their path, but Will swept him away with one hand. "She quit her job!" he screamed. "She told me she quit!"

They had reached the clinic parking lot. Will opened the car door and helped Sara inside.

Jared slammed his hand on the hood. "Come on! She's missing! Something's wrong!" He rushed around the car and got on his knees in front of the open door. His hands pressed together as if in prayer. "Please, Aunt Sara. Please. You've got to help me find her. Something's wrong. I know something's wrong."

There was so much anguish in his face that Sara felt herself falter. She looked at Will, saw the concern in his expression.

His voice was low, steady, when he told her, "She hasn't checked in with me."

Jared was crying. "Please, just check the clinic for me. I know her hand was hurting her this morning. Maybe she went for help. Maybe she fell down or she's sick or—"

Sara closed her eyes for a moment, trying to separate her emotions. She wanted so badly to leave, to never hear the name Lena Adams again as long as she lived.

Will said, "Sara." Not a question, more like an admission of guilt.

"Go," she told him. There was no use fighting it.

Will cupped his hand to her face so she would look at him. "I'll be right back, okay? I'm just going to check the clinic for him."

Sara didn't respond. He closed the car door and she leaned back in the seat. The engine was off now, but the moon was so bright in the sky that she didn't need the headlights to see the two men at the front door of the clinic. Lena didn't even have to be present to control the men in her life. She was like a

succubus, her siren song clouding their logic.

Will glanced at Sara as he turned the key in the lock. She studied Jared with some detachment. He was thinner than his father. His shoulders hadn't filled out. His hair was longer than Jeffrey had kept it, more the length he'd worn in high school. An image flashed in her head: Lena's hand gripping Jared's hair. She had taken everything now. Her path of destruction had ripped through every part of Jeffrey's legacy.

Sara turned her head as the two men went inside the clinic. She couldn't look at Jared anymore. It hurt too much. It hurt too much to even be here. She slid over the console and got behind the steering wheel. She pressed the button to start the engine. Nothing happened. Will had taken the key with him.

Sara got out of the car, leaving the door open. She looked up at the full moon. The glow was remarkably bright, illuminating the ground in front of her. She remembered a Civil War letter Jeffrey had read to her a long time ago. It was written by a lonely wife to her soldier husband. She was wondering whether or not the same moon was shining down on her lover.

Sara walked to the back of the clinic. There was a sign with Hare's name on it, but her anger about the drug study had long dissipated. She couldn't dredge up any sympathy for Allison Spooner or Jason Howell or even poor Tommy Braham, who had somehow gotten caught in the middle of it. All of her emotions had dwindled to a dull ache. Even her hatred for Lena was gone. Trying to stop her was tilting at windmills. There was nothing Sara could do to stop her. If the world fell down, Lena would still be standing. She would outlive them all.

The yard behind the clinic was a mud pit. Elliot hadn't bothered to keep up anything. The picnic tables were gone, the swing set dismantled. The wildflowers Sara had planted with her mother were long dead. She stood on the bank of the stream. It was a river now, the shush of churning waters drowning out all sound. The big maple that had given so much shade over the years had fallen into the current. Its canopy barely touched the opposite side of the shore. As Sara watched, chunks of earth fell into the water and were quickly whisked away. Her father had taken her fishing on these shores. There was a field of large rocks a half mile down where catfish swam in and out of the eddies. Tessa had loved climbing on top of the granite to lie in the sun. Some of the boulders were as high as ten feet tall. Sara guessed they were underwater now. Everything in this town, no matter how strong, eventually got washed away.

Sara heard a branch snap behind her. She turned around. A woman in a pink nurse's uniform stood a few feet away. She was out of breath. Her makeup was smeared, mascara ringed dark circles under her eyes. The plastic red nails on her fingers were chipped and broken.

"Darla," Sara realized. She hadn't seen Frank's oldest daughter in years. "Are you all right?"

Darla seemed reticent. She glanced over her shoulder. "You heard about Daddy, I guess."

"Is he still refusing to go to the hospital?"

She nodded, again looking behind her. "Maybe you could help me work on him, get him to let them run some tests."

"I'm probably not the best person for that job right now."

"He piss you off?"

"No, I just—" Sara felt logic start to intrude. It was almost three in the morning. There was no conceivable reason for Darla to be here. "What's going on?"

"My car broke down." Darla glanced over her shoulder for a third time. She wasn't looking at the clinic. She was looking at the police station. "Can you give me a lift to Daddy's?"

Sara felt her body reacting to a danger she couldn't quite put her finger on. Her heart was pounding. Her mouth was spitless. This wasn't right. None of this was right.

Darla indicated Sara should walk ahead of her to the parking lot. Her tone turned hard. "Let's go."

Sara put her hand to the back of her neck, thinking about Allison Spooner at the lake, the way her head had been held down while the knife sliced into her throat. "What have you done?"

"I just need to get out of here, all right?"

"Why?"

Darla's tone turned even harsher. "Just give me the key to your car, Sara. I don't have time for this."

"What did you do to those kids?"

"The same thing I'm going to do to you if you don't give me that fucking key." There was a glint of light at Darla's waist, then a knife was in her hand. The blade was about three and a half inches long. The tip was sharpened to a menacing point. "I don't want to hurt you. Just give me the key."

Sara took another step back. Her foot sank into the sandy shore. Panic gripped her throat like a hand. She had seen what Darla could do with the knife. She knew the woman had no qualms about killing.

"Give me the key."

Sara heard the roar of the river swelling behind her. Where was Will? What was taking so long? She looked left and right, trying to decide whether to run.

"Don't," the woman said, guessing her thoughts. "I'm not going to hurt you. I just want the key."

Sara could barely speak. "I don't have it."

"Don't lie to me." Darla checked the station again. She hadn't once looked at the clinic. Either she had already taken care of Will and Jared or she didn't know they were still inside. "Don't be stupid, honey. You've seen what I can do."

Sara's voice shook as she asked, "What happens if I give it to you?"

Darla stepped forward, closing the space between them. The blade was steady in her hand. She was less than three feet away now. Within striking distance. "Then you can walk home to your mama and daddy and I'll be gone."

Sara felt a momentary sense of relief before the truth hit her. It couldn't work that way. They both knew Sara wouldn't go home. She'd cross the street to the police station and tell them everything that had happened. Darla wouldn't make it to the city limits before every squad car in the county surrounded her.

The woman repeated, "Give me the key." Without warning, she slashed the blade through the air. The metal made a whistling sound as it passed in front of Sara's face. "Now, dammit."

"Okay! Okay!" Sara put her trembling hand in her pocket, but her eyes were

on the knife. "I'll give you the key if you tell me why you killed them."

Darla stared at her in cold appraisal. "They were blackmailing me."

Sara took a small step back. "The study?"

Her arm relaxed, but the blade was still close. "Students kept dropping out, not showing up when they were supposed to. I got Jason to double up his blood work and do an extra journal. He pulled Allison into it, then they got Tommy involved. We were gonna split the money fifty-fifty. Then they got greedy and decided they wanted all of it."

Sara could not take her eyes off the knife. "You were trying to frame Jason for killing Allison."

"You always were smart."

"Did Hare know?"

"Why do you think I'm leaving town? He found Tommy's paperwork. Said he was going to report it to the ethics panel." For the first time, she showed remorse. "I didn't mean for Tommy to get hurt. He didn't know anything about it. I couldn't have them looking too hard at the case reports."

"Tommy doubled up on his pills," Sara guessed. "He was enrolled twice, so he took twice the dose. That's why his moods were altered. That's why he killed himself, isn't it?"

"I'm done fucking around with you." She straightened her arm. The knife was a few inches from Sara's throat. "Give me the key."

Sara allowed herself a glance back at the clinic. The door was still closed. "I don't have it."

"Don't lie to me, bitch. I saw you in the car."

"I don't—"

Darla lunged. Sara stepped back, holding up her arm in defense. She felt the blade slice open her skin, but no pain followed. All she could feel was heart-stopping panic as the ground under her feet suddenly gave way, sending them both tumbling backward.

Sara's back slammed into the ground. Darla reared up, the knife raised above her head. Sara tried to scramble, instinctively rolling onto her stomach before she realized this was exactly the position Allison Spooner had been in when the blade plunged into her neck. Sara tried to roll back over, but Darla's weight was too much. She gripped the back of Sara's neck. Sara pushed with her hands, kicked with her feet, did whatever she could to get out from under the woman.

Instead of feeling the blade sink into her flesh, Sara felt the earth tremble, the ground again give way beneath her. There was another feeling of free fall. The roar of the river got louder as she fell face-first into the icy water. Sara gasped as the cold enveloped her. Water poured into her mouth and lungs. She couldn't tell which direction was up. Her feet and hands found no purchase. She flailed, trying to find air, but something was holding her down.

Darla. She could feel the woman's hands gripping her waist, fingers digging into her skin. Sara struggled, pounding her hands into the woman's back. Her lungs were screaming in her chest. She brought up her knee as hard as she could. Darla's hold loosened. Sara pushed herself up to the surface, gulping air.

"Help!" she yelled. "Help!" Sara screamed the word so loud that her throat was raw from the effort.

Darla shot into the air beside her, mouth gaping open, eyes wide with panic.

Her hand clamped around Sara's arm. The riverbank was a blur as the current shot them downstream. Sara dug her nails into the back of Darla's hand. Debris slapped against her head. Leaves. Twigs. Limbs. Darla held tight. She had never been a good swimmer. She wasn't trying to pull Sara down. She was holding on for her life.

The water changed from a low roar to a deafening scream. The rock field. The jutting granite stones Tessa and Sara had climbed as children. She saw them up ahead, scattered like teeth waiting to rip them in two. Water split around sharp edges. The current turned violent as it hurtled them forward. Thirty feet. Twenty feet. Sara grabbed Darla under her arm and pulled as hard as she could, thrusting her forward. The crack of the woman's skull against the granite reverberated like a ringing bell. Sara slammed into her. Her shoulder crunched. Her head exploded.

Sara fought the dizziness that wanted to take over. She tasted blood in her mouth. She wasn't moving downstream anymore. Her back was pinned to a large crevice in the rock. White water pounded against her chest, making it impossible for her to move. Darla's hand was trapped between Sara's back and the granite. Her lifeless body waved like a tattered flag. Her skull was open, river water flooding into the gash. Sara could feel the woman's hand slipping. There was a violent jerk, then the current whisked her downstream.

Sara coughed. Water poured into her open mouth, flooded up her nose. She reached above her head, feeling flat stone. She had to turn around. She had to find a way to climb on top of the rock. Sara bent her knees and braced the soles of her feet against the granite. She tried to push up. Nothing happened. She screamed, trying again and again with the same result. The water was peeling her off the rock. She was sliding, losing her grip. Her head dipped beneath the surface. She struggled to stay up. Every muscle in her body shook from the effort. It was too much. Her shoulder screamed with pain. Her thighs were aching. Her fingers were losing their grip. There was no fighting it. The water was too strong. Her body continued sliding down the rock. Sara took a deep breath, gulping in air just before her head dipped below the surface. The constant sound of the rushing water turned to complete and total silence.

Sara pressed her lips tightly together. Her hair floated out in front of her. She could see the moon above her, the bright light somehow managing to pierce the water's edge. The rays were like fingers reaching toward her. She heard something underneath the quiet in her ears. The river had a voice, a gurgling, soothing voice that held a promise that things would be better on the other side. The current was speaking to her, telling her it was okay to let go. Sara realized with some shock that she wanted to. She wanted to just give in, to go to that place where Jeffrey was waiting for her. Not heaven. Not some earthly ideal, but a place of quiet and comfort where the thought of him, the memory of him, did not open like a fresh wound every time she breathed. Every time she walked in the places they walked. Every time she thought of his beautiful eyes, his mouth, his hands.

Sara reached through the water, touching the fingers of moonlight shining down. The cold had turned into a shroud of warmth. She opened her mouth. Air bubbles traced up her face. Her heartbeat was slow, lethargic. She let her emotions wash over her. She let herself feel the luxury of surrender just one

more second before she forced herself back to the surface, twisting her body around so that she could find hold on the rock.

“No!” she screamed, raging at the river. Her arms shook as she clawed her way up the rough surface of the stone. The water gripped her like a million hands trying to drag her back in, but Sara fought with every fiber of her being to drag her way to the top of the granite.

She rolled over onto her back, staring up at the sky. The moon was still gloriously shining down, the light reflecting off the trees, the rocks, the river. Sara laughed, because she was sick of the alternative. She laughed so hard that she started coughing. She pushed herself up to sitting, and coughed until there was nothing left inside.

She breathed deeply, drawing life back into her body. Her heart pounded wildly in her chest. The cuts and bruises riddling her skin started to make themselves known. Pain woke every nerve ending, telling her she was still alive. Sara took another deep breath. The air was so crisp she could feel it touching every part of her lungs. She put her hand to her neck. The necklace was gone. Her fingers did not find the familiar shape of Jeffrey’s ring.

“Oh, Jeffrey,” she whispered. “Thank you.”

Thank you for letting me go.

But go where? Sara looked around. The moon was so bright it might as well have been daytime. She was in the middle of the river, at least ten feet from either bank. Water churned white around the smaller rocks that surrounded her. She knew some of them went at least eight feet down. She tested her shoulder. The tendon clicked, but she could still move it.

Sara stood up. There was a weeping willow on the bank, its waving tendrils beckoning her to the clearing underneath its branches. If she could get to one of the smaller rocks without being swept away, she could stand on top and jump to shore.

She heard a branch snap. Leaves rustled. Will came into the clearing. His chest heaved up and down from running. He had a rope coiled in his hands. She could read every emotion on his face. Fear. Confusion. Relief.

Sara raised her voice to be heard over the rushing water. “What took you so long?”

His mouth opened in surprise. “Errands,” he managed, still breathless. “There was a line at the bank.”

She laughed so hard she started coughing again.

“Are you all right?”

She nodded, struggling against another coughing fit. “What about Lena?”

“She was in the basement. Jared called an ambulance, but ...” His voice trailed off. “She’s in bad shape.”

Sara leaned her hands on her knees. Yet again, Lena needed help. Yet again, it fell to Sara to pick up the pieces. Oddly, she didn’t feel the usual reluctance or even the anger that had been her constant companion since that awful day she had watched her husband die. Sara felt at peace for the first time in four years. Tessa was right—you couldn’t fall off the floor. Eventually, you had to get up, dust yourself off, and get back to the business of living.

“Sara?”

She held out her hand toward Will. “Throw me some rope.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Will slowed the Porsche to turn onto Caplan Road, trying to follow the directions Sara had given him. She had drawn arrows by the street names, and as long as Will held the sheet of paper in the right direction, he should be able to make it to Frank Wallace's house without losing his way. Sara had even given him her reading glasses, which were so small on his face that he looked like Poindexter's idiot cousin. Still, she was right. The glasses worked. The words on the page in front of him still did their tricks, but at least they were sharper.

His phone rang, and Will fished around in his pocket, steering with his knees for fear of dropping the directions. He saw Faith's number in the caller ID.

"Where have you been?" she demanded. "I've left two messages on your cell. I even called Amanda."

"Aren't you supposed to be on maternity leave?"

"Emma's asleep and I'm sick of being in this stupid hospital." She began a litany of complaints that started with the bad Jell-O and quickly segued into breast tenderness.

Will stopped her there. "I got my bad guy."

"What?" Faith's voice went up in surprise, and he realized that she'd had no great hope that he would solve the case so quickly.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"Oh, shut up. You know I'm just annoyed because you did it without me."

Faith wasn't given to sudden fits of emotional honesty. Will knew better than to pursue the point. Instead, he told her about the drug trial and the lengths that Darla Jackson had gone to in order to take out her blackmailers and get rid of Lena Adams.

Faith asked, "How much money are we talking about?"

"We don't know how many records she was falsifying. Maybe tens of thousands of dollars."

"Holy crap. Where do I sign up?"

"No kidding," Will agreed. The money would've come in handy. He wasn't looking forward to going back to Atlanta and digging up his front yard again. "Lena's still at the hospital. I think they're going to keep her for a while."

"I'm surprised Sara helped her."

Will had been surprised as well, but he guessed being a doctor meant you couldn't pick and choose who you saved. Still, there hadn't been much talking while Sara hooked up the IV and ordered Jared to get Lena water, then more blankets, then more water. Will wasn't sure how much of this was meant to help Lena and how much of it was designed to keep Jared from having a nervous breakdown. Either way, it had worked to bring a much-needed level of calm to the situation.

Jared had been frantic from the moment they entered the children's clinic to search for Lena. His erratic behavior had cost them several valuable minutes.

He'd kicked down doors that weren't locked. He'd overturned desks and toppled filing cabinets. By the time Will had found the locked basement door, the young man was so spent that he'd barely had the strength to help Will break it down.

And then Jared's second wind had kicked in. He'd rushed downstairs, heedless of anyone hiding in the shadows. They had found another locked door at the back of the basement. Deep ruts were cut in the concrete where metal shelving had once covered the entrance to what had to be a bomb shelter. An old but sturdy deadbolt held the door firmly in place. Jared had pounded away, popping off the steel like a pinball, nearly dislocating his shoulder, before Will came back with a crowbar from the workbench.

Will had to admit that he didn't think of Sara until after the door was pried open. Lena was barely awake, shaking with fever. Her body was drenched in sweat. Jared cried as he untied the rope from her hands and feet, begging Will to get help. That was when Will had gone upstairs to find Sara. He was staring at her empty BMW when he heard her screams from the river. It was sheer luck that she'd managed to call for help before Darla pulled her back down into the water. It was even better luck that the rope that was used to tie up Lena was long enough to help Sara get back to safer ground.

Not that she had needed it. Will was pretty sure she was capable of taking care of herself. He wouldn't have been surprised to see her walk on water after the hell she had survived.

On the phone, Will heard a baby gurgle and another woman talking.

Faith's voice was muffled as she said something to the nurse. She told Will, "I need to go. They brought Emma for her feeding. Didn't they, baby?"

Will waited through several seconds of baby talk before her voice returned to normal. "I'm glad you're okay. I was worried about you down there on your own." There was a strain to her voice, as if she was about to cry. Faith had been pretty emotional these last few months. Will had hoped the baby's birth would send the crazy train back to the station, but maybe it would take a while for her hormones to get back to normal.

"I should probably go," he told her. "I'm almost at Frank's."

She gave a loud sniff. "Let me know what happens."

"I will."

He heard the phone rattle around in the cradle and assumed that was Faith's way of ending the call. Will tucked his cell phone back into his pocket. He checked a street sign against the directions and took a turn. There was an arrow pointing over to the other side of the paper. His lips tugged up into a smile. Sara had drawn a smiley face for him.

He slowed the Porsche again, looking for street numbers. Will checked each mailbox, comparing the addresses to the directions. Halfway down the street, he found what he was looking for. Frank's house was a one-story cottage, but there was nothing quaint or cottagey about it. An air of sadness hung over the place like a dark cloud. The gutters sagged. The windows were dirty. The garden gnome was surprising, but the empty bottles of Dewar's by the trashcan were not.

The screen door opened as Will got out of his car. Lionel Harris laughed at him, obviously enjoying the surprise.

"Good morning," he said. "I heard y'all went for a swim last night."

Will smiled, though he felt the cold sweat come back like a sudden rain. He couldn't get the image out of his mind of Sara standing on top of that rock. "I'm a little surprised to see you here, Mr. Harris."

"Just dropping off a casserole."

Will's confusion must have been obvious. The old man patted him on the back. "Never underestimate the power of a shared history."

Will nodded, though he still didn't understand.

"I'll leave you to it." Lionel gripped his cane as he walked down the porch steps. Will watched him walk into the street. A neighbor waved him over and he stopped for a chat.

"Frank's waiting for you."

Will turned around. There was a woman standing at the door. She was older, with stooped shoulders and unnaturally red hair. Her makeup was caked on in the same style that her daughter preferred. Will saw the finger of a bruise under the woman's eye. The bridge of her nose was swollen. Someone had punched her recently, and very hard.

"I'm Maxine." She pushed open the screen door for him. "He's waiting for you."

As depressing as Frank's house was on the outside, the inside was far worse. The walls and ceiling had yellowed from years of cigarette smoke. The wall-to-wall carpet was clean but worn. The furniture looked like it had come from a 1950s model home.

"Back here." Maxine gestured for him to follow her down the hall. Opposite the kitchen was a small bedroom that had been turned into a cluttered office. At the back of the house was a dingy bath with avocado green tile. Frank was lying in a hospital bed in the last room. The shades were all drawn but the sunlight glowed behind them. The room was dank and sweaty. Oxygen tubes were clipped to Frank's nose but his breathing was still labored. His skin was yellow. His eyes were clouded.

There was a chair by the bed. Will sat down without having to be told.

"I'll be in the kitchen," Maxine told them. "You'uns let me know if you need anything."

Will turned in surprise, but she'd already left the room. He turned his attention back to Frank. "Julie Smith?"

The older man's deep baritone had been reduced to a low tremble. "I had her call Sara."

Will had assumed something like this had happened. "You already knew Tommy had killed himself before Sara got there."

"I thought ..." Frank closed his eyes. His chest slowly rose and fell. "I thought it would be better if Sara found him. That there would be fewer questions."

It could have easily worked out that way. Sara knew Nick Shelton. She could have unwittingly smoothed things over. "Why did you have Maxine say that Allison had a boyfriend?"

One shoulder went up. "It's always the boyfriend."

Will guessed that was true enough, but Frank had lied so many times over the last few days that Will didn't know whether the man was capable of being honest. Lionel Harris had a point about change. Not many people could pull it off. There had to be something awfully bad or awfully good to compel a person

to turn their lives around. It was obvious to Will that Frank was past any life-changing revelations. Even without the oxygen tank, he smelled sick, like his body was already rotting. Will knew that there came a point in every person's life when it was too late to change anything. All you could do was wait for death to make you inconsequential.

Frank winced as he tried to get more comfortable in the bed.

"Can I get you anything?"

He shook his head, though he was obviously in pain. "How's Lena?"

"The infection's bad, but they think she'll pull through."

"Tell her I'm sorry," Frank said. "Tell her I'm sorry about everything."

"All right," Will promised, though if he had his way he would never talk to the woman again. He didn't think Lena Adams was all bad, but there was just enough of her that was tainted that left a bad taste in Will's mouth. "Why don't you tell me what happened?"

Frank stared openly at Will. His eyes watered. "You got kids?"

Will shook his head.

"Darla was always rebellious, pushing me, pushing Maxine." He stopped to catch his breath. "She disappeared on us when she was seventeen. I didn't even know she was back in town until I saw her outside the clinic." He coughed. Fine specks of blood dotted the bedsheet. "She was taking a cigarette break."

"Why did she call the police on Tommy?" The act seemed risky considering her criminal enterprises.

"I don't know if she was trying to scare Tommy or punish me." Frank reached for the glass of water on his bedside table. Will helped him, holding the straw so he could drink. Frank swallowed, the noise painfully loud in the tiny room. He sat back with a slow groan.

Will asked, "What did you do when you read the incident report about Tommy's dog?"

"I went to the clinic and asked her what the hell she was doing."

"Darla's name wasn't in the report."

Frank didn't answer.

Will was sick of pulling teeth. "You've done thousands of interviews, Chief Wallace. You know what questions I'm going to ask. You've probably already got a list in your head." He paused, waiting for Frank to make this easy. After a full minute, Will realized nothing was ever going to be easy with this man. He asked, "What did Darla say when you confronted her?"

"She told me she was being blackmailed."

"About the drug trial?"

"It wasn't just the two kids she was lying about. It was a lot of them. She had a system going—getting them to double up on the rolls so it looked like more kids were in the study, then they'd split the checks when they came in."

"Were they all blackmailing her?"

"Just Jason and Allison."

"She told you their names?"

"No."

Will studied him, trying again to figure out if he was lying. It was an exercise in futility. "What did Darla tell you about the blackmailers?"

"She thought she could pay them off, get them off her back. One of them was

graduating soon. She thought if she gave them enough money they'd go away."

"How much did she ask you for?"

"Ten thousand dollars. I didn't have it. Even if I did, I wouldn't'a given it to her. I spent so much money bailing her out so many times. I couldn't throw away more."

Will noticed the man had not considered a second option, which was arresting his daughter and sending her to prison for her crimes.

Frank continued, "She worked so hard to get her nursing degree. I never thought she'd ..." His voice trailed off. "I didn't know."

"She's been in trouble before."

Frank would only nod.

"Bad checks," Will supplied. Darla's fingerprints were on file. They matched the print on the Windex bottle Will and Charlie had found in the dorm bathroom closet. Will made an educated guess. "She was in trouble before that."

Frank gave a tight nod. "I'd get calls every now and then. Professional courtesy, one cop to another. Austin. Little Rock. West Memphis. She was taking care of old people, skimming their money. She was good. She never got caught, but they knew it was her."

Will had found many times that there was a fine line between knowing someone was guilty and proving it. Being a cop's daughter had probably given Darla an extra layer of protection.

"I was sure Tommy killed that girl. I just didn't want anything to come back on Darla."

"You did everything you could do to make sure Lena's case was solid."

He stared at Will with rheumy eyes, obviously trying to guess what he knew.

The truth was that Will didn't know anything for certain. He guessed that Frank had hidden evidence. He guessed that Frank had delayed the call center in Eaton sending the audio of Maxine's voice on the 911 call. He guessed that the man had impeded an investigation, acted with reckless endangerment, and blindly if not willfully contributed to the deaths of three people.

As Frank had said, there was knowing and then there was proving.

"I never wanted to get Lena involved in any of this," Frank said. "She didn't know nothing about any of it. It was all down to me."

Will imagined Lena would say the same thing about Frank. As long as he lived, he would never understand the bond that held them together. "When did you figure out that Darla was involved?"

"When Lena—" He started coughing again. This time, there was so much blood that he had to spit into a tissue. "Jesus," Frank groaned, wiping his mouth. "I'm sorry."

Will fought to keep his stomach under control. "When did you figure it out?"

"When Lena told me there was another kid got killed the same way ..." His voice trailed off again. "I couldn't see Darla doing this. You'll understand when you have kids. She was my baby. I used to walk the floor with her at night. I watched her grow from a little girl into ..." Frank didn't finish his words, though it was obvious what Darla had grown into.

"When's the last time you saw her?"

"Last night," he admitted. Then, instead of making Will ask the right questions, he volunteered, "We got into a fight. She said she had to leave town."

She wanted more money.”

“Did you give it to her?”

He shook his head. “Maxine had a couple hundred bucks in her purse. They got into a fight. Pretty bad.” He indicated the oxygen tank, the rails on his bed. “By the time I got up, she had Maxie on the ground, beating her.” Frank pressed his thin lips together. “I never thought I’d live to see anything like that—a child wailing off on her own mother. My child. That wasn’t who I raised her to be. That wasn’t my kid.”

“What happened?”

“She stole the money. Took some out of my wallet, too. Maybe fifty bucks.”

“We found almost three hundred dollars on the body.”

He nodded, as if that’s what he expected. “I got a call from Brock this morning. Said she was pulled out downriver from the granite field.” He looked at Will as if he didn’t quite believe the information.

“That’s right. She was near the college.”

“He said I didn’t need to see her right now. Give him time to clean her up.” Frank’s breath caught. “How many times have you said that to a parent who wants to see their kid, only you know the kid’s been beaten, cut, fucked up six ways to Sunday?”

“A lot of times,” Will admitted. “But Brock’s right. You don’t want to remember her like this.”

Frank stared at the ceiling. “I don’t know if I want to remember her at all.”

Will let his words hang between them for a few seconds. “Is there anything else you want to tell me?”

Frank shook his head, and again, Will wasn’t sure whether or not to trust him. The man had been a detective for over thirty years. There was no way he hadn’t at least suspected his daughter was involved in these crimes. Even if Frank didn’t want to say it out loud, surely he knew deep down that his inaction had at the very least cost Tommy Braham and Jason Howell their lives.

Or maybe he didn’t know. Maybe Frank was so good at deceiving himself that he was certain he had done everything right.

“I should let you get some rest,” Will offered.

Frank’s eyes were closed, but he wasn’t asleep. “I used to take her hunting.” His voice was a raspy whisper. “It was the only time we got along.” He opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling. The only sound in the room was the quiet hiss of the oxygen tank beside his bed. “I taught her to never aim for the heart. There’s ribs and bone all around it. Bullet ricochets. You end up chasing the deer for miles waiting for him to die.” He put his hand to the side of his neck. “You go for the neck. Cut off the stuff that supplies the heart.” He rubbed the sagging skin. “That’s the clean kill. The most humane.”

Will had seen the crime scenes. There was nothing humane about the murders of Allison Spooner and Jason Howell. They had been terrified. They had been butchered.

“I’m dying,” Frank said. His words were no surprise. “I was diagnosed with cancer a few months ago.” He licked his chapped lips. “Maxine said she’d take care of me as long as I gave her my pension.” His breath caught in his chest. He gave a strained laugh. “I always thought I’d die alone.”

Will felt an overwhelming sadness at the man’s words. Frank Wallace *was*

going to die alone. There might be people in the same room with him—his bitter ex-wife, a few blindly loyal colleagues—but men like Frank were destined to die the same way they had lived, with everyone at arm's length.

Will knew this because he often viewed his own life and death through a similar lens. He didn't have any childhood friends he'd kept in touch with. There were no relatives he could reach out to. Faith had the baby now. Eventually, she would find a man whose company she could tolerate. There might be another baby. She would probably find a desk job to take some of the stress out of her life. Will would recede from her life like a tide rolling back from the shore.

That left Angie, and Will had no great hope that she would be a comfort to him in his old age. She lived fast and hard, showing the same reckless disregard that had landed her mother in the coma ward at the state hospital for the last twenty-seven years. Marriage, if anything, had pushed them further apart. Will had always assumed that he would outlive Angie, that he would find himself alone at her graveside one day. This image always brought him great sadness tinged with a modicum of relief. Part of Will loved Angie more than life itself. Another part of him thought of her as a Pandora's box that held his darkest secrets. If she were to die, she would take some of that darkness with her.

But she would also take part of his life.

Will asked Frank, "Do you need me to get you anything?"

He coughed again, a dry, hacking sound. "No," he answered. "I'm fine on my own."

"Take care of yourself." Will made himself reach out and touch Frank's shoulder before he left the room.

Sara was in the front yard with her greyhounds when Will pulled into the Linton driveway. The side of her face was bruised. The cut on her arm had needed stitches. Her hair was down, brushing across her shoulders.

She looked beautiful.

The dogs ran to greet him as he got out of the car. Sara had dressed them both in black fleece jackets to fight the cold. Will petted the excited animals as much as he could without falling over backward.

Sara clicked her tongue and they stopped accosting him. She asked, "I take it Frank wasn't much help?"

Will shook his head, feeling a lump come into his throat. He used to be good at hiding his thoughts, but somehow Sara had cracked the code. "I don't think he has long."

"I heard." She was obviously conflicted about the impending death of her longtime family friend. "I'm sorry that he's sick, but I don't know how I feel about him as a person after all of this."

"Maybe he could've stopped it—for Jason, at least." Will added, "Then again, people don't see what they don't want to see."

"Denial doesn't hold up as a good excuse. Darla could've killed me. She *would've* killed me if the bank hadn't given out."

Will didn't look up because he didn't want Sara to know what he was thinking. Instead, he leaned down to scratch Bob's ear. "Frank's ex-wife is with him. At least he's not going to die alone."

"Small comfort."

"I think it is," he countered. "Some people don't get that. Some people just—" Will stopped himself before he started to sound like a blubbing child. "Anyway, I don't think I'm ever going to find out what really happened this week."

"Do you need to?"

"I don't guess so. Nothing will bring Tommy back, but at least his name is clear. Darla's not going to hurt anyone else. Frank's in his own prison."

"And Lena gets away clean yet again."

She didn't sound as bitter as she had before. "We'll see."

Sara laughed. "You want to make a bet?"

Will tried to think of a clever wager, something that involved him taking her to dinner when they got back to Atlanta, but he was too slow.

She said, "Brock called this morning. He found Lena's Toyota key in Darla's front pocket. I guess she was planning on taking Lena's car and leaving town."

He remembered the Celica's sliced tires. Someone at the station had given Lena a parting gift. "Darla must've seen you get out of your car and decided to upgrade her ride." Will had always known that the killer was good at improvising. "Did Hare say what made him check the files for Tommy's name?"

"He'd seen Tommy in the clinic a couple of times. It's not unusual for kids that age to still go to their pediatrician, but Tommy was there a lot, at least once a week. Hare got curious after the suicide and checked the paperwork for Tommy's name." Sara pulled the leash as Billy tried to pee on the side of Will's car. "He confirmed what Darla said. He was going to the ethics committee to report the protocol breach."

"That's good, right? He was doing the right thing."

"I suppose, but he's not going to stop running trials." She gave a rueful laugh. "Let me correct that: he's going to stop running trials out of my building, but he's still going to keep running them."

"Did you find out what he was testing?"

"An antidepressant. They're going to try again next spring with a different dosage."

"You're kidding me."

"It's a billion-dollar business. One in every ten Americans is on antidepressants, even though placebo studies show a lot of them get absolutely no benefits whatsoever." She nodded back at the house. "Hare's inside, which is why I took the dogs for a two-hour walk in the freezing cold."

"Your folks aren't mad at him?"

She sighed heavily. "Oh, my mother will forgive him anything."

"I guess that's what families do."

She seemed to think about what he said. "Yeah, they do."

"I talked to Faith this morning." She'd sent so many baby pictures to Will's phone that the memory was almost full. "I've never heard her happy before. It's weird."

"Having a baby changes you," Sara told him. "Obviously, that's not something I've learned from personal experience, but I can see it with my sister."

Bob leaned against his leg. Will reached down and scratched him. "I guess I —"

"I was raped."

Will kept his mouth closed because he didn't know what to say.

"In college," she continued. "That's why I can't have children." He'd never noticed how green her eyes were, almost emerald. "It took years for me to tell my husband. I was ashamed. I wanted to think it was behind me. That I was strong enough to get past it."

"I don't think anyone could ever say you're not strong."

"Well. I've had my bad days." She let out Billy's leash as he sniffed around the mailbox. They both stared at the dog as if he was far more fascinating than reality dictated.

Will cleared his throat. The moment was too awkward. It was also cold outside, and he guessed Sara didn't want to stand in front of her parents' house all day watching him struggle to come up with something meaningful to say. "I should start packing my stuff."

"Why?"

"Well ..." Will was tongue-tied, and painfully stupid. "The holiday. Your family. I'm sure you want to be with them."

"My mother's cooked enough for fifty. She'd be crushed if you didn't stay."

He couldn't tell if the offer was genuine or if she was just being polite. "My front yard's kind of a mess."

"I'll help you when we get back to Atlanta." She smiled mischievously. "I'll even show you how to use a backhoe."

"I don't want to impose."

"Will, it's not imposing." She took his hand. He looked down, tracing his thumb along her fingers. Her skin was soft. He caught the scent of her soap. Just being close to her like this made him feel warm, like that empty place in his soul might have the chance of being filled one day. He opened his mouth to tell her that he wanted to stay, that he wanted nothing more than to get two thousand more questions from her mother and watch her sister's sly smile as she glanced back and forth between them.

And then his cell phone chirped in his pocket.

She wrinkled her nose. "What's that?"

"Probably another baby picture from Faith."

She gave him that same flirty smile. "Let me see."

Will felt incapable of denying Sara any request. He used his free hand to find his phone. He'd seen Emma Lee Mitchell from every conceivable angle, and he was sure she was a sweet baby, but at the moment she looked like an angry red raisin in a pink knit hat.

Sara flipped open the phone. Her smile quickly faded. "It's a text." She showed him the phone, then seemed to realize herself. She turned it back and read aloud, " 'Diedre finally died. Come home.' "

Will felt a sudden pang of grief. "Angie's mother." He looked down at her hand. She was still holding his hand.

"I'm sorry."

Will hadn't cried since he was sixteen, but he felt tears threatening to come. He struggled to speak. "She's been on life support since I was a kid. I guess she finally ..." His throat was so tight he could barely swallow. Angie claimed to hate her mother, but she had visited her at least once a month for the last

twenty years. Will had gone with her many times. The experience was awful, heart wrenching. He had held Angie so many times while she sobbed. It was the only time she let her guard down. The only time she surrendered herself to Will.

He suddenly understood Lionel Harris's words about the power of a shared history.

"Sara—"

She squeezed his hand. "You should go home."

Will struggled to find the right words. He was torn between wanting to be with Sara and needing to be with Angie.

Sara leaned in close, pressing her lips to his cheek. The wind draped her hair across his face. She put her mouth to his ear and told him, "Go home to your wife."

So he did.



**THREE WEEKS
LATER**

EPILOGUE

Lena stood in the cemetery looking down at Jeffrey Tolliver's headstone. It seemed stupid to put flowers on an empty grave, but the things inside that coffin were more tangible than a jar of ashes. Brad had contributed a paper target from his first qualifying round at the police academy. Frank had put in his citation book because Jeffrey was always yelling at him for being late with the reports. Lena had donated her gold shield. The one she carried up until three weeks ago was a duplicate. Dan Brock had slipped it in with the other items because they both knew there was no way she could do it herself.

All the businesses on Main Street were closed the day Jeffrey's coffin was lowered into the ground. Jared hadn't attended the funeral either. His resemblance to his father had been brought to his attention years before. He didn't want to distract the mourners. He didn't want to bring Sara that sort of pain.

He wanted to be in town, though. He wanted to feel close to his father, to see the place where Jeffrey had lived and loved. He'd met Lena outside the diner. She was sitting on the curb, thinking about all the things she had lost. At first, she'd thought Jared was Jeffrey. Of course she'd thought he was Jeffrey. He was more than a spitting image. He was a walking ghost.

Maybe part of Lena was drawn to him because of the resemblance. She had worshipped Jeffrey too much to ever consider anything romantic. He was her mentor. He was her hero. She had wanted to be the same kind of cop he was. The same kind of person. She hadn't realized until he was gone that he was just a man.

"Why aren't you at the funeral?" Jared had asked her.

And Lena had told him, "Because I'm the person who killed your father."

Jared had spent two hours listening to Lena pour her heart out, then another two hours arguing about how it wasn't really her fault. His youth made him passionate, a staunch defender of his quickly formed opinions. He had just signed up for the police academy. He hadn't yet seen the horrors of the world. Hadn't yet figured out that there was such a thing as a truly irredeemable person.

Was she irredeemable? Lena didn't want to think so. She had a fresh start ahead of her. A clean slate on which to write the rest of her life. The police review board had returned a verdict of no fault in Tommy Braham's suicide. Will Trent's report was long on supposition and short on evidence, especially since Lena had never gotten around to taping that confession. Gordon Braham was moving to Florida to be closer to his wife's people. He had filed a class-action lawsuit along with Jason Howell's mother against Hareton Earnshaw and the drug company that had sponsored the trials. He'd signed a paper indemnifying the Grant County force in exchange for an undisclosed sum.

Lena had gone through two operations and a week in the hospital, but the

damage to her hand was surprisingly limited considering the hell she'd gone through fighting off a nasty staph infection. Therapy was bringing movement back to her fingers. She was right-handed anyway. All her left hand needed to do was hold up her badge when she was making an arrest. And she would be making a lot of them soon. Gavin Wayne had called two days ago to let her know the job on the Macon force was still available. Lena had told him yes without a second thought.

She was a cop. It was in her blood. Her nerve had been tested. Her resolve had faltered. But she knew without any doubt that there was nothing else in the world that she wanted to do.

She leaned down and placed the flowers on Jeffrey's grave. He was a cop, too. Not the same kind of cop as Lena, but different paths could still lead to the same destination. Jeffrey would understand that. He had always given her the benefit of the doubt.

Lena looked across the row of headstones lining the cemetery. She'd already put flowers on her sister's headstone. Frank Wallace didn't have a marker yet, but she had brought him some daisies because she knew he liked them. He'd left her some money in his will. Not a lot, but enough for Lena to sell her house at a loss and still pay off her mortgage. She had donated the rest to a nonprofit legal fund established to help cops who got on the wrong side of the law. Something told her Frank would've approved.

Not that she needed his approval anymore. Lena was sick of worrying what other people thought about her. Part of looking ahead to her new life required her never to look back. The only things she was taking with her from Grant County were her clothes and her fiancé, neither of which she thought she could live without.

"Ready?" Jared was sitting in his truck. He leaned over and pushed open the door.

Lena slid across the seat so he could put his arm around her. "Are things going to be okay with you and Sara?" He'd had coffee with her this morning. Lena gathered things hadn't gone well.

"Don't worry about it." Jared's jaw tightened as he put the car in gear and pulled out onto the road. He didn't like giving bad news. "Aunt Sara will come around."

"I wouldn't hold my breath."

He kissed the top of her head. "She just doesn't know who you are."

"No, she doesn't."

He reached down and turned on the radio. Joan Jett started singing about her bad reputation. Lena stared into the rearview mirror. She could see the road disappearing behind her, Grant County getting smaller with every mile. She wanted to feel something for the place—a sense of loss, a sense of nostalgia. All she felt was relief to have it finally behind her.

Did Sara Linton know Lena? Probably better than anybody else alive. But Jared didn't need to know that. He didn't need to know about the mistakes Lena had made, or the people whose lives she had ruined. Things were going to be different in Macon. This was her clean slate. Her new beginning.

Besides, Lena had never told a man the truth in her life. She wasn't about to start now.

For Victoria

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My appreciation to the usual suspects: Victoria Sanders, Kate Elton, and Kate Miciak. I'd also like to add Gail Rebuck, Susan Sandon, Richard Cable, Margie Seale, Robbert Ammerlaan, Pieter Swinkels, Silvie Kuttiny-Walster, Berit Boehm, Per Nasholm, Alysha Farry, Chandler Crawford, and Markus Dohle. And I guess Angela Cheng-Caplan, if she can handle the love.

Isabel Glusman, thank you for your letters, and Emily Bestler, thank you for raising such a great kid. Dr. David Harper helped me figure out how to kill people. Dr. David Worth helped me figure out eyeballs. Any mistakes are my own. Trish Hawkins was instrumental in giving me insight into the complexities of dyslexia. Debbie Teague, you are such a trouper for sharing your experiences; every time I write about Will, I think of your amazing strength of spirit. Mo Hayder: thanks for all the free research on scuba diving, suckah! To Andrew Johnston I offer my apologies for you know what, and no, there's no compensation. Same goes for you, Miss Kitty.

Thanks to Beth Tindall of Cincinnati Media for all the usual web crap. Jamey Locastro can arrest me anytime. Fiona Farrelly and Ollie Malcolm were very gracious helping me figure my way around the thing that involves the plot of this story, which I won't mention here in case people read this before they read the actual book, which they shouldn't be doing anyway. Thanks also to the folks who helped by discussing this subject matter but didn't want to be named for obvious reasons. To Speaker David Ralston: I thank you very much for introducing me to some great people. GBI Director Vernon Keenan and John Bankhead, thanks for your time. I will never fire a shotgun again without thinking of our lovely day outside the women's prison. I hope I've honored the work y'all and all the agents and support staff at the GBI do for the great state of Georgia.

My daddy made me soup and cornbread during critical times, which I may have conflated because of the cornbread and soup, which—did I mention?—I will probably need more of. D.A. showed amazing perseverance through this whole process. As always, you are my heart.

To my readers: y'all are the best. For further reading, try the *GPZ* anthology, check out issue 15.05 of *Wired* magazine, or, if you really want to get upset, investigoogle Jessie Gelsing. For those of you with a wild hair, GPGP.net is an interesting site as well. Hey, folks, while you're online, check me out on Facebook or my website, karinslaughter.com. I love getting letters, but please remember this is a work of fiction.

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF CRIMINAL

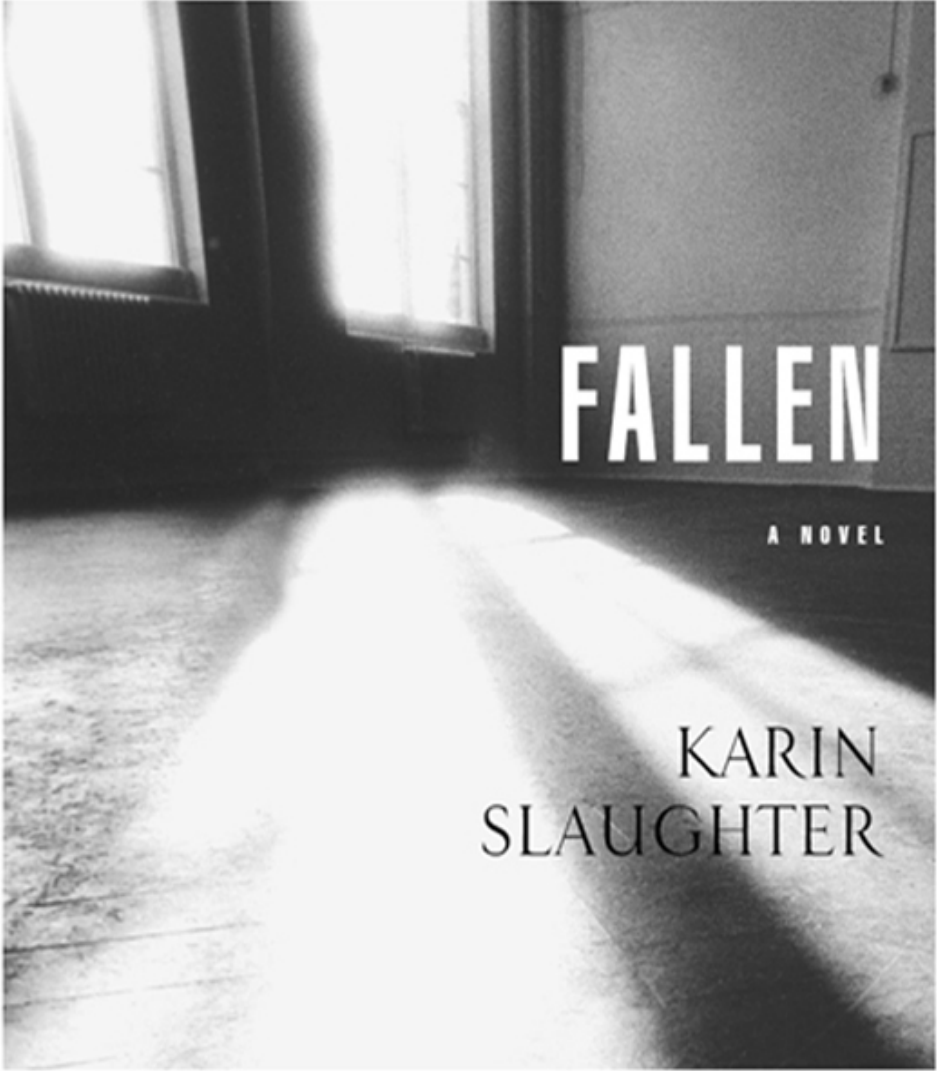
KARIN SLAUGHTER

FALLEN

A NOVEL

"A complex, gripping
and deadly serious
novel that reflects
anew Slaughter's
abundant talent."

—*The Washington Post*

A black and white photograph of a room. A window on the left side allows bright light to enter, creating a strong, diagonal beam of light that illuminates a portion of the floor. The floor appears to be made of wood or a similar textured material. The walls are dark and shadowed, with a door or panel visible on the right. The overall mood is somber and dramatic.

FALLEN

A NOVEL

KARIN
SLAUGHTER



DELACORTE PRESS

NEW YORK

Fallen is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2011 by Karin Slaughter

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by Delacorte Press, an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc., New York.

DELACORTE PRESS is a registered trademark of Random House, Inc., and the colophon is a trademark of Random House, Inc.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Slaughter, Karin

Fallen : a novel / Karin Slaughter.

p. cm.

eISBN: 978-0-345-52822-3

1. Policewomen—Fiction. 2. Georgia—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3569.L275F37 2011

813'.54—dc22 2011004941

www.bantamdell.com

Cover design: Carlos Beltrán

Cover photograph: Michael Trevillion

v3.1

Contents

Master - Table of Contents

Fallen

Title Page

Copyright

Saturday

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Sunday

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Monday

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Thursday

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Dedication

Acknowledgments



SATURDAY

CHAPTER ONE

Faith Mitchell dumped the contents of her purse onto the passenger seat of her Mini, trying to find something to eat. Except for a furry piece of gum and a peanut of dubious origin, there was nothing remotely edible. She thought about the box of nutrition bars in her kitchen pantry, and her stomach made a noise that sounded like a rusty hinge groaning open.

The computer seminar she'd attended this morning was supposed to last three hours, but that had stretched into four and a half thanks to the jackass in the front row who kept asking pointless questions. The Georgia Bureau of Investigation trained its agents more often than any other agency in the region. Statistics and data on criminal activities were constantly being drummed into their heads. They had to be up to date on all of the latest technology. They had to qualify at the range twice a year. They ran mock raids and active shooter simulations that were so intense that for weeks after, Faith couldn't go to the bathroom in the middle of the night without checking shadows in doorways. Usually, she appreciated the agency's thoroughness. Today, all she could think about was her four-month-old baby, and the promise Faith had made to her mother that she would be back no later than noon.

The clock on the dash read ten after one o'clock when she started the car. Faith mumbled a curse as she pulled out of the parking lot in front of the Panthersville Road headquarters. She used Bluetooth to dial her mother's number. The car speakers gave back a static-y silence. Faith hung up and dialed again. This time, she got a busy signal.

Faith tapped her finger on the steering wheel as she listened to the bleating. Her mother had voicemail. *Everybody* had voicemail. Faith couldn't remember the last time she'd heard a busy signal on the telephone. She had almost forgotten the sound. There was probably a crossed wire somewhere at the phone company. She hung up and tried the number a third time.

Still busy.

Faith steered with one hand as she checked her BlackBerry for an email from her mother. Before Evelyn Mitchell retired, she had been a cop for just shy of four decades. You could say a lot about the Atlanta force, but you couldn't claim they were behind the times. Evelyn had carried a cell phone back when they were more like purses you strapped around your shoulder. She'd learned how to use email before her daughter had. She'd carried a BlackBerry for almost twelve years.

But she hadn't sent a message today.

Faith checked her cell phone voicemail. She had a saved message from her dentist's office about making an appointment to get her teeth cleaned, but there was nothing new. She tried her phone at home, thinking maybe her mother had gone there to pick up something for the baby. Faith's house was just down the road from Evelyn's. Maybe Emma had run out of diapers. Maybe she'd needed another bottle. Faith listened to the phone ring at her house, then heard her own

voice answer, telling callers to leave a message.

She ended the call. Without thinking, she glanced into the back seat. Emma's empty car seat was there. She could see the pink liner sticking out over the top of the plastic.

"Idiot," Faith whispered to herself. She dialed her mother's cell phone number. She held her breath as she counted through three rings. Evelyn's voicemail picked up.

Faith had to clear her throat before she could speak. She was aware of a tremor in her tone. "Mom, I'm on my way home. I guess you took Em for a walk ..." Faith looked up at the sky as she merged onto the interstate. She was about twenty minutes outside of Atlanta and could see fluffy white clouds draped like scarves around the skinny necks of skyscrapers. "Just call me," Faith said, worry needling the edge of her brain.

Grocery store. Gas station. Pharmacy. Her mother had a car seat identical to the one in the back of Faith's Mini. She was probably out running errands. Faith was over an hour late. Evelyn would've taken the baby and ... Left Faith a message that she was going to be out. The woman had been on call for the majority of her adult life. She didn't go to the toilet without letting someone know. Faith and her older brother, Zeke, had joked about it when they were kids. They always knew where their mother was, even when they didn't want to. Especially when they didn't want to.

Faith stared at the phone in her hand as if it could tell her what was going on. She was aware that she might be letting herself get worked up over nothing. The landline could be out. Her mother wouldn't know this unless she tried to make a call. Her cell phone could be switched off, or charging, or both. Her BlackBerry could be in her car or her purse or somewhere she couldn't hear the telltale vibration. Faith glanced back and forth between the road and her BlackBerry as she typed an email to her mother. She spoke the words aloud as she typed—

"On-my-way. Sorry-I'm-late. Call-me."

She sent the email, then tossed the phone onto the seat along with the spilled items from her purse. After a moment's hesitation, Faith popped the gum into her mouth. She chewed as she drove, ignoring the purse lint clinging to her tongue. She turned on the radio, then snapped it back off. The traffic thinned as she got closer to the city. The clouds moved apart, sending down bright rays of sunshine. The inside of the car began to bake.

Ten minutes out, Faith's nerves were still on edge, and she was sweating from the heat in the car. She cracked the sunroof to let in some air. This was probably a simple case of separation anxiety. She'd been back at work for a little over two months, but still, every morning when Faith left Emma at her mother's, she felt something akin to a seizure take hold. Her vision blurred. Her heart shook in her chest. Her head buzzed as if a million bees had flown into her ears. She was more irritable than usual at work, especially with her partner, Will Trent, who either had the patience of Job or was setting up a believable alibi for when he finally snapped and strangled her.

Faith couldn't recall if she had felt this same anxiety with Jeremy, her son, who was now a freshman in college. Faith had been eighteen when she entered the police academy. Jeremy was three years old by then. She had grabbed onto the idea of joining the force as if it was the only life preserver left on the *Titanic*.

Thanks to two minutes of poor judgment in the back of a movie theater and what foreshadowed a lifetime of breathtakingly bad taste in men, Faith had gone straight from puberty to motherhood without any of the usual stops in between. At eighteen, she had relished the idea of earning a steady paycheck so that she could move out of her parents' house and raise Jeremy the way that she wanted. Going to work every day had been a step toward independence. Leaving him in day care had seemed like a small price to pay.

Now that Faith was thirty-four, with a mortgage, a car payment, and another baby to raise on her own, she wanted nothing more than to move back into her mother's house so that Evelyn could take care of everything. She wanted to open the refrigerator and see food that she didn't have to buy. She wanted to turn on the air conditioner in the summer without worrying about having to pay the bill. She wanted to sleep until noon, then watch TV all day. Hell, while she was at it, she might as well resurrect her father, who'd died eleven years ago, so that he could make her pancakes at breakfast and tell her how pretty she was.

No chance of that now. Evelyn seemed happy to play the role of nanny in her retirement, but Faith was under no illusion that her life was going to get any easier. Her own retirement was almost twenty years away. The Mini had another three years of payments and would be out of warranty well before that. Emma would expect food and clothing for at least the next eighteen years, if not more. And it wasn't like when Jeremy was a baby and Faith could dress him in mismatched socks and yard sale hand-me-downs. Babies today had to coordinate. They needed BPA-free bottles and certified organic applesauce from kindly Amish farmers. If Jeremy got into the architectural program at Georgia Tech, Faith was looking at six more years of buying books and doing his laundry. Most worryingly, her son had found a serious girlfriend. An older girlfriend with curvy hips and a ticking biological clock. Faith could be a grandmother before she turned thirty-five.

An unwelcome heat rushed through her body as she tried to push this last thought from her mind. She checked the contents of her purse again as she drove. The gum hadn't made a dent. Her stomach was still growling. She reached over and felt around inside the glovebox. Nothing. She should stop at a fast-food place and at least get a Coke, but she was wearing her regs—tan khakis and a blue shirt with the letters *GBI* emblazoned in bright yellow on the back. This wasn't the best part of town to be in if you were law enforcement. People tended to run, and then you had to chase them, which wasn't conducive to getting home at a reasonable hour. Besides, something was telling her—urging her—to see her mother.

Faith picked up her phone and dialed Evelyn's numbers again. Home, cell, even her BlackBerry, which she only used for email. All three brought the same negative response. Faith could feel her stomach flip as the worst scenarios ran through her mind. As a beat cop, she'd been called out onto a lot of scenes where a crying child had alerted the neighbors to a serious problem. Mothers had slipped in the tub. Fathers had accidentally injured themselves or gone into coronary arrest. The babies had lain there, wailing helplessly, until someone had figured out that something was wrong. There was nothing more heart wrenching than a crying baby who could not be soothed.

Faith chided herself for bringing these horrible images to mind. She had

always been good at assuming the worst, even before she became a cop. Evelyn was probably fine. Emma's naptime was at one-thirty. Her mother had probably turned off the phone so the ringing wouldn't wake the baby. Maybe she'd run into a neighbor while checking the mailbox, or gone next door to help old Mrs. Levy take out the trash.

Still, Faith's hands slipped on the wheel as she exited onto Boulevard. She was sweating despite the mild March weather. This couldn't just be about the baby or her mother or even Jeremy's unconscionably fertile girlfriend. Faith had been diagnosed with diabetes less than a year ago. She was religious about measuring her blood sugar, eating the right things, making sure she had snacks on hand. Except for today. That probably explained why her thinking had gone sideways. She just needed to eat something. Preferably in view of her mother and child.

Faith checked the glovebox again to make sure it was really empty. She had a distant memory of giving Will her last nutrition bar yesterday while they were waiting outside the courthouse. It was that or watch him inhale a sticky bun from the vending machine. He had complained about the taste but eaten the whole bar anyway. And now she was paying for it.

She blew through a yellow light, speeding as much as she dared down a semi-residential street. The road narrowed at Ponce de Leon. Faith passed a row of fast-food restaurants and an organic grocery store. She edged up the speedometer, accelerating into the twists and turns bordering Piedmont Park. The flash of a traffic camera bounced off her rearview mirror as she sailed through another yellow light. She tapped on the brakes for a straggling jaywalker. Two more grocery stores blurred by, then came the final red light, which was mercifully green.

Evelyn still lived in the same house Faith and her older brother had grown up in. The single-story ranch was located in an area of Atlanta called Sherwood Forest, which was nestled between Ansley Park, one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in the city, and Interstate 85, which offered the constant roar of traffic, depending on which way the wind was blowing. The wind was blowing just fine today, and when Faith rolled down her window to let in more fresh air, she heard the familiar drone that had marked most every day of her childhood.

As a lifelong resident of Sherwood Forest, Faith had a deep-seated hatred for the men who had planned the neighborhood. The subdivision had been developed after World War II, the brick ranch houses filled by returning soldiers who took advantage of low VA loans. The street planners had unabashedly embraced the Sherwood concept. After taking a hard left onto Lionel, Faith crossed Friar Tuck, took a right on Robin Hood Road, coasted through the fork at Lady Marian Lane, and checked the driveway of her own house on the corner of Doncaster and Barnesdale before finally pulling into her mother's driveway off Little John Trail.

Evelyn's beige Chevy Malibu was backed into the carport. That, at least, was normal. Faith had never seen her mother pull nose-first into a parking space. It came from her days in uniform. You always made sure your car was ready to leave as soon as a call came in.

Faith didn't have time to reflect on her mother's routines. She rolled into the driveway and parked the Mini nose-to-nose with the Malibu. Her legs ached as she stood; every muscle in her body had been tensed for the last twenty minutes.

She could hear loud music blaring from the house. Heavy metal, not her mother's usual Beatles. Faith put her hand on the hood of the Malibu as she walked toward the kitchen door. The engine was cold. Maybe Evelyn had been in the shower when Faith called. Maybe she hadn't checked her email or cell phone. Maybe she had cut herself. There was a bloody handprint on the door.

Faith felt herself do a double take.

The bloody print showed a left hand. It was about eighteen inches above the knob. The door had been pulled closed but hadn't latched. A streak of sunlight cut through the jamb, probably from the window over the kitchen sink.

Faith still couldn't process what she was seeing. She held up her own hand to the print, a child pressing her fingers to her mother's. Evelyn's hand was smaller. Slender fingers. The tip of her ring finger hadn't touched the door. There was a clot of blood where it should have been.

Suddenly, the music stopped mid-thump. In the silence, Faith heard a familiar gurgling noise, a revving up that announced the coming of a full-on wail. The sound echoed in the carport, so that for a moment, Faith thought it was coming from her own mouth. Then it came again, and she turned around, knowing that it was Emma.

Almost every other house in Sherwood Forest had been razed or remodeled, but the Mitchell home was much the same as when it had first been built. The layout was simple: three bedrooms, a family room, a dining room, and a kitchen with a door leading to the open carport. Bill Mitchell, Faith's father, had built a toolshed on the opposite side of the carport. It was a sturdy building—her father had never done anything halfway—with a metal door that bolted shut and safety glass in its one window. Faith was ten before she realized that the building was too fortified for something as simple as tool storage. With the tenderness that only an older brother can muster, Zeke had filled her in on the shed's true purpose. "It's where Mom keeps her gun, you dumbass."

Faith ran past the car and tried to open the shed door. It was locked. She looked through the window. The metal wires in the safety glass formed a spider web in front of her eyes. She could see the potting table and bags of soil stacked neatly underneath. Tools hung on their proper hooks. Lawn equipment was stowed neatly in place. A black metal safe with a combination lock was bolted to the floor under the table. The door was open. Evelyn's cherry-handled Smith and Wesson revolver was missing. So was the carton of ammunition that was usually beside it.

The gurgling noise came again, louder this time. A pile of blankets on the floor pulsed up and down like a heartbeat. Evelyn used them to cover her plants during unexpected freezes. They were usually folded on the top shelf but now were wadded up in the corner beside the safe. Faith saw a tuft of pink sticking up behind the gray blankets, then the bend of a plastic headrest that could only be Emma's car seat. The blanket moved again. A tiny foot kicked out; a soft yellow cotton sock with white lace trim around the ankle. Then a little pink fist punched through. Then she saw Emma's face.

Emma smiled at Faith, her top lip forming a soft triangle. She gurgled again, this time with delight.

"Oh, God." Faith uselessly pulled at the locked door. Her hands shook as she felt around the top edge of the jamb, trying to find the key. Dust rained down.

The sharp point of a splinter dug into her finger. Faith looked in the window again. Emma clapped her hands together, soothed by the sight of her mother, despite the fact that Faith was as close to a full-on panic as she had ever been in her life. The shed was hot. It was too warm outside. Emma could overheat. She could become dehydrated. She could die.

Terrified, Faith got down on her hands and knees, thinking the key had fallen, possibly slid back under the door. She saw that the bottom of Emma's car seat was bent where it had been wedged between the safe and the wall. Hidden behind the blankets. Blocked by the safe.

Protected by the safe.

Faith stopped. Her lungs tightened mid-breath. Her jaw tensed as if it had been wired shut. Slowly, she sat up. There were drops of blood on the concrete in front of her. Her eyes followed the trail going to the kitchen door. To the bloody handprint.

Emma was locked in the shed. Evelyn's gun was missing. There was a blood trail to the house.

Faith stood, facing the unlatched kitchen door. There was no sound but her own labored breath.

Who had turned off the music?

Faith jogged back to her car. She took her Glock from under the driver's seat. She checked the magazine and clipped the holster to her side. Her phone was still on the front seat. Faith grabbed it before popping open the trunk. She had been a detective with the Atlanta homicide squad before becoming a special agent with the state. Her fingers dialed the unlisted emergency line from memory. She didn't give the dispatcher time to speak. She rattled off her old badge number, her unit, and her mother's street address.

Faith paused before saying, "Code thirty." The words nearly choked her. Code 30. She had never used the phrase in her life. It meant that an officer needed emergency assistance. It meant that a fellow cop was in serious danger, possibly dead. "My child is locked in the shed outside. There's blood on the concrete and a bloody handprint on the kitchen door. I think my mother is inside the house. I heard music, but it was turned off. She's retired Blue. I think she's—" Faith's throat tightened like a fist. "Help. Please. Send help."

"Acknowledge code thirty," the dispatcher answered, her tone sharp and tense. "Stay outside and wait for backup. Do not—repeat—do not go into the house."

"Acknowledged." Faith ended the call and tossed the phone into the back seat. She twisted her key into the lock that kept her shotgun bolted to the trunk of her car.

The GBI issued every agent at least two weapons. The Glock model 23 was a .40-caliber semiautomatic that held thirteen rounds in the magazine and one in the chamber. The Remington 870 held four rounds of double-ought buckshot in the tube. Faith's shotgun carried six extra rounds in the side-saddle attached in front of the stock. Each round contained eight pellets. Each pellet was about the size of a .38-caliber bullet.

Every pull of the trigger on the Glock shot one bullet. Every pull on the Remington shot eight.

Agency policy dictated that all agents keep a round chambered in their

Glocks, giving them fourteen rounds total. There was no conventional external safety on the weapon. Agents were authorized by law to use deadly force if they felt their lives or the lives of others were in danger. You only pulled back on the trigger when you meant to shoot, and you only shot when you meant to kill.

The shotgun was a different story with the same ending. The safety was to the rear of the trigger guard, a cross-bolt slide that took lithe muscle to move. You didn't keep a round in the chamber. You wanted everybody around you to hear that round racking, setting up to blast. Faith had seen grown men drop to their knees at the sound.

She looked back at the house as she disengaged the safety. The curtain on the front window twitched. A shadow ran down the hallway.

Faith pumped the shotgun with one hand as she walked toward the carport. The action made a satisfying *tha-thunk* that echoed against the concrete. In a single fluid motion, the stock was against her shoulder, the barrel straight in front of her. She kicked open the door, holding the weapon steady as she yelled "Police!"

The word boomed through the house like a clash of thunder. It came from a deep, dark place in Faith's gut that she ignored most of the time for fear of switching something on that could never be shut off.

"Come out with your hands in the air!"

No one came out. She heard a noise from somewhere in the back of the house. Her vision sharpened as she entered the kitchen. Blood on the counter. A bread knife. More blood on the floor. Drawers and cabinets gaping open. The phone on the wall hung like a twisted noose. Evelyn's BlackBerry and cell phone were smashed to pieces on the floor. Faith kept the shotgun in front of her, finger resting just to the side of the trigger so that she didn't make any mistakes.

She should've been thinking about her mother, or Emma, but there was only one phrase that kept going through her mind: *people and doorways*. When you cleared a house, these were the biggest threats to your safety. You had to know where the people were—whether they were good guys or not—and you had to know what was coming at you from every door.

Faith pivoted to the side, pointing the shotgun into the laundry room. She saw a man lying face-down on the floor. Black hair. Skin a yellow wax. His arms wrapped around his body like a child playing a spinning game. No gun on or near him. The back of his head was a bloody pulp. Brain matter speckled the washing machine. She could see the hole the bullet dug into the wall when it exited his skull.

Faith pivoted back to the kitchen. There was a pass-through to the dining room. She crouched and swung around.

Empty.

The layout of the house came to her like a diagram in her head. Family room on her left. Large, open foyer on the right. Hall straight ahead. Bathroom at the end. Two bedrooms on the right. One bedroom on the left—her mother's room. Inside was a tiny bathroom, a door that led to the back patio. Evelyn's bedroom door was the only one in the hall that was closed.

Faith started to go toward the closed door, but stopped.

People and doorways.

Her mind saw the words engraved in stone: *Do not proceed toward your*

downward threat until you are sure everything behind you is clear.

Faith crouched as she turned left, entering the family room. She scanned along the walls, checked the sliding glass door that led into the backyard. The glass was shattered. A breeze rustled the curtains. The room had been ransacked. Someone was looking for something. Drawers were broken. Cushions gutted. From her vantage point, Faith could see behind the couch, that the wingback chair was clear of extra feet. She kept her head swiveling back and forth between the room and the hall until she was sure she could move on.

The first door was to her old bedroom. Someone had searched here, too. The drawers in Faith's old bureau stuck out like tongues. The mattress was ripped open. Emma's crib had been busted to pieces. Her blanket was ripped in two. The mobile that had hung above her head every month of her life had been ground into the carpet like a pile of dirt. Faith swallowed the burning rage this ignited inside of her. She forced herself to keep moving.

Quickly, she cleared the closets, under the bed. She did the same in Zeke's room, which had been turned into her mother's office. Papers were scattered on the floor. The desk drawers had been thrown against the wall. She glanced into the bathroom. The shower curtain was pulled back. The linen closet gaped open. Towels and sheets spilled onto the floor.

Faith was standing to the left of her mother's bedroom door when she heard the first siren. It was distant, but clear. She should wait for it, wait for backup.

Faith kicked open the door and swung around in a crouch. Her finger went to the trigger. Two men were at the foot of the bed. One was on his knees. He was Hispanic, dressed only in a pair of jeans. The skin across his chest was shredded as if he'd been whipped with barbed wire. Sweat glistened on every part of his body. Black and red bruises punched along his ribs. He had tattoos all over his arms and torso, the largest of which was on his chest: a green and red Texas star with a rattlesnake wrapped around it. He was a member of Los Texicanos, a Mexican gang that had controlled the Atlanta drug trade for twenty years.

The second man was Asian. No tattoos. Bright red Hawaiian shirt and tan chinos. He stood with the Texicano in front of him, holding a gun to the man's head. A cherry-handled Smith and Wesson five-shot. Her mother's revolver.

Faith kept the shotgun trained on the Asian's chest. The cold, hard metal felt like an extension of her body. Adrenaline had pumped her heart into a frenzy. Every muscle inside of her wanted to pull the trigger.

Her words were clipped. "Where's my mother?"

He spoke in a twangy southern drawl. "You shoot me, you're gonna hit him."

He was right. Faith was standing in the hallway, less than six feet away. The men were too close together. Even a headshot carried the risk that a pellet would stray, hitting—possibly killing—the hostage. Still, she kept her finger on the trigger, the shotgun steady. "Tell me where she is."

He pressed the muzzle harder against the man's head. "Drop the gun."

The sirens were getting louder. They were coming from Zone 5, on the Peachtree side of the neighborhood. Faith said, "You hear that sound?" She mapped their path down Nottingham, calculating the cruisers would be here in less than a minute. "Tell me where my mother is or I swear to God I'll kill you before they hit the door."

He smiled again, his hand tightening around the gun. "You know what we're

here for. Hand it over and we'll let her go."

Faith didn't know what the hell he was talking about. Her mother was a sixty-three-year-old widow. The most valuable thing in the house was the land they were standing on.

He took her silence for equivocation. "You really wanna lose your mommy over Chico here?"

Faith pretended to understand. "It's that simple? You'll trade?"

He shrugged. "Only way we'll both walk outta here."

"Bullshit."

"No bullshit. Even trade." The sirens got louder. Tires screeched in the street. "Come on, bitch. Tick-tock. Deal or no deal?"

He was lying. He'd already killed one person. He was threatening another. As soon as he figured out Faith was bluffing, the only thing he'd give her was a bullet in the chest.

"Deal," she agreed, using her left hand to toss the shotgun out in front of her.

The firearms instructor at the shooting range carried a stopwatch that counted every tenth of a second, which was why Faith knew that it took her right hand exactly eight-tenths of a second to draw her Glock from her side holster. While the Asian was distracted by her shotgun dropping at his feet, she did just this, pulling the Glock, snaking her finger around the trigger, and shooting the man in the head.

His arms flew up. The gun dropped. He was dead before he hit the floor.

The front door splintered open. Faith turned toward the foyer as an entry team in full raid gear flooded into the house. And then she turned back toward the bedroom and realized the Mexican was gone.

The patio door was open. Faith ran outside as the Mexican vaulted over the chain link fence. The S&W was in his hand. Mrs. Johnson's grandchildren were playing in her backyard. They screamed when they saw the armed man heading toward them. He was twenty feet away. Fifteen. He raised the gun toward the girls and fired a shot over their heads. Brick siding sprayed onto the ground. They were too scared to scream anymore, to move, to save themselves. Faith stopped at the fence, lined up her Glock, and squeezed the trigger.

The man jerked as if a string had been pulled through his chest. He stayed up for at least a full second, then his knees buckled and he fell backward onto the ground. Faith jumped over the fence and sprinted toward him. She slammed her heel into his wrist until he let go of her mother's gun. The girls started screaming again. Mrs. Johnson came out onto the porch and scooped them up like baby ducklings. She glanced back at Faith as she shut the door. The look in her eyes was shocked, horrified. She used to chase Zeke and Faith with the garden hose when they were little. She used to feel safe here.

Faith holstered her Glock and tucked Evelyn's revolver into the back of her pants. She grabbed the Mexican by the shoulders. "Where's my mother?" she demanded. "What did they do to her?"

He opened his mouth, blood oozing beneath the silver caps in his teeth. He was smiling. The asshole was smiling.

"Where is she?" Faith pressed her hand to his battered chest, feeling his broken ribs move beneath her fingers. He screamed in pain, and she pushed harder, grinding the bones together. "Where is she?"

"Agent!" A young cop steadied himself with one hand as he jumped over the fence. He drew down on her, his gun angled toward the ground. "Back away from the prisoner."

Faith got closer to the Mexican. She could feel the heat radiating from his skin. "Tell me where she is."

His throat worked. He wasn't feeling the pain anymore. His pupils were the size of dimes. His eyelids fluttered. The corner of his lip twitched.

"Tell me where she is." Her voice got more desperate with each word. "Oh, God, just—please—tell me where she is!"

His breath had a sticky sound, as if his lungs were taped together. His lips moved. He whispered something she couldn't make out.

"What?" Faith put her ear so close to his lips that she could feel spit coming out of his mouth. "Tell me," she whispered. "Please tell me."

"Almeja."

"What?" Faith repeated. "What did you say?" His mouth opened. Instead of words, blood pooled out. "What did you say?" she screamed. "Tell me what you said!"

"Agent!" the cop yelled again.

"No!" She pressed her palms into the Mexican's chest, trying to force his heart to pump again. Faith made a fist and slammed it down as hard as she could, beating the man, willing him to come back to life. "Tell me!" she yelled. "Just tell me!"

"Agent!" She felt hands around her waist. The cop practically lifted her into the air.

"Let me go!" Faith jammed her elbow back so hard that he dropped her like a stone. She scrambled across the grass, crawling to the witness. The hostage. The murderer. The only person left who could tell her what the hell had happened to her mother.

She put her hands to the Mexican's face, stared into his lifeless eyes. "Please tell me," she pleaded, even though she knew it was too late. "Please."

"Faith?" Detective Leo Donnelly, her old partner on the Atlanta force, stood on the other side of the fence. He was out of breath. His hands gripped the top of the chain link. The wind whipped open the jacket of his cheap brown suit. "Emma's fine. We got a locksmith on the way." His words came thick and slow, like molasses poured through a sieve. "Come on, kid. Emma needs her mom."

Faith looked behind him. Cops were everywhere. Dark blue uniforms blurred as they swept the house, checked the yard. Through the windows, she followed Tactical's progress from room to room, guns raised, voices calling "Clear" as they found nothing. Competing sirens filled the air. Police cruisers. Ambulances. A fire truck.

The call had gone out. Code 30. Officer needs emergency assistance.

Three men shot to death. Her baby locked in a shed. Her mother missing.

Faith sat back on her heels. She put her head in her shaking hands and willed herself not to cry.

CHAPTER TWO

So, he tells me he was changing the oil in his car, and it was hot in the garage, so he took off his pants ...”

“Uh-huh,” Sara Linton managed, trying to feign interest as she picked at her salad.

“And I say, ‘Lookit, bud, I’m a doctor. I’m not here to judge. You can be honest about ...’ ”

Sara watched Dale Dugan’s mouth move, his voice mercifully blending in with the lunchtime noise of the pizza parlor. Soft music playing. People laughing. Plates sliding around the kitchen. His story was not particularly riveting, or even new. Sara was a pediatric attending doctor in the emergency department at Atlanta’s Grady Hospital. She’d had her own practice for twelve years before that, all the while working part-time as the county coroner for a small but active college town. There was not an implement, tool, household product, or glass figurine she had not at some point or another seen lodged inside a human body.

Still, Dale continued, “Then the nurse comes in with the X-ray.”

“Uh-oh,” she said, trying to inject some curiosity into her tone.

Dale smiled at her. There was some cheese lodged between his central and lateral incisors. Sara tried not to judge. Dale Dugan was a nice man. He wasn’t handsome, but he was okay-looking, with the sort of features many women found attractive once they learned he’d graduated from medical school. Sara was not as easily swayed. And she was starving, because she’d been told by the friend who’d set her up on this ridiculous blind date that she should order a salad instead of a pizza because it looked better.

“So, I hold up the X-ray and what do I see ...”

Socket wrench, she thought, just before he finally reached the punch line.

“A socket wrench! Can you believe it?”

“No!” She forced a laugh that sounded like the sort of thing that came out of a windup toy.

“And he still kept saying he slipped.”

She tsked her tongue. “Quite a fall.”

“I know, right?” He smiled at her again before taking a healthy bite of pizza.

Sara chewed some lettuce. The digital clock over Dale’s head showed 2:12 and a handful of seconds. The red LED numbers were a painful reminder that she could be at home right now watching basketball and folding the mountain of laundry on her couch. Sara had made a game of not looking at the clock, seeing how long she could go before her self-control crumbled and she watched the blurring seconds tick by. Three minutes twenty-two seconds was her record. She took another bite of salad, vowing to beat it.

“So,” Dale said. “You went to Emory.”

She nodded. “You were at Duke?”

Predictably, he began what turned into a lengthy description of his academic achievements, including published journal articles and keynote speeches at

various conferences. Again, Sara feigned attention, willing herself not to look at the clock, chewing lettuce as slowly as a cow in a pasture so that Dale would not feel compelled to ask her a question.

This was not Sara's first blind date, nor, unfortunately, was it her least tedious. The problem today had started within the first six minutes, which Sara had marked by the clock. They had rushed through the preliminaries before their order had been called. Dale was divorced, no children, on good terms with his ex-wife, and played pickup basketball games at the hospital in his free time. Sara was from a small town in south Georgia. She had two greyhounds, and a cat who chose to live with her parents. Her husband had been killed four and a half years ago.

Usually, this last bit was a conversation stopper, but Dale had breezed over it as a minor detail. At first, Sara had given him points for not asking for details, and then she had decided that he was too self-absorbed to ask, and then she had chided herself for being so hard on the man.

"What did your husband do?"

He'd caught her with a mouthful of lettuce. She chewed, swallowed, then told him, "He was a police officer. The chief of police for the county."

"That's unusual." Her expression must have been off, because he said, "I mean, unusual because he's not a doctor. Wasn't a doctor. Not white collar, I guess."

"White collar?" She heard the accusatory tone in her voice but couldn't stop herself. "My father's a plumber. My sister and I worked with him for—"

"Whoa, whoa." He held up his hands in surrender. "That came out wrong. I mean, there's something noble about working with your hands, right?"

Sara didn't know what kind of medicine Dr. Dale was practicing, but she tended to use her hands every day.

Oblivious, his voice took on a solemn tone. "I have a lot of respect for cops. And servicepeople. Soldiers, I mean." He nervously wiped his mouth with his napkin. "Dangerous job. Is that how he died?"

She nodded, glancing at the clock. Three minutes nineteen seconds. She'd just missed her record.

He took his phone out of his pocket and looked at the display. "Sorry. I'm on call. I wanted to make sure there's service."

At least he hadn't pretended the phone was on silent ring, though Sara was sure that was coming. "I'm sorry for being so defensive. It's difficult to talk about."

"I'm sorry for your loss." His tone had a practiced cadence Sara recognized from the ER. "I'm sure it was hard."

She bit at the tip of her tongue. Sara couldn't think of a polite way to respond, and by the time she thought to change the subject to the weather, so much time had passed that the conversation felt even more awkward. Finally, she said, "Well, anyway. Why don't we—"

"Excuse me," he interrupted. "I need to go to the bathroom."

He got up so quickly that his chair nearly fell over. Sara watched him scamper toward the back. Maybe it was her imagination, but she thought he hesitated in front of the fire exit.

"Idiot." She dropped her fork onto her salad plate.

She checked the clock again for the time. It was two-fifteen. She could wrap this up by two-thirty if Dale ever came back from the toilet. Sara had walked here from her apartment, so there wouldn't be that protracted, awful silence as Dale drove her home. The bill had been paid when they ordered the food at the cash register. It would take her fifteen minutes to walk home, giving her time to change out of her dress and into her sweat pants before the basketball game started. Sara felt her stomach rumble. Maybe she could pretend to leave, then backtrack and order a pizza.

Another minute ticked by on the clock. Sara scanned the parking lot. Dale's car was still there, assuming the green Lexus with the DRDALE license plate belonged to him. She didn't know if she felt disappointed or relieved.

The clock marked another thirty seconds. The hallway leading to the bathrooms stayed empty for another twenty-three seconds. An older woman with a walker inched her way down the hall. No one was behind her.

Sara dropped her head into her hand. Dale was not a bad man. He was stable, relatively healthy, gainfully employed, had most of his hair, and except for the cheese between his teeth, had the appearance of good hygiene. And yet, all of this wasn't enough. Sara was beginning to think *she* was the problem. She was turning into the Mr. Darcy of Atlanta. Once her good opinion was lost, it was gone forever. Changing the direction of a steamship was easier than changing Sara's mind.

She should try harder at this. She wasn't twenty-five anymore, and forty was breathing heavy down the back of her neck. At five feet eleven inches, her dating pool was already limited. Her auburn red hair and fair skin were not to every man's taste. She worked long hours. She couldn't cook to save her life. She had apparently lost her ability to conduct any small talk whatsoever, and the mere mention of her dead husband could send her into a hissy fit.

Maybe her standards were too high. Her marriage hadn't been perfect, but it was pretty damn good. She had loved her husband more than life itself. Losing him had almost killed her. But Jeffrey had been gone for almost five years now, and if Sara was being honest, she was lonely. She missed a man's company. She missed the way their minds worked and the surprisingly sweet things they could say. She missed the rough feel of their skin. She missed the other things, too. Unfortunately, the last time a man had made her eyes roll back in her head, she'd been fighting boredom, not writhing in ecstasy.

Sara had to face the fact that she was extremely, awfully, horribly bad at dating. There hadn't been much time to practice. From puberty on, Sara had been serially monogamous. Her first boyfriend was a high school crush that had lasted until college, then she'd dated a fellow student all through medical school, then she'd met Jeffrey and never given another man a second thought. Except for a disastrous one-night stand three years ago, there had been no one since. She could only think of one man who had even remotely given her a spark, but he was married. Worse, he was a married cop.

Even worse, he was standing at the cash register less than ten feet away from her.

Will Trent was wearing black running shorts and a long-sleeved black T-shirt that showed his broad shoulders to good advantage. His sandy blond hair was longer than it had been a few months ago, when Sara had last seen him. He'd

been working a case that involved one of her old patients at the children's clinic back home. She'd stuck her nose so far into Will's business that he'd had no choice but to let her help with the investigation. They had shared what felt like a flirtation, and then when the case was over, he had gone back home to his wife.

Will was extremely observant. He must have noticed Sara sitting at the table when he walked in. Still, he kept his back to her as he stared at a flyer pinned to the bulletin board on the wall. She didn't need the clock to count off the seconds as she waited for him to acknowledge her.

He turned his attention to another flyer.

Sara pulled out the clip holding up her hair, letting the curls fall past her shoulders. She stood up and walked over to him.

There were a few things she knew about Will Trent. He was tall, at least six-three, with a runner's lean body and the most beautiful legs she had ever seen on a man. His mother had been killed when he was less than a year old. He'd grown up in a children's home and never been adopted. He was a special agent with the GBI. He was one of the smartest men she had ever met, and he was so dyslexic that, as far as she could tell, he read no higher than a second-grade level.

She stood shoulder to shoulder with him, staring at the flyer that had caught his attention. "That looks interesting."

He made a very bad show of acting surprised to see her. "Dr. Linton. I was just ..." He tore one of the info tags off the flyer. "I've been thinking about getting a bike."

She glanced at the ad, which had a detailed drawing of a Harley Davidson underneath a headline asking for members to join. "I don't think Dykes on Bikes is your kind of ride."

His smile was crooked. He'd spent a lifetime covering up his disability, and even though Sara had found out, he was still loath to acknowledge there was a problem. "It's a great way to meet women."

"Are you looking to meet women?"

Sara was reminded of yet another one of Will's traits, which was that he had an uncanny knack for keeping his mouth shut when he didn't know what to say. This resulted in the sort of awkward moments that made Sara's dating life look downright ebullient.

Thankfully, Will's order was up. Sara stood back as he took the box of pizza from the tattooed and multipierced waitress. The young woman gave Will what could only be called an appreciative glance. He seemed oblivious as he checked his pizza to make sure they'd gotten the order right.

"Well." He used his thumb to twist the wedding ring on his finger. "I guess I should go."

"All right."

He didn't move. Neither did Sara. A dog started barking outside, the high-pitched yips traveling through the open windows. Sara knew there was a post and water bowl by the front door for people who brought their pets to the restaurant. She also knew that Will's wife had a little dog named Betty, and that the care and feeding fell mostly to him.

The yipping intensified. Will still made no move to leave.

She said, "That sounds a lot like a Chihuahua."

He listened intently, then nodded. "I think you might be right."

"There you are." Dale was finally back from the restroom. "Listen, I got a call from the hospital ..." He looked up at Will. "Hi."

Sara made the introductions. "Dale Dugan, this is Will Trent."

Will gave a tight nod. Dale returned it.

The dog kept barking, a piercing, panicked yelp. Sara could tell from Will's expression that he was prepared to die rather than acknowledge ownership.

She found some mercy in her heart. "Dale, I know you need to get to the hospital. Thanks so much for lunch."

"Sure." He leaned in and kissed her squarely on the lips. "I'll call you."

"Great," she managed, resisting the urge to wipe her mouth. She watched the two men exchange another tight nod that made Sara feel like the only fire hydrant at the dog park.

Betty's yips intensified as Dale walked across the parking lot. Will mumbled something under his breath before pushing open the door. He untied the leash and scooped up the dog with one hand, keeping the pizza box steady in the other. The barking stopped immediately. Betty tucked her head into his chest. Her tongue lolled out.

Sara petted the dog's head. There were fresh sutures crisscrossing her narrow back. "What happened?"

Will's jaw was still clenched. "She got into it with a Jack Russell."

"Really?" Unless the Jack Russell had a pair of scissors for paws, there was no way another dog had made the marks.

He indicated Betty. "I should get her home."

Sara had never been to Will's house, but she knew the street that he lived on. "Aren't you going right?" She clarified, "This way?"

Will didn't answer. He seemed to be gauging whether or not he could lie to her and get away with it.

She pressed, "Don't you live off Linwood?"

"You're the opposite direction."

"I can cut through the park." She started walking, giving him no choice. They were silent as they headed down Ponce de Leon. The traffic noise was loud enough to fill the void, but even the exhaust from the cars couldn't overshadow the fact that they were in the middle of a brilliant spring day. Couples walked down the street hand in hand. Mothers pushed baby carriages. Runners darted across four lanes of traffic. The cloud cover from this morning had rolled eastward, exposing a sky of denim blue. There was a steady breeze in the air. Sara clasped her hands behind her back and looked down at the broken sidewalk. Tree roots pushed against the concrete like gnarled old toes.

She glanced at Will. The sun picked out the sweat on his brow. There were two scars on his face, though Sara had no idea what had caused them. His upper lip had been split open at some point, then badly stitched together, giving a raffish quality to his mouth. The other scar followed the line of his left jaw and dipped into his collar. When she'd first met him, she'd taken the scars for signs of boyhood mischief, but knowing his history, knowing that he had grown up in state care, Sara now assumed the damage had a darker story.

Will glanced at her and she looked away. He said, "Dale seems like a nice

guy.”

“Yes, he does.”

“Doctor, I guess.”

“That’s right.”

“Looked like a good kisser.”

She smiled.

Will shifted Betty in his hand to get a better grip. “I guess you’re dating him.”

“Today was our first date.”

“You seemed friendlier than that.”

Sara stopped walking. “How’s your wife, Will?”

His answer didn’t come quickly. His gaze fell somewhere over her shoulder. “I haven’t seen her in four months.”

Sara felt an odd sense of betrayal. His wife was gone and Will had not called her. “You’re separated?”

He stepped aside so that a runner could pass. “No.”

“Is she missing?”

“Not exactly.”

A MARTA bus lurched up to the curb, its engine filling the air with a protracted grumble. Sara had met Angie Trent almost a year ago. Her Mediterranean looks and curvaceous figure were exactly the sort of things mothers were thinking of when they warned their sons about loose women.

The bus pulled away. Sara asked, “Where is she?”

Will let out a long breath. “She leaves me a lot. That’s what she does. She leaves, and then she comes back. And then she stays some and then she leaves again.”

“Where does she go?”

“I have no idea.”

“You’ve never asked her?”

“No.”

Sara didn’t pretend to understand. “Why not?”

He glanced out into the street, watching the traffic zoom by. “It’s complicated.”

She reached out and put her hand on his arm. “Explain it to me.”

He stared at her, looking ridiculous with the tiny dog in one hand and a pizza box in the other.

Sara narrowed the space between them, moving her hand to his shoulder. She could feel hard muscle beneath his shirt, the heat from his skin. In the bright light of the sun, his eyes looked impossibly blue. He had delicate eyelashes, blond and soft. There was a stubbly spot along his jaw that he’d missed shaving. She was a few inches shorter than him. She stood on her tiptoes to look him straight in the eye.

She said, “Talk to me.”

He was silent, his eyes tracing back and forth across her face, lingering on her mouth, before meeting her gaze again.

Finally, he said, “I like your hair down.”

Sara was robbed of a response by a black SUV slamming on its brakes in the middle of the street. It skidded to a halt about twenty yards away, then jerked into reverse. The wheels squealed against the asphalt. The smell of burned

rubber filled the air. The SUV stopped directly in front of them. The window rolled down.

Will's boss, Amanda Wagner, yelled, "Get in!"

They were both too stunned to move. Car horns blared. Fists were waving. Sara felt like she was caught in the middle of an action movie.

"Now!" Amanda ordered.

"Can you—" Will began, but Sara was already taking Betty, the box of pizza. He fished into his sock and handed her a house key. "She needs to be locked in the spare room so she doesn't—"

"Will!" Amanda's tone didn't leave room for equivocation.

Sara took the key. The metal was warm from his body. "Go."

Will didn't have to be told twice. He jumped into the car, his foot skipping along the road as Amanda pulled away from the curb. More horns blared. A four-door sedan fishtailed. Sara could see a teenager in the back seat. The girl's hands pressed against the window. Her mouth gaped open in terror. Another car was coming from behind, speeding, but swerved at the last moment. Sara locked eyes with the young girl, then the sedan straightened and drove away.

Betty was shaking, and Sara wasn't much better off. She tried to soothe the dog as she walked toward Will's street, holding it close, pressing her lips to its head. Both of their hearts were pounding wildly. Sara wasn't sure what was making it worse—thinking about what might have happened between her and Will or the bad accident Amanda Wagner had nearly caused.

She'd have to watch the news when she got home to find out what was going on. Surely, wherever Will was going, the news vans would follow. Amanda was a deputy director with the GBI. She didn't ride around looking for her agents on a whim. Sara imagined Faith, Will's partner, was probably doing her own mad rush to the crime scene right now.

She had forgotten to ask for his house number, but thankfully, Betty's collar had a tag with the details. Even without that, she easily spotted Will's black Porsche parked in a driveway toward the end of the street. The car was an older model that had been fully restored. Will must have washed it today. The tires were gleaming and her reflection bounced off the long nose of the hood as she walked past.

She smiled at his house, which she'd never seen before. He lived in a red brick bungalow with an attached garage. The front door was painted black. The trim was a buttery yellow. The lawn was well tended with sharp edges and sculpted shrubs. A colorful flower bed circled the mimosa tree in the front yard. Sara wondered if Angie Trent had a green thumb. Pansies were hardy plants, but they had to be watered. From the sound of it, Mrs. Trent wasn't the type to stick around for that kind of thing. Sara wasn't sure how she felt about that, or even if she understood it. Still, she heard her mother's nagging voice in the back of her head: *An absent wife is still a wife.*

Betty started to squirm as Sara walked up the front path. She tightened her grip. That was all she needed to make the day worse—lose the dog that belonged to the wife of the man she'd just been longing to kiss in the middle of the street.

Sara shook her head as she climbed the front steps. She had no business thinking about Will this way. She should be glad Amanda Wagner had

interrupted them. Early on in their marriage, Jeffrey had cheated on Sara. It had nearly ripped them in two, and putting their relationship back together had taken years of hard work. For better or worse, Will had made his choice. And this wasn't a fly-by-night romance, either. He had grown up with Angie. They had met in the children's home when they were kids. They had almost twenty-five years of history together. Sara didn't belong between them. She wasn't going to make another woman feel the same pain she had, no matter how dismal her other options.

The key easily slid into the front lock. A cool breeze met her as she walked through the doorway. She set Betty on the floor and took off her leash. Freed, the dog made a beeline for the back of the house.

Sara couldn't control her curiosity as she looked around the front rooms. Will's taste definitely ran toward the masculine. If his wife had contributed to the decorating, it certainly didn't show. A pinball machine was given pride of place in the center of the dining room, just under a glass chandelier. Will was obviously working on the machine—the electronic guts were neatly laid out by an open toolbox on the floor. The smell of machine oil filled the air.

The couch in the living room was a dark brown ultra-suede with a large matching ottoman. The walls were muted beige. A sleek black recliner was turned toward a fifty-inch plasma television with various electronic boxes stacked neatly underneath. Everything seemed to be in its proper place. There was no dust or clutter, no laundry piled into an Everest-like mountain on the couch. Obviously, Will was a better housekeeper than Sara. But then, most people were.

His desk was in the corner of the main room, just outside the hallway. Chrome and metal. She traced her finger along the arm of his reading glasses. Papers were neatly stacked around a laptop computer and printer. A pack of Magic Markers rested on a pile of colored folders. There were small metal bins with rubber bands and paper clips that were separated by color and size.

Sara had seen this setup before. Will could read, but not easily and certainly not quickly. He used the colored markers and clips as cues to help him find what he was looking for without having to actually scan what was on a page or in a folder. It was a neat trick that he'd probably taught himself early on. Sara had no doubt that he'd been one of those kids who sat in the back of the classroom and memorized everything the teacher said, only to be unable—or unwilling—to write down any of it come test day.

She took the pizza box into the kitchen, which had been remodeled in the same rich browns as the rest of the house. Unlike Sara's kitchen, the granite counters were neat and tidy, a coffeemaker and television the only items on display. Similarly, the fridge was empty but for a carton of milk and a pack of Jell-O pudding cups. Sara slid the box onto the top shelf and walked to the back of the house to check on Betty. She found the spare bedroom first. The overhead lights were off, but Will had left on the floor lamp behind another leather recliner. Beside the chair was a dog bed shaped like a chaise longue. A bowl of water and some kibble were in the corner. There was another television mounted on the wall, with a fold-up treadmill underneath.

The room was dark, the walls painted a rich brown that complemented the living room. She turned on the overhead light. Surprisingly, there were

bookcases along the walls. Sara ran her finger down the titles, recognizing classics mixed in with a handful of feminist texts that were usually assigned to earnest young women their first year in college. All of the spines were cracked, well read. It had never occurred to her that Will would have a library in his house. With his dyslexia, reading a thick novel would have been a Sisyphean task. The audiobooks made more sense. Sara knelt down and looked at the CD cases stacked beside an expensive-looking Bose player. Will's tastes were certainly more highbrow than hers—lots of nonfiction and historical works that Sara would normally suggest for insomniacs. She pressed down a peeling sticker and read the words "Property of the Fulton County Library System."

The tip-tap of toenails announced Betty in the hallway. Sara blushed, feeling caught. She stood to fetch the dog, but Betty ran off with surprising speed. Sara followed her past the bathroom and into the second room. Will's bedroom.

The bed was made, a dark blue blanket covering matching sheets. There was just one pillow leaning against the wall where the headboard should have been. One bedside table. One lamp.

Unlike the rest of the house, there was a utilitarian feel to the room. Sara didn't want to dwell on why the lack of romantic setting gave her relief. The walls were white. No art hung on the walls. Will's watch and wallet were on top of the chest of drawers beside yet another television. A pair of jeans and a T-shirt were laid out on the bench at the foot of the bed. There was a pair of folded black socks. His boots were under the bench. Sara picked up the shirt. Cotton. Long-sleeved. Black, like the one Will had been wearing.

The dog jumped on the bed, pushed down the pillow and settled like a bird in a nest.

Sara folded the shirt and put it back by the jeans. This was bordering on stalker behavior. At least she hadn't smelled the shirt or rummaged through his drawers. She scooped up Betty, thinking she should shut the dog in the spare room and get out of here. She was doing just that when the phone started to ring. The answering machine picked up. She heard Will's voice back in the bedroom.

"Sara? If you're there, please pick up."

She went back to his room and picked up the phone. "I was just about to leave."

His voice sounded tense. She could hear a baby crying in the background, people shouting. "I need you to come here right now. To Faith's. Her mother's house. It's important."

Sara felt a rush of adrenaline sharpen her senses. "Is she all right?"

"No," he answered bluntly. "May I give you the address?"

Without thinking, she opened the bedside drawer, assuming she'd find a piece of paper and pen. Instead, she saw a magazine like her father used to keep in the back of his toolbox in the garage.

"Sara?"

The drawer wouldn't close. "Let me get something to write on. Hold on."

Will seemed to be the only person in America who didn't have a cordless phone. Sara left the receiver on the bed, found some pen and paper on his desk, and came back. "All right."

Will waited for someone to stop shouting. He kept his voice low as he gave

Sara the address. "It's in Sherwood Forest, on the back side of Ansley. Do you know it?"

Ansley was only five minutes away. "I can figure it out."

"Take my car. The keys are on a hook by the back door in the kitchen. Can you drive a stick?"

"Yes."

"The news people are already here. Find the first cop you see, tell them you're there at my request, and they'll let you back. Don't talk to anyone else. Okay?"

"Okay." She hung up the phone and pushed the bedside drawer shut with both hands. Betty was back on the pillow. Sara picked her up again. She started to leave, then thought better of it. Will was in shorts the last time she'd seen him. He'd probably want his jeans. She put his watch and wallet in the back pocket. There was no telling where he kept his gun, but Sara wasn't going to go looking through his things any more than she already had.

"Can I help you?"

Sara felt a rush of horror burn through her body. Angie Trent was leaning against the bedroom door, palm resting casually against the jamb. Her dark, curly hair cascaded around her shoulders. Her makeup was perfect. Her nails were perfect. Her tight skirt and revealing top would've easily won her the cover shot on the magazine in Will's drawer.

"I-I—" Sara hadn't stuttered since she was twelve.

"We've met before, right? You work at the hospital."

"Yes." Sara stood away from the bed. "Will got called out on an emergency. He asked me to bring your dog—"

"My dog?"

Sara felt the vibrations of a growl building in Betty's chest.

Angie's mouth twisted in distaste. "What happened to it?"

"She was ..." Sara felt like a fool just standing there. She tucked Will's jeans under her arm. "I'll put her in the spare room and go."

"Sure." Angie was blocking the door. She took her time letting Sara pass, then followed Sara to the spare room, watched her put Betty on the dog bed and pull the door to.

Sara started to leave out the front door, but then she remembered she needed Will's keys. She fought to keep her voice from shaking. "He told me to bring his car."

Angie crossed her arms. Her ring finger was bare, but she had a silver band around her thumb. "Of course he did."

Sara went back into the kitchen. Her face was so red she was sweating. There was a duffel bag by the table that hadn't been there before. Will's car keys were hanging on a hook by the back door, just as he'd said. She grabbed them and went back into the den, aware that Angie stood in the hallway watching her every move. Sara walked as quickly as she could toward the front door, her heart in her throat, but Angie Trent wasn't going to make it that easy for her.

"How long have you been fucking him?"

Sara shook her head. This couldn't be happening.

"I asked you how long you've been fucking my husband."

Sara stared at the back of the door, too ashamed to look at her. "This is a misunderstanding. I promise you."

"I found you in *my* house in *my* bedroom that I share with my husband. What's your explanation? I'm dying to hear it."

"I told you I—"

"You got a thing for cops? Is that it?"

Sara felt her heart stop mid-beat.

"Your dead husband was a cop, right? You get some kind of thrill out of that?" Angie gave a derisive laugh. "He'll never leave me, honey. You'd better find yourself another dick to play with."

Sara couldn't answer. The situation was too awful for words. She fumbled for the doorknob.

"He cut himself for me. Did he tell you that?"

She willed her hand to steady so she could open the door. "I have to go now. I'm sorry."

"I watched him slice the razor blade into his arm."

Sara's hand wouldn't move. Her mind tried in vain to process what she was hearing.

"I've never seen so much blood in my life." Angie paused. "You could at least look at me when I'm talking to you."

She didn't want to, but Sara made herself turn around.

Angie's tone was passive, but the hatred in her eyes made her hard to look at. "I held him the whole time. Did he tell you about it? Did he tell you how I held him?"

Sara still could not find her voice.

Angie held up her left arm, showing the bare flesh. With excruciating slowness, she traced her right index finger from her wrist down to her elbow. "They said the razor cut so deep that he scraped the bone." She smiled, as if this was a happy memory. "He did that for *me*, bitch. You think he'd do that for you?"

Now that Sara was looking at her, she couldn't stop. Moments slipped by. She thought of the clock back at the restaurant, the seconds blurring. Finally, she cleared her throat, not sure she could speak. "It's the other arm."

"What?"

"The scar," she said, relishing the surprised look on Angie Trent's face. "It's on his other arm."

Sara's hands were sweating so badly she could barely turn the doorknob. She cringed as she rushed outside, thinking Angie would come running after her or worse, call her out on the lie.

The truth was that Sara had never seen a scar on Will's arm, because she'd never seen his bare arm. He always wore long-sleeved shirts. He never rolled up the sleeves or unbuttoned the cuffs. She had made an educated guess. Will was left-handed. If he'd tried to kill himself while his hateful wife was cheering him on, he'd sliced open his right arm, not his left.

CHAPTER THREE

Will picked at the collar of his shirt. The mobile command vehicle was scorching hot, filled with so many uniforms and suits that there was hardly room to breathe. The noise was equally unbearable. Phones were ringing. BlackBerries chirped. Computer monitors played live feeds from all three of the local news stations. Adding to the cacophony was Amanda Wagner, who had been yelling at the three zone commanders on scene for the last fifteen minutes. The Atlanta chief of police was on his way. So was the director of the GBI. The jurisdictional pissing contest was only going to intensify.

Meanwhile, no one was really working the case.

Will pushed open the door. Sunlight sliced through the dark interior. Amanda stopped yelling for a few seconds, then revved back up as Will closed the door. He took a deep breath of fresh air, scanning the scene from the top of the metal steps. Instead of the usual rapid activity that followed a shocking crime, everyone was milling around waiting for orders. Detectives sat in their unmarked cars checking their email. Six cruisers blocked each end of the street. Neighbors gawked from their front porches. The Atlanta PD crime scene unit van was here. The GBI crime scene unit van was here. The fire truck was still angled in front of the Mitchell house. The EMTs were smoking on the back bumper of their ambulance. Various uniformed officers leaned against emergency vehicles, shooting the breeze, pretending not to care about what was going on in the command center.

Still, they all managed to glare at Will as he stepped down onto the street. Scowls went around. Arms were crossed. A curse was muttered. Someone spat on the sidewalk.

Will didn't have many friends in the Atlanta Police Department.

The sound of chopping blades filled the air. Will looked up. Two news copters hovered just above the crime scene. They wouldn't be alone for long. Every ten minutes, a black SWAT MD 500 swept by. An infrared camera was mounted on the nose of the mosquito-like helicopter. The camera could see through dense forests and rooftops, picking out warm-blooded bodies, directing searchers to the bad guys. It was an amazing device, but completely useless in the residential area, where at any given moment there were thousands of people milling around not committing crimes. At best, they were probably picking up the glowing red forms of people sitting on their couches watching their televisions, which in turn showed the SWAT copter hovering overhead.

Will checked the crowd for Sara, wishing she would show up. If he'd been thinking at all when Amanda pulled up on the street, he would've told Sara to come with them. He should have anticipated Faith would need help. She was his partner. Will was supposed to take care of her, to have her back. Now, it might be too late.

He wasn't sure how Amanda had heard about the shootings so quickly, but they were on scene within fifteen minutes of the last shot being fired. The

locksmith was just opening the shed door when they rolled up. Faith had been pacing back and forth like a caged animal while she waited for her child to be freed, and she kept pacing long after Emma was in her arms. As soon as she saw Will, Faith started babbling, talking about her backyard neighbor, Mrs. Johnson, her brother Zeke, the shed her father had built when she was little, and a million other things that made absolutely no sense the way she was stringing them together.

At first, Will thought that Faith was in shock, but shocked people don't pace around squawking like lunatics. Their blood pressure drops so quickly they generally can't stand. They pant like dogs. They stare blankly at the space in front of them. They talk slowly, not so fast you can barely understand them. Something else was at play, but Will didn't know if it was some kind of mental break or Faith's diabetes or what.

Making it worse, by that point, there were twenty cops standing around who knew exactly what a person was supposed to look like when an awful thing happened. Faith didn't fit the profile. She wasn't crying. She wasn't shaking. She wasn't angry. She was just crazy, totally out of her mind. Nothing she said had a bit of reason. She couldn't tell them what had happened. She couldn't walk them through the scene and explain the bloodshed. She was worse than useless, because the answers to all their questions were locked up inside of her head.

And that was when one of the cops had mumbled something about her being under the influence. And then someone else volunteered to get the Breathalyzer out of his car.

Quickly, Amanda had intervened. She dragged Faith across the front lawn, banged on the neighbor's door—not Mrs. Johnson, who had a dead man in her backyard, but an old woman named Mrs. Levy—and practically ordered her to give Faith a place to collect herself.

By then, the mobile command center had pulled up. Amanda had gone straight into the back of the vehicle and started demanding this case be turned over to the GBI immediately. She knew that she wouldn't win the territorial fight with the zone commanders. By law, the GBI could not simply waltz in and take over a case. The local medical examiner, district attorney, or police chief generally asked the state for assistance, and usually that only happened when they'd failed to make a case on their own or didn't want to spend the money or manpower tracking down leads. The only person who could yank this case from Atlanta was the governor, and any politician in the state could tell you that crossing the capital city was a very bad idea. Amanda's screaming tactics were for show. She didn't yell when she was angry. Her voice got low, more like a rumble, and you had to strain your ears to hear the insults flying out of her mouth. She was trying to buy them time. Trying to buy Faith time.

In the eyes of the Atlanta PD brass, Faith wasn't a cop anymore. She was a witness. She was a suspect. She was a person of interest, and they wanted to talk to her about the men she had killed and why her mother had been kidnapped. The Atlanta police weren't a bunch of yokels. They were one of the best forces in the country. But for Amanda yelling at them, they would've had Faith at the station by now, drilling her like they were working a terrorist at Gitmo.

Will couldn't blame them. Sherwood Forest was not the kind of neighborhood where you'd expect to find a shootout in the middle of a beautiful Saturday

afternoon. Ansley Park was a stone's throw away. Cast the net a bit farther and you'd encompass about eighty percent of the city's real estate tax revenue—multimillion-dollar homes with tennis courts and au pair suites. Rich people weren't the type of folks who let bad things happen without assigning blame. Someone would have to pay for this. If Amanda couldn't find a way to prevent it, that person would probably end up being Faith. And Will was at a loss as to what to do.

Detective Leo Donnelly walked up, his feet shuffling along the asphalt. He had a cigarette dangling out of his mouth. Smoke twined into his eye. He winked to keep it out. "I'd hate to hear that bitch in bed."

He meant Amanda. She was still screaming, though her words were hard to make out through the closed doors.

Leo continued, "I dunno. Might be worth it. The old ones are tigers when you get 'em in the sack."

Will suppressed a shudder, not because Amanda was in her mid-sixties, but because Leo was clearly considering the possibilities.

"She knows she's not going to win this, right?"

Will leaned against one of the police cruisers. Leo had been Faith's partner for six years, but she had done most of the heavy lifting. At forty-eight, Leo wasn't an old man by any stretch, but he had aged in cop years. His skin was yellow from an overburdened liver. He'd beaten prostate cancer but the treatment had taken its toll. He was an okay guy but he was lazy, which was perfectly fine if you were a used-car salesman but incredibly dangerous if you were a cop. Faith counted herself lucky that she'd gotten away from the man.

Leo said, "Haven't seen a clusterfuck like this since the last time I worked a case with you."

Will took in the scene: the hum of the command center's generator mixing with the metallic whir coming from the television vans. The cops standing around with their hands resting on their belts. The firemen shooting the breeze with each other. The complete and total lack of activity. He decided he should talk to Leo. "That so?"

"What's your CSU guy's name—Charlie?" Leo nodded to himself. "He managed to talk his way into the house."

Special Agent Charlie Reed was head of the GBI's crime scene unit and would do anything to get onto a crime scene. "He's good at his job."

"Lots of us are." Leo leaned against the cruiser a couple of feet down from Will. He made a puffing noise with his mouth. "Never known Faith to be a drinker."

"She's not."

"Pills?"

Will gave him the nastiest look he could muster.

"You know I gotta talk to her."

Will couldn't keep the derision out of his tone. "You're in charge of this case?"

"Try not to sound so confident."

Will didn't waste his breath. Leo's time in the sun would be shortlived. As soon as the Atlanta chief of police came onto the scene, he'd kick Leo to the curb and put together his own team. Leo would be lucky if they let him fetch coffee.

"Seriously," Leo said. "Faith doin' all right?"

"She's fine."

He took a last drag on his cigarette and dropped it to the ground. "Neighbor's freaked out. Almost watched her granddaughters get shot down."

Will tried to keep his expression blank. He knew a little bit about what had happened here, but not much. The guys from the tactical team had gotten bored after standing around for five minutes with nothing to break. The details of the crime scene had leaked like a rusty pipe. Two bodies in the house. One in the neighbor's backyard. Two guns on Faith—her Glock and a Smith and Wesson. Her shotgun on the floor of the bedroom. Will had stopped listening when he'd overheard a cop who'd just arrived on scene saying that he'd seen Faith with his own two eyes and she was as high as a kite.

For his part, Will only knew two things to be true: he had no idea what had happened in that house, and Faith had done the right thing.

Leo cleared his throat and spit a chunk of phlegm onto the asphalt. "So, Granny Johnson said she heard some screaming in the backyard. She looks out the kitchen window and sees the shooter—Mexican guy—aiming down on her grandkids. He squeezes off a shot, takes out some bricks on the house. Faith runs up to the fence and shoots him dead. Saves the little girls."

Will felt some of the weight lift off his chest. "Lucky for them Faith was there."

"Lucky for Faith the neighbor's a good witness."

Will started to stick his hands in his pockets, too late remembering he was still in his running shorts.

Leo chuckled. "I like these new uniforms. You supposed to be the cop in the Village People?"

Will crossed his arms over his chest.

"Los Mexicanos," Leo said. "The guy in the backyard. He's affiliated, got tats all over his chest and arms."

"What about the other two?"

"Asian. Both of 'em. No idea if they're ganged up. Don't look like it. Don't dress like it. Bodies are clean—no tats." Leo took his time lighting another cigarette. He blew out a steady stream of smoke before continuing. "Scott Shepherd over there—" He nodded toward a beefy-looking young man in tactical gear. "Says he had his team suited up outside the house waiting for backup. They heard a gun go off. It's a possible hostage situation, right? One officer inside, two if you count Evelyn. Imminent danger. So, they breach the door." Leo took another hit off his cigarette. "Scott sees Faith standing there in the hall, feet spread, Glock out in front of her. She sees Scott, doesn't say a word, just takes off into the bedroom. They go in after her and find a dead guy laid out on the carpet." Leo touched his finger to his forehead. "She nailed him right between the eyes."

"Must've had a good reason."

"Wish I knew that reason. He didn't have a gun in his hand."

"The other guy did. The one who ran into the backyard and shot at the kids."

"You're right. He did."

"Fingerprints?"

"We're working on it."

Will would've bet his house that they would find two sets of prints—one from

the Asian and one from the Mexican. "Where'd you find the third guy?"

"Laundry room. Bullet to the head. Nasty shot, took off half his skull. We dug a thirty-eight out of the wall."

Faith's Glock was a .40-caliber. "Does the S&W take a thirty-eight?"

"Yep." Leo pushed away from the car. "Nothing on the mother yet. We got teams out looking for her. She ran the drug squad, but I think you already know that, Ratatouille."

Will forced his jaw not to clench. About the only thing Leo was really good at was pushing buttons. This was the reason for the nasty stares and hostile stances from Will's brothers in blue. Every cop out here knew that Will Trent was the reason Evelyn Mitchell had been forced into retirement. One of the most loathsome jobs he had at the GBI was investigating corrupt cops. Four years ago, he'd made a solid case against Evelyn's narcotics squad. Six detectives had gone to prison for skimming money off drug busts and taking cash to look the other way, but Captain Mitchell had walked away scot-free, her pension and most of her good reputation intact.

Leo said, "Tell the kid I can give her ten more minutes, tops, but then she's gotta get her shit together and start talking to me." He leaned in closer. "I heard the dispatch call. She was told to stay outta the house. She needs to be real clear on why she went in anyway."

Leo started to leave, but Will asked him, "How did she sound?"

He turned around.

"The phone call to dispatch. How did she sound?"

Unsurprisingly, Leo hadn't considered the question. He did now, and quickly started nodding his head. "Maybe a little scared, but clearheaded. Calm. In control."

Will nodded, too. "That sounds exactly like Faith."

Leo flashed a grin, but Will couldn't tell if he was relieved or just playing his usual role of smartass. "I meant that about the shorts, man." Leo slapped him on the arm. "You should try to get those pretty legs of yours on TV."

Leo waved to the reporters standing at the yellow tape line. They pressed forward as one, thinking he was going to give them a statement. There was a collective groan as he walked away. The cops holding the line pushed them back just because they could. Will knew they couldn't care less about crowd control. Their eyes kept going to the command center like they expected an announcement from on high. The cops were just as eager as the reporters to find out what had happened. Maybe more so.

Captain Evelyn Mitchell had served with the Atlanta force for thirty-nine years. She had come up the hard way, clawing her way out of the secretarial pool, advancing to meter reader, then traffic cop, and finally being given a twenty-two and a badge that wasn't made of plastic. She was part of a group known for being first: first women driving solo, first women detectives. Evelyn was the first female lieutenant on the Atlanta force, then the first female captain. No matter the reasons for her retirement, she had more medals and commendations than all of the cops on scene combined.

Will had learned a long time ago that police officers were blindly loyal. He'd also learned that there was a distinct pecking order to that loyalty. It was like a pyramid, with every cop in the world at the bottom and your partner at the top.

Faith had been with the Atlanta Police Department since she joined up, but she'd moved to the GBI two years ago, partnering with Will, who wasn't exactly the most popular guy in class. Leo might still be halfway on Faith's side, but as far as the general members of the APD were concerned, she had lost her spot on their pyramid. Especially since the first cop on scene, an eager young rookie, had been rushed into emergency surgery after Faith elbowed his testicles up into his brain stem.

Will saw a flash of yellow as the tape line was lifted. Sara had put up her hair, pinning it tightly behind her head. The linen dress she was wearing looked worse for wear. She had a folded pair of jeans under her arm. At first Will thought she looked confused, but the closer she got, the more he thought she looked annoyed, maybe even angry. Her eyes were red rimmed. Her cheeks were flushed.

She handed him the jeans. "Why do you need me here?"

He put his hand at her elbow and led her away from the reporters. "It's Faith."

She crossed her arms, keeping some distance between them. "If she needs medical attention, you should take her to the hospital."

"We can't do that." Will tried not to focus on the coldness in her voice. "She's at the neighbor's house. We don't have much time."

"I heard what happened on the radio."

"We think there's a drug connection. Keep that to yourself." Will stopped walking. He waited for her to look at him. "Faith's not acting right. She's confused, not making sense. They want to talk to her, but—" He didn't know what to say. Amanda had told Will to make the call to Sara. She knew the woman had been married to a cop, and assumed that her allegiance hadn't died with the man. "This could be really bad for Faith. She killed two men. Her mother's been kidnapped. They're going to be eyeballing her for a lot of reasons."

"Did she overreact?"

"There was a hostage situation. The kids next door were in the line of fire." Will skated over the missing details. "She shot one guy in the head and one in the back."

"Are the children okay?"

"Yes, but—"

The back doors of the command center banged opened. Chief Mike Geary, the zone commander for Ansley and Sherwood Forest, jumped down from the steps. He was in full uniform, a scratchy, dark blue polyester that was too tight across the pouch of his stomach. He blinked up at the sun, a deep line creasing his well-tanned forehead. Like most of the old guard, he kept his gray hair clipped in a militarystyle crew cut. Geary put on his hat and turned back around to hold out his hand to Amanda. Something stopped him just shy of touching her, though, and he dropped his hand before she could take it.

"Trent," he barked. "I want to talk to your partner right now. Go get her. We're taking her to the station."

Will shot Amanda a look as she navigated the rickety stairs in her high heels. She shook her head once. There was nothing more she could do.

To his surprise, it was Sara who saved them. "I have to examine her first."

Geary wasn't pleased to be met with resistance. "Who the hell are you?"

"I'm a trauma doc from the Grady ER." Sara deftly left out her name. "I'm here to evaluate Agent Mitchell so that any testimony she gives will be admissible." She tilted her head to the side. "I'm sure it's not your policy to take statements under duress."

Geary snorted. "She's not under duress."

Sara raised an eyebrow. "Is that your official position? Because I would hate to have to testify that you conducted a coercive interrogation against medical advice."

Confusion clouded in on Geary's anger. Doctors were usually more than willing to help the police, but they had the power to shut down any interview if they thought it would jeopardize their patient. Still, Geary tried. "What kind of medical treatment does she need?"

Sara didn't back down. "I can't tell you that until I evaluate her. She could be in shock. She could be injured. She could need hospitalization. Maybe I should just transfer her to the hospital right now and start running tests." Sara turned around to call to the EMTs.

"Wait." Geary hissed out a curse, telling Amanda, "Your bullshit stalling tactics are being noted, Deputy Director."

Her smile was fake sweetness and light. "It's always nice to be recognized for something."

Geary announced, "I want her blood drawn and taken to an independent lab for a full tox screen. You think you can do that, Doctor?"

Sara nodded. "Of course."

Will put his hand back under Sara's arm and led her toward the neighbor's house. As soon as they were out of earshot, he said, "Thank you."

Again, she pulled away from him as they walked up the driveway. By the time they reached the front porch, she was several feet ahead, though the distance between them felt more like a chasm. This wasn't the Sara from half an hour ago. Maybe it was the crime scene, though Will had seen her on a crime scene before. Sara had been a coroner at one time. She was far from out of her element. Will didn't know what to do about the change. He had spent a lifetime gauging the moods of other people, but getting a read on this particular woman was beyond his abilities.

The door opened and Mrs. Levy peered at them from behind her thick glasses. She was wearing a yellow housedress that was frayed at the collar. A white apron with baby geese waddling around the hem was wrapped around her thin waist. Her heels hung out of the back of her matching yellow bedroom slippers. She was somewhere north of eighty, but her mind was sharp and she clearly cared for Faith. "Is this the doctor? I was told to only let a doctor in."

Sara answered, "Yes, ma'am. I'm the doctor."

"Well, aren't you pretty? Come on in. What a crazy day this has been." Mrs. Levy stepped aside, throwing wide the door so they could come into the foyer. Her breath whistled through her false teeth. "I've had more visitors this afternoon than I've had all year."

The living room was sunken a few steps and furnished much as it probably had been when Mrs. Levy first bought the house. Harvest gold wall-to-wall shag carpet was flattened to the floor. The couch was a tightly cushioned, mustard-colored sectional. The only update to the décor was a recliner that looked like

the kind that had a mechanical lift to make it easier to get in and out of. The only light in the room came from the flickering console television set. Faith was slumped on the couch with Emma held to her shoulder. All of the talk had drained out of her. Her spirit seemed to have gone with it. This was more what Will had been expecting when he'd heard that Faith was involved in a shooting. She tended to go quiet when she was really upset. But this wasn't quite right, either.

She was too quiet.

"Faith?" he said. "Dr. Linton is here."

She stared at the muted television, not answering. In some ways, Faith looked worse than she had before. Her lips were as white as her skin. Sweat gave her face a luminescence. Her blonde hair was matted to her head. Her breathing was shallow. Emma made a cooing sound, but Faith didn't seem to notice.

Sara turned on the overhead light before kneeling in front of her. "Faith? Can you look at me?"

Faith's eyes were still on the set. Will took the moment to slip on his jeans over his shorts. He felt a lump in his back pocket and pulled out his watch and wallet.

"Faith?" Sara's voice became louder, firmer. "Look at me."

Slowly, she looked at Sara.

"Why don't you give me Emma?"

Her words slurred. "Sh'sleeping."

Sara wrapped her hands around Emma's waist. Gently, she lifted the baby from Faith's shoulder. "Look at her. She's gotten so big." Sara did a cursory exam, looking into Emma's eyes, checking her fingers and toes, then her gums. "I think she's a little dehydrated."

Mrs. Levy offered, "I've got a bottle ready, but she wouldn't let me give it to her."

"Why don't you go get it now?" Sara motioned for Will to come over. He took Emma. She was surprisingly heavy. He put her on his shoulder. Her head fell against his neck like a moist sack of flour.

"Faith?" Sara spoke succinctly, as if she was trying to get an old person's attention. "How are you feeling?"

"Took her to the doctor."

"You took Emma?" Sara cupped Faith's face in her hand. "What did the doctor say?"

"Dunno."

"Can you look at me?"

Faith's mouth moved like she was chewing gum.

"What's today, sweetie? Can you tell me what day of the week it is?"

She pulled away her head. "No."

"That's all right." Sara pressed open Faith's eyelid. "When's the last time you had something to eat?"

She didn't answer. Mrs. Levy came back with the bottle. She handed it to Will, and he cradled Emma in his arm so that she could drink.

"Faith? When is the last time you had something to eat?"

Faith tried to push Sara away. When that didn't work, she pushed harder.

Sara kept talking, holding down Faith's hands. "Was it this morning? Did you

eat breakfast this morning?”

“Go ’way.”

Sara turned to Mrs. Levy. “You’re not diabetic, are you?”

“No, dear, but my husband was. Passed away almost twenty years ago, bless his soul.”

Sara told Will, “She’s having an insulin reaction. Where’s her purse?”

Mrs. Levy supplied, “She didn’t have it when they brought her here. Maybe she left it in the car.”

Again, Sara directed her words to Will. “She should have an emergency kit in her purse. It’s plastic. It says ‘Glucagon’ on the side.” She seemed to remember herself. “It’s oblong, about the size of a pen case. Bright red or orange. Get it for me now, please.”

Will took the baby with him, jogging toward the front door and out into the yard. The lots in Sherwood Forest were larger than most, but some of them were long and narrow rather than wide. Will could see directly into Evelyn Mitchell’s bathroom from Mrs. Levy’s carport. He could see a man standing in the long hallway. Will wondered not for the first time how the old woman hadn’t heard the gun-fight next door. She wouldn’t be the first witness who didn’t want to get involved, but Will was surprised by her reticence.

It didn’t occur to him until he was a few feet from the Mini that Faith’s car was part of the crime scene. There were two cops standing on the other side of the car, four more in the carport. Will scanned the interior. He saw the plastic case Sara had told him about mixed in with various lady items on the passenger’s seat.

He told the cops, “I need to get something out of the car.”

“Tough shit,” one of them shot back.

Will indicated Emma, who was sucking on the bottle like she’d been on a ten-mile hike. “She needs her teething thing. She’s teething.”

The cops stared at him. Will wondered if he’d screwed up. He’d changed his share of diapers at the children’s home, but he had no idea when babies got their teeth. Emma was four months old. All her food came from Faith or a bottle. As far as he could tell, she didn’t need to chew anything.

“Come on.” Will held up Emma so they could see her little pink face. “She’s just a tiny baby.”

“All right,” one of them relented. He walked around the car and opened the door. “Where is it?”

“It’s that red plastic thing. Looks like a pen case.”

The cop didn’t appear to find this odd. He picked up the kit and handed it to Will. “She all right?”

“She was just thirsty.”

“I meant Faith, dipshit.”

Will tried to take the kit, but the man wouldn’t let go.

He repeated his question. “Is Faith going to be okay?”

Will realized there was more going on here. “Yes. She’s going to be fine.”

“Tell her Brad says we’re gonna find her mom.” He let go of the kit and slammed the door.

Will didn’t give the man time to change his mind. He jogged back to the house, trying not to jostle the baby. Mrs. Levy still stood sentry at the door. She

opened it before Will could knock.

The scene inside had changed. Faith was lying on the couch. Sara was cupping the back of her head, making her drink from a can of Coke.

Sara immediately started in on Will. "You should've called in the medics first thing," she admonished. "Her blood sugar is too low. She's stuporous and diaphoretic. Her heart is racing. This isn't something you play around with." She took the kit from him and popped it open. Inside was a syringe filled with a clear liquid and a vial of white powder that looked a lot like cocaine. Sara cleaned the needle with a cotton ball and some rubbing alcohol that she had obviously gotten from Mrs. Levy. She talked as she pressed the syringe into the vial and squirted in the liquid. "I'm assuming she hasn't eaten since breakfast. The adrenaline from the confrontation in the house would've giving her an enormous sugar kick, but it made the crash harder, too. Considering what happened, I'm surprised she didn't slip into a coma."

Will took her words as hard as they were meant to be. No matter what Amanda said, he should've pulled an EMT in here half an hour ago. He had been worried about Faith's career when he should've been worried about her life. "Is she going to be okay?"

Sara shook the vial, mixing the contents before drawing them back into the syringe. "We'll know soon enough." She lifted Faith's shirt and swabbed a patch of skin on her belly. Will watched the needle go in, the rubber stopper sliding down the plastic cylinder as the liquid was injected.

Sara asked, "Are you worried they'll think she was impaired when she shot those two men?"

He didn't answer.

"Her comedown was probably hard and immediate. She would've been slurring her words. She probably appeared intoxicated." Sara cleaned up the kit, putting everything back in its place. "Tell them to look at the facts. She shot one man in the head and one in the back, probably from a distance, with two innocent bystanders downrange. If she'd been impaired, there's no way she would've been able to make those shots."

Will glanced at Mrs. Levy, who probably didn't need to be hearing this conversation. She waved off his concerns. "Oh, don't worry about me, dear. I don't remember much of nothin' these days." She held out her arms for Emma. "Why don't you let me take care of the little lamb?" Carefully, he transferred the baby to Mrs. Levy. The old woman walked off toward the back of the house. Her bedroom slippers made a slapping sound on her dry heels.

Will asked Sara, "What about the diabetes? Can they say it was that?"

Her tone was businesslike. "How was she acting when you got here?"

"She looked ..." He shook his head, thinking he never wanted to see Faith that bad off again. "She looked like she'd lost her mind."

"Do you think a mentally or chemically altered person could've killed two men with a single shot to each?" Sara put her hand on Faith's shoulder. Her tone softened. "Faith, can you sit up for me, please?"

Slowly, Faith moved to right herself. She looked groggy, as if she had just woken from a long nap, but her color was coming back. She put her hands to her head, wincing.

Sara told her, "You'll have a headache for a while. Drink as much water as

you can tolerate. We need your tester to see where you are.”

“It’s in my purse.”

“I’ll try to get another one from one of the ambulances.” She took a bottle of water off the coffee table and twisted off the cap. “Switch to water. No more Coke.”

Sara left without looking at Will. Her back felt like a wall of ice. He didn’t know what to do with that, so he ignored it, sitting on the coffee table in front of Faith.

She took a long drink of water before she spoke to him. “My head is killing me.” The shock of what happened came back to her like a bolt of lightning. “Where’s my mother?” She tried to stand, but Will kept her down. “Where is she?”

“They’re looking for her.”

“The little girls—”

“They’re fine. Please, just stay here for a second, okay?”

She looked around, some of her wildness returning. “Where’s Emma?”

“She’s with Mrs. Levy. She’s asleep. I called Jeremy at the school—”

Her mouth opened. He could see her life coming back to her in spurts. “How did you tell him?”

“I talked to Victor. He’s still the dean of students. I knew you wouldn’t want me to send a cop to Jeremy’s classroom.”

“Victor.” Faith pressed her lips together. She had dated Victor Martinez for a while, but they had broken up almost a year ago. “Please tell me you didn’t mention Emma.”

Will couldn’t remember exactly what he’d told Victor, but he guessed Faith hadn’t gotten around to telling the man that he had a daughter. “I’m sorry.”

“It doesn’t matter.” She put down the bottle of water, her shaking hands spilling some onto the carpet. “What else?”

“We’re trying to track down your brother.” Dr. Zeke Mitchell was a surgeon in the Air Force, stationed somewhere in Germany. “Amanda reached out to a friend at Dobbins Air Reserve. They’re cutting through some of the red tape.”

“My phone ...” She seemed to realize where she’d left it. “Mama has his number by the phone in the kitchen.”

“I’ll get it as soon as we’re finished,” Will promised. “Tell me what happened.”

She took a stuttered breath. He could see her struggle with the knowledge of what she had done. “I killed two people.”

Will held both her hands. Her skin was still cold and clammy. She had a slight tremor, but he didn’t think it was from her blood sugar issues. “You saved two little girls, Faith.”

“The man in the bedroom—” She stopped. “I don’t understand what happened.”

“Are you confused again? Do you need me to get Dr. Linton?”

“No.” She shook her head for so long he thought maybe he should get Sara anyway. “She’s not bad, Will. My mom is not a dirty cop.”

“We don’t need to talk about—”

“Yes, we do,” Faith insisted. “Even if she was, which she’s not, she’s been retired for five years. She’s not on the job anymore. She doesn’t go to the fundraisers or the events. She doesn’t talk to anybody from that old life. She

plays cards on Fridays with some of the ladies in the neighborhood. She goes to church every Wednesday and Sunday. She watches Emma while I'm at work. Her car is five years old. She just made the last mortgage payment on the house. She's not mixed up in anything. There's no reason for anybody to think ..." Her lip started to tremble. Tears threatened to fall.

Will told her the concrete things he could point to. "There's a mobile command center outside. All the highways are being watched. Evelyn's photo is on all the news stations. Every cruiser policing the metro area has her picture. We're lighting up all the snitches to see if they've heard anything. They've trapped and traced all your phones in case any ransom demands are made. Amanda pitched a fit, but they put one of their detectives in your house to monitor all mail and calls. Jeremy's at your house. They've got a plainclothes assigned to him. You'll get somebody, too."

Faith had worked kidnapping cases before. "Do you really think there's going to be a ransom demand?"

"It could happen."

"They were Mexicanos. They were looking for something. That's why they took her."

Will asked, "What were they looking for?"

"I don't know. The house was turned upside down. The Asian said he'd trade my mother for whatever they were looking for."

"The Asian said he'd trade?"

"Yes, he had a gun on the Mexicano—the one in the backyard."

"Hold on." They were doing this the wrong way. "Work with me, Faith. Treat your memory like a crime scene. Start from the beginning. You had that in-service this morning, right? Computer training?"

She started to nod. "I was late getting home by almost two hours." She laid out every detail from her morning until now, how she had tried to call her mother, how she'd heard music playing in the house when she got out of her car. Faith hadn't realized that something was wrong until well after the music stopped. Will let her run through the story—the torn-up house, the dead man she'd found and the two that she had killed herself.

When she was finished, he played it all back in his head, seeing Faith standing in the carport by the shed, going back to her car. Despite her recent medical issues, her memory seemed crystal clear now. She had called dispatch, and then she had gotten her gun. Will felt this detail picking at a spot in his brain. Faith knew that Will was home today. They had talked about it yesterday afternoon. She was complaining about having to go do computer training, and he told her he was going to wash his car and take care of the yard. Will lived 2.3 miles away from where they were sitting. He could've gotten here in under five minutes.

But Faith hadn't called him.

"What is it?" she asked. "Did I miss something?"

He cleared his throat. "What was the song that was playing when you pulled up?"

"AC/DC," she said. " 'Back in Black.' "

The detail seemed strange. "Is that what your mom usually listens to?"

She shook her head. She was obviously still in shock, her mind reeling from what had happened.

He wrapped his hands around her arms, trying to get her to concentrate. "Think this through, all right?" He waited for her to look at him. "There are two dead men in the house. Both are Asian. The guy in the backyard is Mexican. Los Texicanos."

She focused herself. "The Asian in the bedroom—he was wearing this loud Hawaiian shirt. He sounded southside." She meant his accent. "He had a gun on the Texicano. He was threatening to kill him."

"Did he say anything else?"

"I shot him." Her lip started to tremble again.

Will had never seen Faith cry and he didn't want to now. "The guy in the shirt had a gun pointed at someone's head," he reminded her. "The Texicano was already beaten up, possibly tortured. You feared for his life. That's why you pulled the trigger."

She nodded, though he could see self-doubt brimming in her eyes.

He said, "After Hawaiian Shirt went down, the Texicano ran out into the yard, right?"

"Right."

"And you chased after him, and he raised his gun toward those little girls and fired, so you shot him, too, right?"

"Yes."

"You were protecting the hostage in the bedroom and you were protecting those two girls in your neighbor's backyard. Right?"

"Yes," she said, her voice stronger. "I was."

She was getting back to her old self. Will allowed himself to feel a little bit of relief. He dropped her hands. "You remember the directive, Faith. Deadly force is authorized when your life or the lives of others are at stake. You did your job today. You just have to articulate what you were thinking. People were in danger. You shoot to immediately stop the threat. You don't shoot to wound."

"I know."

"Why didn't you wait for backup?"

She didn't answer.

"The dispatcher told you to wait outside. You didn't wait outside."

Faith still didn't answer.

Will sat back on the table, hands between his knees. Maybe she didn't trust him. They had never talked openly about the case he'd built against her mother, but he knew Faith assumed that it was the detectives on the squad, not the captain in charge, who had messed up. As smart as she was, she was still naïve about the politics of the job. Will had noticed in every corruption case he'd worked that the heads that tended to roll in this business were the ones that didn't have gold stars on their collars. Faith was too low on the food chain to have that kind of protection.

He said, "You must've heard something inside. A yell? A gunshot?"

"No."

"Did you see something?"

"I saw the curtain move, but that was after—"

"Good, that's good." He leaned forward again. "You saw someone inside. You thought your mother might be in there. You sensed an immediate danger to her life and went in to secure the scene."

“Will—”

“Listen to me, Faith. I’ve asked a lot of cops these same questions, and I know what the answer is supposed to be. Are you listening to me?”

She nodded.

“You saw someone inside the house. You thought your mother might be in serious danger—”

“I saw blood on the carport. On the door. A bloody handprint on the door.”

“Exactly. That’s good. That gives you cause to go in. Someone was badly injured. Their life was at stake. The rest of it happened because you were provoked into a situation where deadly force was justified.”

She shook her head. “Why are you coaching me? You hate when cops lie for each other.”

“I’m not lying for you. I’m trying to make sure you keep your job.”

“I don’t give a shit about my job. I just want to get my mother back.”

“Then stick to what we just talked about. You won’t do anybody any good sitting in a jail cell.”

He could read the shock in her eyes. As bad as things were right now, it had never occurred to her that they could get worse.

There was a loud knock at the door. Will started to get up, but Mrs. Levy beat him to it. She sashayed down the hall with her arms swinging. He guessed she’d put Emma in one of the beds and hoped she’d thought to stack some pillows around her.

Geary was the first to come in, then Amanda, then a couple of older-looking men, one black, one white. Both had bushy eyebrows, clean-shaven faces, and the kind of brass and ribbons on their chests that came from a glorious career of riding a desk. They were window dressing, here to make Geary look important. If he were a rap star, they would’ve been called a posse. Because he was a zone commander, they were called support staff.

“Ma’am,” Geary mumbled to Mrs. Levy as he took off his hat. His boys followed suit, tucking their hats under their arms, just like the boss. Geary walked toward Faith, but the old woman stopped him.

“Can I get y’all some tea or perhaps some cookies?”

Geary snapped, “We’re conducting an investigation, not a tea party.”

Mrs. Levy seemed unfazed. “Well, then. Please, make yourself at home.” She winked at Will before turning on her heel and heading back down the hallway.

Geary said, “Stand up, Agent Mitchell.”

Will felt his stomach tense as Faith stood. None of her earlier shakiness was on display, though her shirt was untucked and her hair was still a mess. She said, “I’m ready to make a statement if—”

Amanda interrupted, “Your lawyer and a union rep are waiting at the station.”

Geary scowled. He obviously didn’t care about Faith’s legal representation. “Agent Mitchell, you were told to wait for backup. I don’t know how they do it in the GBI, but the men on my force follow orders.”

Faith glanced at Amanda, but told Geary evenly, “There was blood on the kitchen door. I saw a person inside the house. My mother’s S&W was missing. I feared there was an immediate threat to her life, so I went into the house to secure her safety.” She couldn’t have said it better if Will had supplied a script.

Geary asked, “The man in the kitchen?”

"He was dead when I entered the house."

"The one in the bedroom?"

"He had my mother's revolver pointed at another man's head. I was protecting the life of the hostage."

"And the man in the yard?"

"The hostage. He took the revolver after I shot the first man. The front door was breached and my attention was diverted. He ran into the backyard with the gun, which he fired at two young girls. I had my shot and I took it to save their lives."

Geary glanced at his brass window dressing as he decided what to do. The two men seemed unsure themselves, but ready to back up the boss without question. Will felt himself tense, because this was the part where things either went down hard or easy. Perhaps an overriding loyalty to Evelyn Mitchell persuaded the man to take a softer approach. He told Faith, "One of my officers will drive you to the station. Take a moment to collect yourself if you need to."

He started to put his hat back on, but Amanda stopped him.

"Mike, I feel the need to remind you of something." She gave him that same sweet smile as before. "The GBI has original jurisdiction over all drug cases in the state."

"Are you telling me you've found evidence that narcotics are a factor in these shootings?"

"I'm not telling you much of anything, am I?"

He glared at her as he put his hat back on. "Don't think I'm not going to find out why you've been wasting my time."

"That sounds like a wonderful use of your resources."

Geary stomped toward the door, his minions scrambling after him. Outside, Sara was coming up the front porch steps. She quickly put her hands behind her back, hiding the blood sugar monitor she had borrowed.

"Dr. Linton." Geary took off his hat again. His men followed suit. "I'm sorry I didn't recognize your name earlier." Will assumed this was because Sara hadn't offered it. Obviously, someone else had filled him in. "I knew your husband. He was a good cop. A good man."

Sara kept her hands behind her back, twisting the plastic monitor. Will recognized the look she gave the men—she didn't want to talk. For Geary, she managed a dry "Thank you."

"Please let me know if I can ever be of assistance."

She nodded. Geary put on his hat, and the gesture was mimicked like a wave at a football game.

Faith spoke as soon as the door was closed. "The Texicano in the yard said something to me before he died." Her mouth moved as she tried to remember what she'd heard. " 'Alma' or 'al-may.' "

"*Almeja*?" Amanda asked, giving the word an exotic sound.

Faith nodded. "That's right. Do you know what it means?"

Sara opened her mouth to speak, but before she could get a word out, Amanda provided, "It's Spanish slang for 'money.' It means 'clams.' Do you think they were looking for cash?"

Faith shook her head and shrugged at the same time. "I don't know. They never really said. I mean, it makes sense. Los Texicanos means drugs. Drugs

mean money. Mom worked in narcotics. Maybe they think she ...” Faith glanced at Will. He could practically read her mind. After his investigation, a lot of people thought that Evelyn Mitchell was just the kind of cop who had stacks of cash lying around her house.

Sara took advantage of their silence. “I should go.” She handed Faith the blood sugar monitor. “You need to follow your schedule religiously. Stress is going to make it harder. Call your doctor and talk about your dosage, whatever adjustments you need to make, what signs you need to look for. Are you still seeing Dr. Wallace?” Faith nodded. “I’ll call her service on my way home and tell her what happened, but you need to be on the phone with her as soon as possible. This is a stressful time, but you have to stay on your routine. Understood?”

“Thank you.” Faith had never been easy with gratitude, but her words were more heartfelt than anything Will had ever heard come from her mouth.

Will asked Sara, “Are you going to do a tox screen for Geary?”

She directed her words to Amanda. “Faith works for you, not APD. They need a warrant to draw her blood and I’m guessing you don’t want to go to the trouble.”

Amanda asked, “Hypothetically, what would a tox screen find?”

“That she wasn’t intoxicated or impaired by any of the substances they test for. Do you want me to do a blood draw?”

“No, Dr. Linton. But I appreciate your help.”

She left without another word, or even a glance Will’s way.

Amanda suggested, “Why don’t you go check on the merry widow?”

Will thought she meant Sara, then logic intervened. He walked to the back of the house to find Mrs. Levy, but not before seeing Amanda pull Faith into a tight hug. The gesture was shocking coming from a woman whose maternal instincts were more closely related to those of a dingo.

Will knew that Faith and Amanda shared a past that neither woman ever talked about or even acknowledged. While Evelyn Mitchell was blazing a trail for women in the Atlanta Police Department, Amanda Wagner was doing the same in the GBI. They were contemporaries, about the same age, with the same ball-breaking attitudes. They had also been lifelong friends—Amanda had even dated Evelyn’s brother-in-law, Faith’s uncle—a detail Amanda had failed to mention to Will when she assigned him to investigate the narcotics squad that was headed by her old friend.

He found Mrs. Levy in the back bedroom, which seemed to have been turned into a catchall for whatever struck the old woman’s fancy. There was a scrapbooking station, something Will only recognized because he had worked a shooting in the suburbs where a young mother had been murdered while she was pasting crinkle-cut photographs of a beach vacation onto colored construction paper. There was a pair of roller skates with four wheels. A tennis racket leaned against the corner. Various types of cameras were laid out on the daybed. Some were digital, but most were the old-fashioned kind that used film. He guessed from the red light over the closet door that she developed her own photographs.

Mrs. Levy was sitting in a wooden rocking chair by the window. She had Emma in her lap. Her apron was wrapped around the baby like a blanket. The

little geese were reversed across the hem. Emma's eyes were closed as she sucked fiercely on the bottle in her mouth. The noise reminded Will of the baby in *The Simpsons*.

"Why don't you have a seat?" the old woman offered. "Emma seems to be perking up just fine."

Will sat on the bed, careful not to jostle the cameras. "It's a good thing that you just happened to have a bottle for her."

"It is, isn't it?" She smiled down at the baby. "Poor lamb missed her nap with all this excitement."

"Do you have a crib for her, too?"

She gave a raspy chuckle. "I assume you've already looked in my bedroom."

He hadn't been that bold, but Will took this as an opening. "How often do you watch her?"

"Usually just a few times a week."

"But lately?"

She winked at him. "You're a smart one."

He was more lucky than smart. It had struck him as odd that Mrs. Levy just happened to have a baby bottle lying around when Emma needed it. He asked, "What's Evelyn been up to?"

"Do I look rude enough to pry into someone's business?"

"How can I answer that without insulting you?"

She laughed, but relented easily enough. "Evelyn never said, but I'm assuming she had a gentleman friend."

"For how long?"

"Three or four months?" She seemed to be asking herself a question. She nodded her answer. "It was just after Emma was born. They started out slowly, maybe once a week or every two, but I'd say in the last ten days it's been more frequent. I stopped keeping a calendar when I retired, but Ev asked me to watch Emma three mornings in a row last week."

"It was always in the morning?"

"Usually from around eleven to about two in the afternoon."

Three hours seemed like a long enough time for an assignation. "Did Faith know about him?"

Mrs. Levy shook her head. "I'm certain Ev didn't want the kids to find out. They loved their father so much. As did she, mind you, but it's been ten years, at least. That's a long time to go without companionship."

Will guessed she was speaking from experience. "You said your husband's been dead for twenty years."

"Yes, but I didn't like Mr. Levy very much and he didn't care for me at all." She used her thumb to stroke Emma's cheek. "Evelyn loved Bill. They had some bumps along the way, but it's different when you love them. They're gone and your life splinters in two. It takes an awful long time to put it back together."

Will let himself think about Sara for just a second. The truth was that he never stopped thinking about her. She was like the news crawl that ran at the bottom of the television while his life, the main story, played on the screen. "Do you know the gentleman's name?"

"Oh, no, dear. I never asked. But he drove a very nice Cadillac CTS-V. That's the sedan, not the coupe. Black on black and the stainless steel grill on the front.

A very throaty V8. You could hear it blocks away.”

Will was momentarily too surprised to respond. “Are you a car person?”

“Oh, not at all, but I looked it up on the Internet because I wanted to know how much he paid for it.”

Will waited her out.

“I’m guessing around seventy-five thousand dollars,” the old woman confided.

“Mr. Levy and I bought this house for less than half that.”

“Did Evelyn ever tell you his name?”

“She never acknowledged it. Despite what you men want to think, we ladies don’t sit around talking about y’all all the time.”

Will allowed a smile. “What did he look like?”

“Well, bald,” she said, as if this was to be expected. “A bit paunchy around the middle. He wore jeans most of the time. His shirts were often wrinkled and he kept the sleeves rolled up, which I found rather perplexing because Evelyn always liked a sharply dressed man.”

“What age do you think he is?”

“Without the hair, it’s hard to tell. I’d put him around Evelyn’s age.”

“Early sixties.”

“Oh.” She seemed surprised. “I thought Evelyn was in her forties, but I suppose that doesn’t make sense with Faith being in her thirties. And the baby’s not a baby anymore, is he?” She lowered her voice as if she was afraid someone would hear. “I guess it’s coming up on twenty years now, but that’s not the kind of pregnancy you forget. There was that bit of a scandal when she started to show. Such a pity how folks behaved. We’ve all had our bit of fun now and then, but as I told Evelyn at the time, a woman can run faster with her skirt up than a man can with his pants down.”

Will hadn’t considered Faith’s teenage predicament beyond thinking it unusual she had kept the child, but it had probably rocked the neighborhood to have a pregnant fourteen-year-old in their refined midst. It was almost commonplace now, but back then, a girl in Faith’s predicament was generally suddenly called away to tend a never-before-mentioned frail aunt or given what was euphemistically called an appendectomy. A handful of less fortunate ones ended up in the children’s home with kids like Will.

He asked, “So, the man in the expensive car is in his early sixties?” She nodded. “Did you ever see them being affectionate?”

“No, but Evelyn wasn’t the showy type. She would get in the car with him and he would drive off.”

“No kiss on the cheek?”

“Not that I ever saw. Mind you, I never even met him. Evelyn would drop Emma off here, then go back to her house and wait.”

Will let that sink in. “Did he ever go into her house?”

“Not that I could tell. I guess people do things differently now. In my day, a man would knock on your door and escort you to his car. There was none of this pulling up and beeping the horn.”

“Is that what he did—beep the horn?”

“No, son, that was just a figure of speech. I suppose Ev must’ve been looking out the window, because she always came out as soon as he pulled up.”

“Do you know where they went?”

"No, but like I said, they were usually gone for a couple'a-three hours, so I assumed they were seeing a movie or having lunch."

That was a lot of movies. "Did the man show up today?"

"No, and I didn't see anyone in the street, either. No cars, no nothing. The first I heard there was trouble was when the sirens came. Then I heard the gunshots, of course, one and then about a minute later one more. I know what gunfire sounds like. Mr. Levy was a hunter. Back then, all the policemen were. He used to make me go so I could cook for them." She rolled her eyes. "What a boring gasbag he was. Rest his soul."

"Lucky man to have you."

"Lucky for me he's not around anymore." She stood with difficulty from the rocker, keeping the baby steady in her arms. The bottle was empty. She put it on the table and offered Emma to Will. "Take her for a second, will you?"

He put Emma on his shoulder and patted her back. She gave an unusually rewarding burp.

Mrs. Levy narrowed her eyes. "You've been around babies before."

Will wasn't about to get into his life story. "They're easy to talk to."

She rested her hand on his arm before going to the closet. Will had been right. There was a darkroom set up in the small space. He stood in the doorway, careful not to block her light as she thumbed through a stack of five-by-seven photographs. Her hands had a slight tremor, but she seemed steady on her feet.

She explained, "Mr. Levy never set much store by my hobbies, but he was called onto a crime scene one day and they asked if anyone knew a photographer. Twenty-five dollars they paid—just for taking pictures! The old bastard wasn't going to say no to that. So he called me and told me to bring my camera. When I didn't faint over the mess—this was a shotgun incident—they said I could do it again." She nodded toward the bed. "That Brownie Six-16 helped keep this roof over our heads."

He knew she meant the box camera. It looked worn but well loved.

"I moved into surveillance work later on. Mr. Levy had drunk himself off the job by then, and of course I'm a woman, so it took some time for them to understand I wasn't there for flirting and screwing."

Will felt his face start to redden. "Was this with the Atlanta Police Department?"

"Fifty-eight years!" She seemed as surprised as Will that she'd lasted that long. "I may be a bag of bones now, but there was a time Geary and his ass-kissers would've snapped to instead of brushing me off like a speck of lint on their shiny trousers." She picked through another pile of five-by-sevens. Will saw black-and-white shots of birds and various household pets, all taken from a vantage point that implied they were being spied upon rather than admired. "This little so-and-so's been digging in my flower bed." She showed Will a picture of a gray and white cat with dirt on its nose. The lighting was harsh in the black-and-white print. The only thing missing was a board over his chest with his name and inmate number.

"Here." Finally, she found what she was looking for. "This is him. Evelyn's gentleman friend."

Will looked over her hunched shoulder. The photo was grainy, obviously taken from behind the blinds covering the front window. The lens pressed open

thin, plastic slats. A tall, older man leaned against a black Cadillac. His palms rested on the hood, forearms twisted out. The car was parked in the street, its front tires turned against the curb. Will parked his car the same way. Atlanta was a city of hills, resting on the piedmont of the Appalachian Mountains. If you drove a car with a manual transmission, you always banked the wheels against the curb to keep the car from rolling.

"What is it?" Faith stood in the doorway. Will passed her the baby, but she seemed more concerned with the photograph. "Did you see something?"

"I was showing him Snippers." Mrs. Levy had somehow pulled a sleight of hand. The photo of the man was gone and in its place was the flower-garden-digging cat.

Emma shifted in Faith's arms, obviously picking up on her mother's troubled mood. Faith kissed her on the cheek with several quick smacks and made faces until the baby smiled. Will knew Faith was putting on a show. Tears filled her eyes. She hugged the infant tightly to her chest.

Mrs. Levy spoke. "Evelyn's a tough old bird. They won't break her."

Faith swayed back and forth with the baby the way mothers automatically do. "You didn't hear anything?"

"Oh, darlin', you know if I'd'a heard something, I would've been over there with my hogleg." Will recognized the slang for a large-caliber handgun. "Ev's going to come out of this just fine. She always lands on her feet. You can take that to the bank and cash it."

"I just—" Faith's voice caught. "If I'd gotten here sooner, or—" She shook her head. "Why did this happen? You know Mama's not mixed up in anything bad. Why would someone take her?"

"Sometimes there's no rhyme or reason to the stupid things people get up to." The old woman's shoulders twisted in a slight shrug. "All I know is that you're gonna eat yourself alive if you keep going down that road asking what if I did this or what if I did that." She pressed the back of her fingers to Faith's cheek. "Trust in the Lord to look over her. 'Lean not into thine own understanding.'"

Faith nodded, solemn, though Will had never known her to be religious. "Thank you."

Amanda's heels thudded down the carpeted hallway. "I can't stall them anymore," she told Faith. "There's a cruiser outside waiting to take you to the station. Try to shut up and do what your lawyer says."

"The least I can do is watch the baby," Mrs. Levy offered. "You don't need to take her down to that filthy station, and Jeremy wouldn't know which end the diaper goes on."

Faith obviously wanted to take her up on the offer, but she hedged, "I don't know how long I'll be."

"You know I'm a night owl. It's no bother."

"Thank you." Faith reluctantly handed the baby to the old woman. She smoothed down Emma's crop of fine brown hair and kissed the top of her head. Her lips stayed there for a few seconds more, then she left without another word.

As soon as the front door closed, Amanda cut to the chase. "What?"

Mrs. Levy pulled the photograph from under her apron.

"Evelyn had a frequent visitor," Will explained. Mrs. Levy had a good

memory: The man was bald. His jeans were baggy. His shirt was wrinkled, the sleeves rolled up. She'd failed to mention a more important detail, which was that he was Hispanic. The tattoo on his arm was blurry, but Will easily recognized the symbol on his forearm that identified him as Los Texicanos.

Amanda folded the picture in half before sticking it into the pocket of her suit jacket. She asked Mrs. Levy, "Have the uniforms talked to you yet?"

"I'm sure they'll get around to the little old ladies eventually."

"I assume you'll be as cooperative as usual."

She smiled. "I'm not sure what I can tell them, but I'll go ahead and lay out some fresh cookies in case they come calling."

Amanda chuckled. "Careful, Roz." She motioned for Will to follow her as she left the room.

Will reached into his wallet and pulled out one of his cards for Mrs. Levy. "This has all my numbers. Call me if you remember anything or if you need help with the baby."

"Thank you, sonny." Her voice had lost some of its old lady kindness, but she tucked the card into her apron anyway.

Amanda was halfway up the hall by the time Will joined her. She didn't say anything about the photograph, or Faith's condition, or the pissing contest she'd had with Geary. Instead, she started giving him orders. "I need you to review all of your case files from the investigation." She didn't have to tell him which investigation she meant. "Comb through every witness statement, every CI report, every jail-house snitch's last hurrah. I don't care how small it is. I want to know about it." Amanda stopped. He knew she was thinking about his reading issues.

He kept his voice steady. "It's not a problem."

She wouldn't let him off that easy. "Pull up your panties, Will. If you need help, speak up now so I can deal with it."

"Do you want me to start now? The boxes are at my house."

"No. We've got an errand to run first." She stood in the foyer, her hands on her hips. She was a trim woman, and Will often forgot how short she was until he saw her straining her neck to look up at him. "I managed to pry some information loose while Geary was throwing his tantrum. The Texicano in the backyard has helpfully identified himself as Ricardo vis-à-vis the large tattoo on his back. We don't have a full ID on him yet. He's mid-twenties, approximately five-nine, and one hundred seventy pounds. The Asian in the bedroom is around forty years of age, slightly shorter and thinner than his Hispanic friend. I would guess he's not from this part of town. He might've been brought in just for this."

Will remembered, "Faith said he had a southern drawl."

"That should help narrow things down."

"He was also wearing a loud Hawaiian shirt. That's not very gangsterish."

"We'll add that to his list of crimes." She glanced down the hallway, then looked back at Will. "Now, the Asian in the laundry room is an odd story, too, which we know courtesy of the wallet he carried in his back pocket. Hironobu Kwon, age nineteen. He's a freshman at Georgia State. He's also the son of a local schoolteacher, Miriam Kwon."

"He's not affiliated?"

"Not that we can find. APD swooped up Mama Kwon before we could get to

her. We'll have to find her tomorrow morning to see what she knows." She pointed her finger at Will. "Softly, softly. We're still not officially on the case. It's just you and me until I can find a way in."

He said, "Faith seems to think the Mexicanos were looking for something." Will tried to gauge Amanda's expression. Usually it hovered somewhere between amused and annoyed, but now it was completely blank. "Ricardo was beaten to a pulp. He had a gun pointed at his head. He wasn't looking for anything except to save his life. It's the Asians we should be talking to first."

"That seems entirely logical."

"It points to a larger problem," he continued. "The Mexicanos I can understand, but what would the Asians want with Evelyn? What's their play?"

"That's the million-dollar question."

He put a finer point on it. "Evelyn headed the drug squad. Los Mexicanos control the drug trade in Atlanta. They have for the last twenty years."

"They certainly have."

Will felt the familiar sting of his head hitting a brick wall. This was the same run-around Amanda always gave him when she had information that she wasn't going to share. Somehow, this time was worse, because she wasn't just screwing with his head, she was covering for her old friend.

He tried, "You said that the guy in the Hawaiian shirt was probably brought in for 'this.' What's 'this'? Kidnapping? Finding whatever Evelyn had hidden in her house?"

"I don't think anyone is finding what they're looking for today." She paused to let her meaning sink in. "Charlie's helping out the locals with the crime scene, but they're not as weak to his charms as I'd like. His access has been very limited and closely supervised. They say they'll share lab results. I'm iffy on their ME."

The Fulton County medical examiner. "Has he shown up?"

"He's still combing through that apartment fire in People's Town." Budget cuts had left the medical examiner's office devastated. If there was more than one serious crime happening within the city limits, that usually meant the detectives were in for a long wait. "I'd love to get Pete on this."

She was referring to the GBI's medical examiner. Will asked, "Can't he make some phone calls?"

"Unlikely," she admitted. "Pete's not exactly covered up in friends. You know how strange he is. He makes you look normal. What about Sara?"

"She'll keep her mouth shut."

"I'm aware of that, Will. I saw your do-si-do in the street. I meant do you think she knows anyone in the ME's office?"

Will shrugged.

"Ask her," Amanda ordered.

Will doubted Sara would welcome the call, but he nodded his agreement anyway. "What about Evelyn's credit card statements, phone records?"

"I've ordered them pulled."

"Does she have GPS in her car? On her phones?"

She didn't really answer him. "We're going through some backdoor channels. As I said, this isn't exactly aboveboard."

"But what you told Geary is right. We've got original jurisdiction over drug

cases.”

“Just because Evelyn was in charge of the narcotics division doesn’t mean this is drug-related. From what I’ve gathered, they’ve found no indication of drugs in the house or on any of the dead men.”

“And Ricardo, the dead Texicano, of the drug-related Mexicanos?”

“Odd coincidence.”

“How about the living, breathing, drug-related Texicano who drives a black Cadillac that Evelyn Mitchell has no qualms about getting into and going for a ride?”

She feigned surprise. “You think he’s affiliated?”

“I saw the tattoo in the photograph. Evelyn’s been seeing a Texicano for at least four months.” Will tried to moderate his tone. “He’s older. He must be higher up in the organization. Mrs. Levy says the visits have stepped up over the last ten days. They’ve been going somewhere together in his car, usually out by eleven and back by two.”

Again, Amanda ignored his point and made her own. “You busted six detectives on Evelyn’s squad. Two of them were paroled for good behavior last year. Both transferred out of state—one to California, one to Tennessee, which is where they were this afternoon when Evelyn was taken. Two are in medium security at Valdosta State, four years away from release and no good behavior in sight. One is dead—drug overdose, which is what I call the thinking man’s karma. The last one is waiting to get his dance card punched at D&C.”

The Georgia Diagnostic and Classification Prison. Death row. Will reluctantly asked, “Who’d he kill?”

“A guard and an inmate. Strangled a convicted rapist with a towel—no loss there—but then he beat the guard to death with his bare hands. Claimed it was self-defense.”

“Against the guard?”

“You sound like the prosecutor on his case.”

Will tried again. “And Evelyn?”

“What about her?”

“I investigated her, too.”

“You did.”

“We’re not going to talk about the elephant in the room?”

“Elephant? For chrissakes, Will, we’ve got the entire goddamn *circus* in here.” She opened the front door. The sun cut through the dark house like a knife.

Amanda slipped on her sunglasses as they walked across the lawn toward the crime scene. A pair of uniformed cops were making their way toward Mrs. Levy’s house. They each glowered at Will and gave Amanda a curt nod.

She mumbled to Will, “About time they got going,” as if she hadn’t been the cause of the delay.

He waited until the men started banging on the front door. “I guess you know Mrs. Levy from your days with the APD?”

“GBI. I investigated her for murdering her husband.” Amanda seemed to enjoy Will’s horrified expression. “Never could prove it, but I’m sure she poisoned him.”

“Cookies?” he guessed.

“That was my working theory.” An appreciative smile curved her lips as she

picked her way across the grass. “Roz is a wily old coot. Seen more crime scenes than all of us rolled together, and I’m sure she took notes the entire time. I wouldn’t trust half of what she told you. Remember—the Devil can cite Scripture for his purpose.”

Amanda had a point, or at least Shakespeare did. Still, Will reminded her, “Mrs. Levy’s the one who told me about the Texicano visiting Evelyn. She took the picture of him.”

“She did, didn’t she?”

Will felt the question hit him like a slap to the back of his head. Considering Mrs. Levy’s artistic talent lent itself more to unflattering mugshots of household pets, it seemed strange that she just happened to have handy a photograph of the Texicano standing beside his black Cadillac. She was a sharp old lady. She’d been spying for a reason. “We should go back and talk to her.”

“Do you really think she’s going to tell us anything useful?”

Will silently conceded the point. Mrs. Levy seemed to like her games, and with Evelyn missing, they didn’t really have time to play them. “Does Evelyn know she killed her husband?”

“Of course she does.”

“And she still let her watch Emma?”

They had reached Faith’s Mini. Amanda cupped her hands to the glass and peered inside. “She killed a sixty-four-year-old abusive alcoholic, not a four-month-old baby.”

Will guessed somewhere in the world this kind of logic made sense.

Amanda headed toward the house. Charlie Reed was in the carport talking to a bunch of other crime scene unit techs. Some were smoking. One was leaning against a tan Malibu that was parked nose-out to Faith’s Mini. They were all dressed in white Tyvek clean suits that made them look like various sizes of soiled marshmallows. Charlie’s handlebar mustache was the only thing that distinguished him from the clean-shaven men. He saw Amanda and broke away from the group.

She said, “Take me through it, Charlie.”

Charlie glanced back at a portly, dark man whose odd build made the Tyvek suit unflatteringly tight in all the critical areas. The man took a last puff on his cigarette and handed it to one of his co-workers. He introduced himself to Amanda in a clipped, British-sounding accent. “Dr. Wagner, I am Dr. Ahbidi Mittal.”

She indicated Will. “This is Dr. Trent, my associate.”

Will shook the man’s hand, trying not to cringe at the effortless way Amanda rolled out a degree they both knew he’d obtained from a dubious online school.

Mittal offered, “As a courtesy, I’m prepared to show you around the crime scene.”

Amanda gave a cutting glance to Charlie, as if he had any say in the matter.

“Thank you,” Will said, because he knew no one else would.

Mittal handed them each a pair of white booties for their shoes. Amanda grabbed Will’s arm to steady herself as she slipped off her heels and covered her stocking feet. Will was left to hop around on his own. Even without his shoes, his feet were too big, and he ended up looking like Mrs. Levy with her heels hanging off the back of her slippers.

“Shall we start in here?” Mittal didn’t wait for them to acknowledge his invitation. He led them around the back of the Malibu and into the house through the open kitchen door. Instinctively, Will ducked his head as he walked into the low-ceilinged room. Charlie bumped into him and mumbled an apology. The kitchen was small for four people, horseshoe shaped, with the open end facing the laundry room. Will caught the distinct odor of rusty iron that blood gave off when it congealed.

Faith was right—the intruders had been looking for something. The house was a mess. Silverware was scattered on the floor. Drawers had been thrown around. Holes were knocked in the walls. A cell phone and an older-looking BlackBerry were crushed on the floor. The wall phone had been smashed off the hook. Except for the black fingerprint powder and the yellow plastic markers the forensics team had used, nothing had been altered from what Faith said she’d first seen when she entered the house. Even the dead body was still in the laundry room. Faith must have been terrified, not knowing what was coming around the corner, terrified that her mother was injured—or worse.

Will should have been here. He should’ve been the kind of partner Faith knew she could call no matter what.

Mittal said, “I’ve yet to write my report, but I am prepared to share my working theory.”

Amanda rolled her hand in a circle to move things along. “Tell me what you’ve got.”

Mittal’s lips pursed at the commanding tone. “I assume that Captain Mitchell was preparing lunch when the crime commenced.” There were bags of cold cuts on the counter beside a knife and cutting board where Evelyn had obviously been slicing tomatoes. An empty Wonder bread sleeve was wadded up in the sink. The toaster had popped up long ago. Four slices of bread. Evelyn had probably known Faith would need lunch when she got home.

It was a normal enough scene, even pleasant, but for the fact that every item on the counter was spattered or smeared with blood. The toaster, the bread, the cutting board. More blood had dripped down to the floor and pooled onto the tiles. Two sets of red shoe prints crisscrossed the white porcelain, one small, one large; there had been a struggle.

Mittal continued, “Captain Mitchell was startled by a noise, possibly the sliding glass door breaking, which likely made her cut her finger with the knife she was using to slice the tomatoes.”

Amanda noted, “That’s a lot of blood for a kitchen accident.”

Mittal obviously didn’t want any editorial comments. He paused again before continuing, “The infant, Emma, would’ve been here.” He pointed to the counter space beside the fridge, opposite the area where Evelyn had been preparing lunch. “We found a small drop of blood on the counter here.” He pointed to the spot beside an older-model CD player. “There’s a blood trail to and from the shed, so Captain Mitchell was most likely bleeding when she left the kitchen. Her handprint on the door supports this.”

Amanda nodded. “She hears a noise, so she hides the baby to keep her safe, then comes back in with her S&W.”

Charlie’s words came out in a rush, as if he could no longer hold his tongue. “She must’ve wrapped a paper towel around the cut, but it bled through quickly.

There's blood on the kitchen door and the wooden handle of the S&W."

Will asked, "What about the car seat?"

"It's clean. She must've carried it with her uninjured hand. We've got a blood trail back and forth across the carport where she carried Emma to the shed. It's Evelyn's blood. Ahbidi's people already typed it, so we can kinda puzzle it out from that." He glanced up at Mittal. "Sorry, Ahbi. I hope I'm not stepping on your toes."

Mittal made an expansive gesture with his hands, indicating Charlie should continue.

Will knew that this was Charlie's favorite part of the job. There was a swagger to his walk as he went to the open doorway and clasped his hands together near his face as if he held a gun. "Evelyn comes back into the house. Pivots, sees bad guy number one waiting in the laundry room and shoots him in the head. The force spun him around like a pinwheel. That's the exit wound you see at the back of his head." Charlie turned back around, hands raised again in a classic Charlie's Angel pose, which was the best way to make sure you got shot in the chest. "Then bad guy number two comes, probably from over there." He pointed to the pass-through between the kitchen and dining room. "There's a struggle. Evelyn loses her gun. See there?"

Will followed his pointing finger to a plastic marker on the floor. Now that Charlie had put the suggestion in his head, he could see the faint, bloody outline of a handgun.

"Evelyn grabs the knife off the counter. Her blood is on the handle, but it's not on the blade."

Amanda interrupted, "It's not just her blood on the knife?"

"No. According to her personnel file, Evelyn is typed as O-positive. We've got B-negative coating the blade and here by the fridge."

They all looked down at a dozen large, round drops of blood on the floor.

Mittal provided, "It's a passive spatter. No arteries were compromised or there would be a spray pattern. All the samples were sent to the lab for DNA analysis. I imagine we're looking at a week for results."

A smile played at Amanda's lips as she stared at the blood. "Good girl, Ev." There was a sound of triumph in her voice. "Any of the dead guys B-negative?"

Charlie glanced at Mittal again. The man nodded his acquiescence. "The Asian in the ugly shirt was O-positive, which is a fairly common type across races. It's Evelyn's type. It's my type. The other, the guy we're calling Ricardo because of his tattoo, was B-negative, but here's the kicker: he doesn't have any stab wounds. I mean, he bled at some point. He was obviously tortured. But the blood we're looking at here is a larger volume than anything—"

Amanda interrupted, "So, we've got someone out there with a stab wound whose blood type is B-negative. Is that rare?"

"Less than two percent of the U.S. Caucasian population is B-negative," Charlie told them. "It's a quarter of that for Asians, and around one percent for Hispanics. Bottom line, it's a very rare blood type, which makes it probable that our dead B-negative Ricardo is genetically related to our missing and wounded B-negative."

"So, we've got a wounded man out there, blood type B-negative."

Charlie was ahead of her for once. "I already put a be-on-the-lookout at all

hospitals within a hundred miles for a stab wound of any kind—male, female, white, black, orange. We’ve already had three rule-outs from domestics just in the last half hour. More people get stabbed than I’d realized.”

Mittal made sure Charlie was finished, then pointed to the blood smeared across the floor. “These shoe prints are conducive to a struggle between a small woman and a medium-sized man, probably around seventy kilos. We can tell from the variation of light to dark in the print that there is a medial roll to the foot, or supination.”

Amanda stopped the lesson. “Take me back to the stab wound. Are we talking fatal?”

Mittal shrugged. “The medical examiner’s office would have to give you their opinion. As was stated earlier, there’s no blood spray on the walls or ceiling, from which we can posit that none of the arteries were damaged. This spatter, then, could perhaps be the result of a head wound, where one would find a fair amount of blood with minimal damage.” He looked at Charlie. “Do you concur?”

Charlie nodded, but added, “A gut wound might bleed like this. I’m not sure how long you could last with that. If you trust the movies, not long. If a lung was punctured, then he’d have an hour, tops, before he suffocated. There’s absolutely no arterial spray, so it’s a seeping wound. I don’t disagree with Dr. Mittal about the possibility of a head wound....” He shrugged, then disagreed anyway. “The blade was coated tip to hilt, which might indicate that the knife plunged into the body.” He saw the frown on Mittal’s face and backpedaled. “Then again, it could be that the victim grabbed the knife, which cut his hand and coated the blade through transfer.” He showed his hand, palm up. “In which case we’d have a B-negative out there with a wounded hand as well.”

Amanda had never embraced the equivocations of crime scene science. She tried to sum it up in absolutes. “So, bad guy B-negative struggles with Evelyn. Then I suppose we bring in the second man, the Asian in the Hawaiian shirt, who later ended up dead in the bedroom. They managed to subdue Evelyn and take away her gun. And then there’s a third man, Ricardo, who was a hostage at one point, and then became a shooter, and then, thanks to Agent Mitchell’s quick action, became dead before he could injure anyone.” She turned to Will. “My money is on Ricardo being hooked up in all of this, torture or not. He pretended to be a hostage to try to leverage Faith.”

Mittal looked uncomfortable with the finality in her tone. “That is an interpretation.”

Charlie tried to smooth things over. “There’s always the chance that—”

There was a sound similar to the rush of a tropical waterfall. Mittal unzipped his clean suit and felt around in his pants pockets. He pulled out his cell phone and said, “If you will excuse me,” before heading back into the garage.

Amanda turned to Charlie. “Brass tacks?”

“They’re not giving me full access, but there’s no reason for me to disagree with what Ahbi’s said so far.”

“And?”

“I don’t want to sound racist,” Charlie began, “but you don’t often see Mexicans and Asians working together. Especially Los Texicanos.”

“Younger kids aren’t as hung up on that sort of thing,” Will offered, wondering if that could be called progress.

Amanda didn't acknowledge either comment. "What else?"

"The list by the phone." Charlie pointed to a piece of yellow paper with a bunch of numbers and names. "I took the liberty to call the number for Zeke. I left a message for him to get in touch with you."

Amanda looked at her watch. "What about the rest of the house? Did forensics find anything?"

"Not that they've told me. Ahbi's not being overtly rude, but he's not going out of his way to volunteer anything, either." Charlie paused before adding, "It seems obvious whatever the bad guys were looking for wasn't found, otherwise they would've cleared out the minute Faith pulled up."

"And we'd be planning Evelyn's funeral." Amanda didn't dwell on the fact. "Whatever they were searching for—what would you guess the size of this mysterious item to be?"

"No telling," Charlie admitted. "Obviously, they were looking everywhere—drawers, closets, cushions. I think they got angrier as they went through the house and started destroying on top of searching. They ripped open the beds, broke the baby's toys. There's a lot of fury in there."

"How many searchers?"

"I'm sorry, Dr. Wagner." Mittal was back. He tucked his phone into his pocket but left his white suit gaping open. "That was the ME. He's been delayed by the discovery of another body at the apartment fire. What was your question?"

Charlie answered for her, perhaps sensing that Amanda's tone might get them thrown out of the house. "She was asking how many searchers you thought there were."

Mittal nodded. "An educated guess would be three to four men."

Will saw the disgusted look on Amanda's face. It had to be more than three, otherwise all the suspects were dead and Evelyn Mitchell had kidnapped herself.

Mittal continued, "They did not wear gloves. Perhaps they thought Captain Mitchell would relent without a struggle." Amanda snorted a laugh and Mittal gave another one of his patented pauses. "There are fingerprints on most surfaces, which of course we will share with the GBI."

Charlie said, "I've already called the lab. We've got two techs coming in to digitize them and put them in the database. From there it's only a matter of time before we know if they're in the system."

Amanda indicated the kitchen. "Once Evelyn was neutralized, they would've started their search in here. They were looking through drawers, so it's something that would fit in a drawer." She looked up at Charlie, then Mittal. "Any tire tracks? Footprints?"

"Nothing of consequence." Mittal walked her over to the kitchen window and started pointing out things in the backyard that had been checked. Will studied the broken CDs on the floor. Beatles. Sinatra. No AC/DC. The player was white plastic, smudged with black fingerprint powder. Will used his thumbnail to press the eject button. The tray was empty.

Amanda's voice came back to him. "Where did they keep Evelyn while they were tearing up the house?"

Mittal started toward the living room. Will took up the rear as Charlie and Amanda followed the doctor through the path of debris. The setup was similar to Mrs. Levy's house, minus the sunken aspect of the living room. Opposite the

couch and a wingback chair were a wall of bookshelves and a small plasma-screen television with a foot-sized crack in the center. Most of the books were strewn across the floor. The couch and chairs had been gutted, their frames broken. There was a stereo on the shelf by the TV, the old record-playing kind, but the speakers were busted and the arm had been wrenched off the turntable. A small pile of vinyl records had obviously met the hard edge of someone's heel.

There was a Thonet-style bentwood chair against the wall, the only thing in the room that seemed to have remained intact. The seat was thatched. The legs were scuffed. Mittal pointed to where chunks of veneer had been ripped off. "It appears that duct tape was used. I found adhesive where Captain Mitchell's feet would've been." He lifted up the chair and moved it away from the wall. A yellow plastic number marker had been placed beside a dark stain. "One can surmise from the blood drops on the carpet that Captain Mitchell's hands were hanging down. The cut to her finger was still bleeding, but not with any significance. Perhaps my colleague is correct in assuming that she wrapped the wound in a paper towel."

Amanda leaned down to look at the bloodstain, but Will was more interested in the chair. Evelyn's hands had been tied behind her back. He used his foot to tilt the chair forward so he could see the bottom of the thatched seat. There was a mark underneath, an arrowhead, drawn in blood.

Will looked out into the room, trying to figure out what the arrow was pointing to. The couch directly across from the chair was gutted, as was the wingback chair to the side. The hardwood floors meant nothing could be hidden under a carpet. Was Evelyn pointing to something in the backyard?

He heard a hiss of air through teeth. Will glanced up to find Amanda giving him such a searing look that he dropped the chair back into place without his brain being aware of what his foot was doing. She gave a slight shake of her head, indicating he should keep his mouth shut about the find. Will glanced at Charlie. They had all three seen the arrow under the chair while Mittal, oblivious, waxed poetic on the efficacy of fingerprinting on porous versus nonporous surfaces.

Charlie opened his mouth to speak, but Amanda talked over him. "Dr. Mittal, in your opinion, was the glass door broken with a found object, such as a rock or lawn ornament?" She glared at Charlie, and Will thought if she was capable of shooting lasers from her eyes, they would've sealed Charlie's mouth shut. "I'm just wondering how well this attack was planned. Did they bring something to break the glass? Did they surround the house? If so, did they know the layout ahead of time?"

Mittal frowned, because these were questions none of them were capable of answering. "Dr. Wagner, these are not scenarios that can be forensically evaluated."

"Well, let's just toss it around and see what sticks. Was a brick used to break the glass?"

Charlie started shaking his head. Will recognized the internal conflict. Like it or not, this was Mittal's crime scene, and there was evidence under the chair—possibly important evidence—that the man had missed. Charlie was obviously torn. As with most things that had to do with Amanda, there was the right thing to do and then there was the thing that she was ordering him to do. Each

decision had its consequence.

Mittal was shaking his head, too, but only because Amanda wasn't making sense. "Dr. Wagner, we have searched every inch of this crime scene, and I am telling you we have not found any more items of substance than what I have already detailed."

Will knew for a fact they hadn't checked every inch. He asked, "Has anyone checked the Malibu?"

That took Charlie's mind off his troubles. His brow furrowed. Will had made the same mistake with Faith's Mini. All of the violence had taken place inside the house, but the cars were still part of the crime scene.

Amanda was the first to move. She had made her way out to the carport and opened the driver's side door of the Malibu before anyone thought to ask her what she was doing.

Mittal said, "Please, we've not yet processed—"

She gave him a withering look. "Did you think to check the trunk?"

His stunned silence was enough of an answer. Amanda popped the trunk. Will was standing just inside the kitchen doorway, which gave him a raised view of the scene. There were several plastic grocery bags in the trunk, their contents flattened down by the dead body on top of them. As in the kitchen, blood coated everything—soaking into the cereal box, dripping down the plastic wrap around the hamburger buns. The dead man was a big guy. His body was folded almost in two where he'd been bent to fit into the space. A deep gash in his bald head showed splintered bone and bits of brain. His jeans were wrinkled. His shirtsleeves were rolled up. There was a Los Mexicanos tattoo on his forearm.

Evelyn's gentleman friend.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Georgia Diagnostic and Classification Prison was located in Jackson, about an hour south of Atlanta. The drive was usually a quick shot down I-75, but the Atlanta Motor Speedway was having some kind of exhibition event that slowed traffic to a crawl. Undeterred, Amanda kept hopping on and off the shoulder, jerking the wheel quickly to pass groups of sluggish cars. The SUV's tires made a strumming sound as they grazed the rumble strips meant to deter drivers from leaving the roadway. Between the noise and the vibration, Will found himself fighting an unexpected wave of motion sickness.

Finally, they made it through the worst of the traffic. At the speedway exit, Amanda took one last dash onto the shoulder, then popped the SUV back onto the road. The tires skipped. The chassis shook. Will rolled down the window for some fresh air to help settle his stomach. The wind slapped his face so hard that he felt his skin ripple.

Amanda pressed the button to roll the window back up, giving him the look she reserved for stupid people and children. They were going over a hundred miles an hour. Will was lucky he hadn't been sucked out the window.

She let out a long sigh as she stared back at the road. One hand rested in her lap, while the other was firmly wrapped around the steering wheel. She was wearing her usual power suit: a bright blue skirt and matching jacket with a light-colored blouse underneath. Her high-heel shoes exactly matched the color of her suit. Her fingernails were trim but manicured. Her hair was its usual helmet of salt-and-pepper gray. Most days, Amanda seemed to have more energy than all the men on her team. Now, she looked tired, and Will could see the worry lines around her eyes were more pronounced.

She said, "Tell me about Spivey."

Will tried to click his brain back over to his old case against Captain Evelyn Mitchell's team. Boyd Spivey was the former lead detective on the narcotics squad who was currently biding his time on death row. Will had talked to the man only once before Spivey's lawyers advised him to keep his mouth shut. "I don't find it hard to believe he beat someone to death with his fists. He was a big guy, taller than me, carried about fifty more pounds, all of it muscle."

"Gym rat?"

"I'd guess steroids gave him a boost."

"How did that work for him?"

"They made him uncontrollably angry," Will recalled. "He's not as smart as he thinks, but I wasn't able to get him to confess, so maybe I'm not either."

"You still sent him to prison."

"He sent himself to prison. His house in the city was paid for. His house at the lake was paid for. All three of his kids were in private school. His wife worked ten hours a week and drove a top-of-the-line Mercedes. His mistress drove a BMW. He kept his brand new Porsche 911 parked in her driveway."

"Men and their cars," she mumbled. "He doesn't sound very smart to me."

"He didn't think anyone would ask questions."

"Generally, they don't."

"Spivey was good at keeping his mouth shut."

"As I recall, all of them were."

She was right. In a corruption case, the usual strategy was to find the weakest member and persuade him or her to turn on his or her fellow conspirators in exchange for a lighter sentence. The six detectives belonging to Evelyn Mitchell's narcotics squad had proven immune to this strategy. None of them would turn on the other, and all of them routinely insisted that Captain Mitchell had nothing to do with their alleged crimes. They went out of their way to protect their boss. It was both admirable and incredibly frustrating.

Will said, "Spivey worked on Evelyn's squad for twelve years—longer than any of them."

"She trusted him."

"Yes," Will agreed. "Two peas in a pod."

Amanda cut him a sharp look. "Careful."

Will felt his jaw tighten so hard that the bone ached. He didn't see how ignoring the most important part of this case was going to get them anywhere. Amanda knew as well as Will that her friend was guilty as hell. Evelyn hadn't lived large, but like Spivey, she'd been stupid in her own way.

Faith's father had been an insurance broker, solidly middle class with the usual kinds of debts that people had: car payments, mortgage, credit cards. Yet, during Will's investigation, he'd found an out-of-state bank account in Bill Mitchell's name. At the time, the man had been dead for six years. Though the account balance always hovered around ten thousand dollars, the activity showed monthly deposits since his death that totaled up to almost sixty thousand dollars. It was clearly a shell account, the kind of thing prosecutors called a smoking gun. With Bill dead, Evelyn was the only signatory. Money was taken out and deposited with her ATM card at an Atlanta branch of the bank. Her dead husband wasn't the one who was keeping the activities spread apart and the deposits shy of the limit that would throw up a red flag at Homeland Security.

As far as Will knew, Evelyn Mitchell had never been asked about the account. He'd figured it would come out during her trial, but her trial had never happened. There had been a press conference announcing her retirement, and that was the end of the story.

Until now.

Amanda flipped down the visor to block the sun. Clipped to the underside were a couple of yellow claim tickets that looked like they were from a dry cleaner. The sun wasn't doing her any favors. She didn't look tired anymore. She looked haggard.

She said, "Something's bothering you."

He resisted uttering the biggest "duh" ever vocalized in the history of the world.

"Not that," she said, as if she could read his mind. "Faith didn't call you for help because she knew that she was going to do the wrong thing."

Will looked out the window.

"You would've made her wait for backup."

He hated the relief her words brought.

"She's always been headstrong."

He felt the need to say, "She didn't do the wrong thing."

"That's my boy."

Will watched the trees along the highway blend into a sea of green. "Do you think there's going to be a ransom?"

"I hope so." They both knew that a ransom pointed to a living hostage, or at least the opportunity to demand proof of life.

He said, "This feels personal."

"How so?"

He shook his head. "The way the house was torn up. There's mad, and then there's furious."

"I don't imagine the old girl sat by quietly while they performed their search."

"Probably not." Evelyn Mitchell was no Amanda Wagner, but Will could easily see her taunting the men who were tearing up her house. You didn't get to be one of the first female captains on the Atlanta police force by being sweet. "They were obviously looking for money."

"Why do you say that?"

"Clams—the last word Ricardo said to Faith before he died. You said it's slang for money. Ergo, they were looking for money."

"In the silverware drawer?"

Another good point. Cash was nice, but it was cumbersome. A pile worth kidnapping an ex-Atlanta police captain for would fill several silverware drawers.

He said, "The arrow was pointing into the backyard."

"What arrow?"

Will suppressed a groan. She wasn't usually this obvious. "The arrow drawn in Evelyn's blood underneath the chair she was duct-taped to. I know you saw it. You hissed at me like an air compressor."

"You really should work on your metaphors." She was silent for a beat, probably considering the most circuitous route to take him to nowhere. "You think Evelyn has buried treasure in her backyard?"

He had to admit this was unlikely, especially considering the Mitchell backyard was on full display to the rest of the neighbors, most of whom were retired and seemed to have ample time to spy. Besides, Will couldn't picture Faith's mother out with a shovel and a flashlight in the middle of the night. Then again, it wasn't like she could put it in the bank.

"Safe deposit box," Will tried. "Maybe they were looking for a key."

"Evelyn would have to go to the bank and sign in to get access. They'd compare her signature, ask for her ID. Our kidnapper had to know her picture would be on every television station the minute he took her."

Will silently conceded the point. Besides, the same rule applied. A large amount of cash took up space. Diamonds and gold were more for Hollywood movies. In real life, stolen jewels fetched pennies on the dollar.

She asked, "What about the crime scene? Do you think Charlie got it right?"

Will went on the defense. "Mittal did most of the talking."

"Okay, you've covered Charlie's ass. Now answer my question."

"The Los Texicanos in the trunk of the Malibu, Evelyn's gentleman friend. He

throws it all out.”

She nodded. “He wasn’t stabbed. He died from a shot to the head, plus, he’s B-positive. That still leaves us with our B-negative out there with a nasty wound.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about.” Will resisted the urge to add, “and you know it.” Amanda wasn’t just tying his hands behind his back. She was blindfolding him and sending him toward the edge of a cliff. Her refusal to talk about or even acknowledge Evelyn Mitchell’s sordid past wasn’t going to help Faith and it sure as hell wasn’t going to get her mother back in one piece. Evelyn had worked in narcotics. She was obviously in contact, almost daily, with a higher-up in Los Texicanos, the gang that ran the drug trade in and out of Atlanta. They should be back in the city talking to the gang units and putting together the last few weeks of Evelyn’s life, not making a fool’s errand to visit a guy who had nothing to lose and a history of stubborn silence.

“Come on, Dr. Trent,” Amanda chided. “Don’t make me pull teeth.”

Will let his ego get in the way for a few more seconds before saying, “Evelyn’s gentleman friend. His wallet was missing. He didn’t have any ID or money on him. The only thing in his pockets was the key to Evelyn’s Malibu. She must’ve given it to him.”

“Keep going.”

“She was making lunch for two people. There were four slices of bread in the toaster. Faith was late. Evelyn didn’t know what time she’d be home, but she would assume Faith would call when she was on her way. There were groceries in the trunk of the Malibu. The receipt says Evelyn used her debit card at the Kroger at 12:02. The gentleman was bringing in the groceries while she fixed lunch.”

Amanda smiled. “I often forget how smart you are, but then something like this happens and it makes me realize why I hired you.”

Will ignored the backhanded compliment. “So, Evelyn’s making lunch. She starts to wonder where her gentleman friend is. She goes outside and finds his body in the trunk. She grabs Emma and hides her in the shed. If she’d grabbed Emma after cutting her hand, like Dr. Mittal said, there would’ve been blood somewhere on the car seat. Evelyn’s strong, but she’s not Hercules. The car seat, even without a baby in it, is pretty heavy. She couldn’t dead lift one of those things off the counter with one hand—at least not safely. She’d have to cup the bottom with her free hand. Emma’s little, but she’s got some heft to her.”

Amanda supplied, “Evelyn spent time in the shed. She moved the blankets around. There’s no blood on them. She dialed the combination lock on the safe. There’s no blood on the dial. The floor is clean. She was bleeding after she locked the door.”

“I’m not an expert on kitchen injuries, but you don’t generally cut your ring finger when you’re slicing something. It’s usually the thumb or the index finger.”

“Another good point.” Amanda checked the rearview mirror and changed lanes. “Okay, what did she do next?”

“Like you said. Evelyn hides the baby, then gets her gun out of the safe, goes back into the house and shoots Kwon, who’s waiting to ambush her from the laundry room. Then, she’s overpowered by a second man, probably our mystery blood type B-negative. Evelyn’s gun gets knocked out of her hand during the struggle. She stabs B-negative, but there’s a third guy, Mr. Hawaiian Shirt. He

gets Evelyn's gun off the floor and stops the struggle. He asks her where the thing is that they're looking for. She tells them to go to hell. She's duct-taped to the chair while they search the house."

"That sounds plausible."

It sounded confusing. There were so many bad guys that Will was having a hard time keeping track of them. Two Asians, one Hispanic, possibly two—maybe a third man, race unknown—a house being searched for God only knew what and a missing sixty-three-year-old ex-cop who had her share of secrets.

Then there was the even larger question that Will knew better than to ask: why hadn't Evelyn called for help? By Will's count, she'd had at least two opportunities to make a call or run for help: when she first heard the noise, and after she shot Hironobu Kwon in the laundry room. And yet, she had stayed.

"What are you thinking?"

Will knew better than to give an honest answer. "I'm wondering how they got her out of the house without anyone seeing."

Amanda reminded him, "You're assuming Roz Levy is being forthcoming."

"Do you think she's involved in this?"

"I think she's a wily old bitch who wouldn't piss on you if your hair was on fire."

Will supposed the venom in her tone came from experience.

Amanda said, "This wasn't spur-of-the-moment. Some planning went into it. They didn't all walk there. There was a car somewhere, maybe a van. There's a dogleg alley jutting into Little John Trail. They would've gone out the back, exiting into Evelyn's backyard. You follow the fence line between the neighbors and you're there in two minutes."

"How many men do you think were there?"

"We've got three dead on scene. There's the injured B-negative and at least one able-bodied man. There's no way Evelyn would've gone to a second location without a fight. She would've risked being shot first. There had to be someone there who was strong enough to tie her up or subdue her."

Will didn't add that they could've just as easily injured or killed her and removed the body. "We'll know for sure when we get the fingerprints. They all must've touched something."

Abruptly, Amanda changed the subject. "Have you and Faith ever talked about your case against her mother?"

"Not really. I've never told her about the bank account, because there's no reason. She assumes I was wrong. A lot of people do. My case was never made in court. Evelyn retired with full benefits. It's not a hard conclusion to jump to."

She nodded as if she was giving her approval. "The man in the trunk, the one you call Evelyn's gentleman friend. Let's talk about him."

"If he was bringing in groceries, that implies they had a personal relationship."

"That's certainly possible."

Will thought about the guy. He'd been shot in the back of the head. His wallet and ID were not the only things missing from his person. He didn't have a cell phone. He didn't have the thick gold watch he'd been wearing in the picture Mrs. Levy had taken. His clothes were nondescript—Nikes with Dr. Scholl's orthopedic inserts, J. Crew jeans, and a Banana Republic shirt that had cost a lot

of money considering he hadn't bothered to iron it. There was a smattering of gray in the black goatee on his chin. The stubble on his shiny head indicated he was hiding male pattern baldness rather than making a bold statement in style. Except for the Los Mexicanos star on his forearm, he could've been a stockbroker having a midlife crisis.

Amanda said, "I've checked with Narcotics. There've been some grumblings about the Asians making a play for the powder cocaine trade. It's been up for grabs since the BMF went down."

The Black Mafia Family. They had controlled coke sales from Atlanta to LA, with Detroit in between. "That's a lot of money. The Family was pulling down hundreds of millions of dollars a year."

"Los Mexicanos was calling the shots. They've always been suppliers, not distributors. It's a smart way to play it. That's why they've survived all these years. Despite what Charlie thinks about race, they don't care if the dealer is black or brown or purple, so long as the money's green."

Will had never worked a major drug case. "I don't know much about the organization."

"Los Mexicanos started back in the mid-sixties at the Atlanta Pen. The population demographic back then was almost the exact reverse of what it is now—seventy percent white, thirty black. Crack cocaine changed that overnight. It worked faster than forced busing. There were still only a handful of Mexicans in the joint, and they ganged up to keep from getting their throats cut. You know how it goes."

Will nodded. Just about every gang in America had started as a group of minorities, be they Irish, Jewish, Italian, or other, banding together for survival. It generally took a couple of years before they started doing worse than was done to them. "What's the structure?"

"Pretty loose. No one's going to chart like MS-13." She was referring to what was often called the most dangerous gang in the world. Their organizational structure rivaled the military's, and their loyalty was so fierce that they'd never been successfully infiltrated.

Amanda explained, "In the early years, Los Mexicanos was on the front page of the paper every single day, sometimes in both editions. Shootouts in the street, heroin, pot, numbers, prostitution, robbery. Their calling card was branding children. They didn't just go after the person who crossed them. They'd go after a daughter, son, niece, nephew. They'd cut open their faces, once across the forehead, then a vertical line down the nose to the chin."

Without thinking, Will put his hand to the scar along his jaw.

"There was one point during the Atlanta Child Murders investigation when Los Mexicanos was at the top of our list. This was early on, the fall of '79. I was the glorified assistant of the senior liaison for Fulton, Cobb, and Clayton. Evelyn was on the Atlanta task force, mostly fetching coffee until it was time to talk to the parents, then it all fell to her. The general consensus was that the Mexicanos were trying to send a broader message to the clientele. It seems ludicrous now, but at the time, we were hoping it was them." She switched on the blinker and changed lanes. "You were around four then, so you won't remember, but it was a very tense time. The entire metro area was terrified."

"Sounds like it," he said, surprised she knew his age.

"It wasn't long after the Child Murders that one of the top Mexicanos was taken down during an internal struggle. They're tight-knit. We never found out what happened or who took over, but we know the new guy was much more business-oriented. No more violence for the sake of violence. He prioritized the business, taking out the riskier component. His motto was to keep the coke flowing and the blood off the streets. Once they went underground, we were glad to ignore them."

"Who's in charge now?"

"Ignatio Ortiz is the only name we have. He's the face of the gang. There are two others, but they keep an incredibly low profile and you'll never find all three of them together in the same place. Before you ask, Ortiz is in Phillips State Prison serving his third year of seven without parole for attempted manslaughter."

"Attempted?" That didn't sound very gangbanger.

"Came home and found his wife tossing the sheets with his brother. Story goes he missed on purpose."

Will assumed Ortiz had no trouble running his business from prison. "Is he worth talking to?"

"Even if we had cause, he wouldn't sit with us in a room without his lawyer, who would insist that his client is just an average businessman who let his passion get the best of him."

"Has he ever been arrested before?"

"A few times in his younger days, but nothing major."

"So, the gang's still under the radar."

"They come out every now and then to school the younger kids. Do you remember the Father's Day murder in Buckhead last year?"

"The guy who had his throat slit open in front of his kids?"

She nodded. "Thirty years ago, they would've killed the children, too. One might say they've gotten softer in their old age."

"I'd hardly call that soft."

"Inside the joint, the Mexicanos are known as throat slitters."

"The gentleman in the trunk is high up on the food chain."

"Why do you think that?"

"He's only got one tattoo." Young gang members generally used their bodies as a canvas to illustrate their lives, etching tattoos of teardrops under their eyes for every murder, wrapping their elbows and shoulders in cobwebs to show that they'd done time. The tattoos were always rendered in blue ink culled from ballpoint pens, what was called "joint ink," and they always told a story. Unless their story was so bad that it didn't need to be told.

Will said, "A clean body means money, power, control. The gentleman is older, probably early sixties. That puts him in on the ground floor of Mexicanos. His age is his badge of honor. This isn't the kind of lifestyle that ensures longevity."

"You don't get old by being stupid."

"You don't get old by being in a gang."

"We can only hope the APD shares the gentleman's identity with us when they manage to track it down."

Will glanced at her. She stared ahead at the road. He had a niggling suspicion

that Amanda already knew who this man was, and exactly what part he played in the Mexicanos hierarchy. There was something about the way she'd folded Mrs. Levy's photograph in her pocket, and he was pretty sure that she had given the old woman some kind of coded message to keep her story to herself.

He asked, "Do you ever listen to AC/DC?"

"Do I look like I listen to AC/DC?"

"It's a metal band." He didn't tell her they'd created one of the bestselling albums in the history of music. "They've got a song called 'Back in Black.' It was playing when Faith pulled up. I checked the CDs at the house. Evelyn didn't have it in her collection, and the player was empty when I ejected the tray."

"What's it about?"

"Well, the obvious. Being back. Wearing black. It was recorded after the original lead singer of the group died from a drug and alcohol bender."

"It's always sad when someone dies of a cliché."

Will thought about the lyrics, which he happened to know by heart. "It's about resurrection. Transformation. Coming back from a bad place and telling people who might've underestimated you, or made fun of you, that you're not taking it anymore. Like, you're cool now. You're wearing black. You're a bad guy. Ready to fight back." He suddenly realized why he'd worn out the record when he was a teenager. "Or something like that." He swallowed. "It could mean other things."

"Hm" was all she would give him.

He drummed his fingers on the armrest. "How did you meet Evelyn?"

"We went to Negro school together."

Will nearly choked on his tongue.

She chuckled at his reaction to what must have been a well-used line. "That's what they called it back in the stone ages—the Negro Women's Traffic School. Women were trained separately from men. Our job was to check meters and issue citations for illegally parked cars. Sometimes, we were allowed to talk to prostitutes, but only if the boys allowed us, and usually there was some crude joke about it. Evelyn and I were the only two whites in a group of thirty that graduated that year." There was a fond smile on her lips. "We were ready to change the world."

Will knew better than to say what he was thinking, which was that Amanda was a hell of a lot older than she looked.

She obviously guessed his thoughts. "Give me a break, Will. I joined in '73. The Atlanta you know today was fought for by the women in those classes. Black officers weren't even authorized to arrest whites until '62. They didn't have a precinct building. They had to hang out at the Butler Street YMCA until someone thought to call them. And it was even worse if you were a woman—two strikes, with the third hanging over your head." Her voice took on a solemn tone. "Every single day was a struggle to do right when everything around you was wrong."

"Sounds like you and Evelyn went through a trial by fire."

"You have no idea."

"Then tell me about it."

She laughed again, but this time at his fumble. "Are you trying to interrogate me, Dr. Trent?"

"I'm wondering why you're not talking about the fact that Evelyn obviously

had a close, personal relationship with an old-school Texicano who ended up murdered in the trunk of her car.”

She stared ahead at the road. “It does seem odd, doesn’t it?”

“How can we work this case if we’re not going to at least admit what really happened?” She didn’t respond. “We’ll keep it between us, all right? No one else has to know. She’s your friend. I understand that. I spent a lot of time with her myself. She seems like a very agreeable person, and she obviously loves Faith.”

“There’s a ‘but’ in there somewhere.”

“She was taking money like the rest of her team. She must’ve known the Mexicanos from—”

Amanda cut him off. “Speaking of Mexicanos, let’s go back to Ricardo.”

Will clenched his fist, wanting to punch something.

Amanda let him stew in silence for a while. “I’ve known you an awful long time, Will. I need you to trust me on a few things.”

“Do I have a choice?”

“Not really, but I’m giving you an opportunity here to give me a return on all that benefit of the doubt I’ve deposited into your account over the years.”

His inclination was to tell her exactly where she could put her benefit, but Will had never been the type of man to say the first thing that came into his head. “You’re treating me like a dog on a leash.”

“That’s one interpretation.” She paused for a moment. “Did it ever occur to you that I might be protecting you?”

He scratched the side of his jaw again, feeling the scar that had been ripped into his skin years ago. Will generally shied away from introspection, but a blind man could see that he had strangely dysfunctional relationships with all of the women in his life. Faith was like a bossy older sister. Amanda was the worst mother he’d never had. Angie was a combination of both, which was unsettling for obvious reasons. They could be mean and controlling and Angie especially could be cruel, but Will had never once thought that any of them truly wished him harm. And Amanda was right about at least one thing: she had always protected Will, even on the rare occasion when it put her job at risk.

He said, “We need to call all the Cadillac dealerships in the metro area. The gentleman wasn’t driving a Honda. That’s an expensive ride. There are probably only a handful of those Cadillacs on the road. I think it has a manual transmission. That’s rare in a four-door.”

To his surprise, she said, “Good idea. Set it up.”

Will reached into his pocket, remembering too late that he didn’t have his phone. Or his gun and badge. Or his car for that matter.

Amanda tossed him her phone as she took the exit without so much as tapping the brake. “What’s going on with you and Sara Linton?”

He flipped open her phone. “We’re friends.”

“I worked a case with her husband a few years ago.”

“That’s nice.”

“Those are some mighty big shoes to fill, friend.”

Will dialed information and asked for the number of the closest Cadillac dealership to Atlanta.

As he followed Amanda past the corridor that led to the death chamber, Will

had to admit, if only to himself, that he hated visiting prisons—not just the D&C, but any prison. He could handle the constant threat of violence that made every inmate facility feel like a simmering pot that had been left too long on the stove. He could handle the noise and the filth and the dead-eyed stares. What he couldn't take was the feeling of helplessness that came from confinement.

The inmates ran their drug trade and other rackets, but at the end of the day, they had no power over the basic things that made them human beings. They couldn't take a shower when they wanted. They couldn't go to the bathroom without an audience. They could be strip-searched or cavity-searched at any time. They couldn't go for a walk or take a book from the library without permission. Their cells were constantly checked for contraband, which could be anything from a car magazine to a roll of dental floss. They ate on someone else's schedule. The lights were turned off and on by someone else's clock. By far the worst part was the constant handling they received. Guards were always touching them—wrenching their arms behind their backs, tapping their heads during count, pushing them forward or yanking them back. Nothing belonged to them, not even their own bodies.

It was like the worst foster home on earth, only with more bars.

The D&C was the largest prison in Georgia and, among other things, served as one of the main processing centers for all inmates entering the state penal system. There were eight cellblocks with single and double bunk beds in addition to eight more dormitories that warehoused the overflow. As part of their intake, all state prisoners were subjected to a general medical exam, psych evaluation, behavioral testing, and a threat assessment to assign a security rating that determined whether they belonged in a minimum, medium, or maximum facility.

If they were lucky, this diagnosing and classification process took around six weeks before they were assigned to another prison or moved to the permanent facilities at D&C. Until then, the inmates were on twenty-three-hour lockdown, which meant that but for one hour a day, they were confined to their cells. No cigarettes, coffee, or soda were allowed. They could buy only one newspaper a week. No books were allowed, not even the Bible. There were no TVs. No radios. No phones. There was a yard, but inmates were allowed out only three days a week, and that was weather permitting and only for whatever time was left on their one hour a day. Only long-term residents were allowed visitors, and then it was in a room that was halved by a metal mesh that required you to yell to be heard over the voices of the other visitors. No touching. No hugging. No contact whatsoever.

Maximum security.

There was a reason suicide rates in prisons were three times higher than on the outside. It was heartbreaking to think about their living conditions, until you read some of their files. Rape of a minor. Aggravated sodomy with a baseball bat. Domestic violence. Kidnapping. Assault. Shooting. Beating. Mutilating. Stabbing. Slashing. Scalding.

But the really bad guys were sitting on death row. They'd been convicted of killings so heinous that the only way the state knew how to deal with them was to put them to death. They were segregated from the rest of the population. Their lives were even more limited than the intake prisoners'. Total lockdown.

Total isolation. No hour a day in the sunshine. No shared meals. No stepping past the iron bars that held them in their cells except once a week for a shower. Days could pass without hearing another man's voice. Years could pass without feeling another person's touch.

This was where Boyd Spivey was housed. This was where the former highly decorated detective was living while he waited to die.

Will felt his shoulders hunch as the gate leading to the death row cells swung closed behind him. Prison design lent itself to wide, open corridors where a running man could easily be taken out with a rifle from a hundred yards away. The corners were sharp ninety-degree angles that deliberately discouraged loitering. The ceilings were high to trap the constant heat from so many sweating bodies. Everything was meshed or barred—windows, doors, overhead lights, switches.

Despite the spring climate, the temperature inside hovered somewhere around eighty. Will instantly regretted the wicking nature of his running shorts under his heavy jeans, which clearly were not meant to be worn in tandem. Amanda, as always, seemed right at home, no matter the greasy-looking bars or the panic buttons that lined the walls every ten feet. D&C's permanent inmates were classified as violent offenders. A lot of them had nothing to lose and everything to gain by engaging in willful acts of violence. Taking the life of a deputy director of the GBI would be a big feather in any man's cap. Will didn't know how they felt about cops who took down other cops, but he didn't imagine that was much of a distinction for inmates looking to raise their status.

For this reason, they were escorted by two guards who were approximately the size of commercial refrigerators. One walked in front of Amanda and the other loomed behind Will, making him feel practically dainty. No one was allowed to carry guns into the prison, but each guard had a full array of weaponry on their belts: pepper spray, steel batons, and worst of all a set of jangling keys that seemed to announce with every footstep that the only way out of this place was through thirty locked doors.

They turned a corner and found a man in a gray suit standing outside yet another locked door. As with every other door in the place, there was a large, red panic button beside the jamb.

Amanda extended her hand. "Warden Peck, thank you for arranging this visit on such short notice."

"Always glad to help, Deputy Director." He had a gravelly old man's voice that fit perfectly with his weathered, mahogany face and slicked-back gray mane. "You know you need only pick up the phone."

"Would it be a bother to ask if you could print out a list of all the visitors Spivey's had since he entered the system?"

Peck obviously thought it was a bother, but he covered for it well. "Spivey's been in four different facilities. I'll have to make some calls."

"Thank you so much for going through the trouble." She indicated Will. "This is Agent Trent. He'll need to be in the observation room. He's got a somewhat checkered past with the prisoner."

"That's fine. I should warn you that we got Mr. Spivey's death notice last week. He's to be executed on the first of September."

"Does he know?"

Peck nodded gravely, and Will could see that he didn't like this part of his job. "It's my policy to give the inmates as much information as we can as soon as we can. The news has sobered Mr. Spivey considerably. They generally become quite docile during this time, but don't be lulled into complacency. If at any point you feel a threat, stand and leave the room immediately. Don't touch him. Avoid being within reaching distance. For your safety, you'll be monitored through the cameras and one of my men will be outside the door at all times. Just keep in mind that these men are quick, and they have absolutely nothing to lose."

"I'll just have to be quicker." She winked at him as if this was some kind of frat party where the boys might get rowdy. "I'm ready when you are."

Will was led one door down to the observation room. The space was small and windowless, the sort of prison office that could've easily passed for a storage closet. There were three monitors stacked on a metal desk, each showing a different angle of Boyd Spivey in the adjacent room. He was shackled to a chair that was undoubtedly bolted to the floor.

Four years ago, Spivey hadn't exactly been handsome, but he'd carried himself with a cop's swagger that made up for his deficits. His reputation was as a practical joker, but a good cop—the guy you'd want to have your back when things went from bad to worse. His file was full of commendations. Even after he'd taken a deal to plead guilty for lesser time, there were men who worked in his station house who refused to believe that Spivey was dirty.

Now, everything about the man said "con." He was as hard looking as a piece of honed granite. His skin was pockmarked and puffy. A long, ratty ponytail draped down his back. Prison tattoos decorated his forearms and twisted around his neck. His thick wrists were bolted to a chrome bar welded to the center of the table. His legs were crossed at the ankles. The chains around his leg irons were tightened into a straight line. Will guessed Boyd passed his days working out in his cell. His bright orange uniform was busting at the seams around his overly muscled arms and wide chest.

Will wondered if the extra weight was a good or bad thing as far as the man's impending execution was concerned. After several gruesome mishaps with the electric chair, including a man whose chest had burst into flames, Georgia had finally been ordered by the state supreme court to retire Old Sparky. Now, instead of being shaved, stuffed with cotton, and fried to a crisp, the condemned were strapped to a table and given a series of drugs that stopped their breathing, their hearts, and finally their lives. Boyd Spivey would probably get a larger dose than most. It would take a powerful combination of drugs to put down such a large man.

A crackly cough came through the tiny speakers on the desk. In the next room, Will could see Boyd staring straight ahead at Amanda, who was leaning against the wall despite the chair that was opposite his at the table.

The tone of Boyd's voice was surprisingly high for a man of his size. "You too scared to sit across from me?"

Will had never known Amanda to show fear, and now was no exception. "I don't mean to be rude, Boyd, but you've got an awful smell."

He looked down at the table. "They only let me shower once a week."

Her voice had a teasing lilt. "Now, that's cruel and unusual."

Will checked the camera that was zoomed in on Boyd's face. There was a smile playing at his lips.

Amanda's high heels echoed in the concrete room as she walked over to the chair. The metal legs scraped across the floor. She sat down, primly crossing her legs, letting her hands rest in her lap.

Boyd let his eyes linger. "You look good, Mandy."

"I've been keeping myself busy."

"With what?"

"You've heard about Evelyn."

"We don't have TVs in here."

She laughed. "You probably knew I was coming here before I did. This place could put CNN out of business."

He shrugged, as if it was out of his hands. "Is Faith okay?"

"Tip-top."

"I hear she K-fived both guys."

A K-five indicated the center ring on a paper target, the kill shot. Amanda told him, "One was to the head."

"Ouch." He faked a cringe. "How's Emma?"

"A handful. I'm sorry I don't have a picture for you. I left my purse in the car."

"The pedophiles would've stolen it anyway."

"What an appalling lack of decorum."

He smiled with his teeth. They were chipped and broken, the sort of souvenirs you got from fighting dirty. "I remember the day Faith got her gold shield." He sat back in his chair, shackles dragging across the table. "Ev was beaming like a Maglite."

"I think we all were," Amanda admitted, and Will let it sink in that his boss knew Boyd Spivey a hell of a lot better than she'd let on in the car. "How've you been, Boyd? They treating you okay?"

"Okay enough." He smiled again, then stopped himself. "Sorry about my teeth. Didn't see any point in getting them fixed."

"It's no worse than the smell."

He gave her a sheepish glance. "It's been a long time since I've heard a woman's voice."

"I hate to say it, but that's the nicest thing a man has said to me all year."

He laughed. "Hard times for us both, I guess."

Amanda let the moment stretch out for a few more seconds.

He said, "I guess we should get to the reason you're here."

"We can do whatever you want." Her tone implied she could talk to him all day, but Boyd got the message.

He asked, "Who took her?"

"We think it was a group of Asians."

His brow furrowed. Despite the orange jumper and the hellhole he called home, a piece of Boyd Spivey was still a cop. "Yellow doesn't have traction in the city. Brown's been grooming black to do its bidding again."

"Brown's involved in this, but I'm not sure how."

He nodded, indicating he was taking all this in but didn't know what to make of it. "Brown don't like getting their hands dirty."

"Shit rolls downhill."

"Did they send a sign?" Proof of life. Amanda shook her head. "What do they want to trade her for?"

"You tell me."

He was silent.

She said, "We both know Evelyn was clean, but could there be blowback?"

He glanced at the camera, then looked down at his hands. "I can't see it. She was under the umbrella. No matter what happened, ain't one man from the team wouldn't still lay down his life for her. You don't turn your back on family."

Will had always thought Evelyn was protected on both sides of the law. Hearing it validated was no consolation.

Amanda told the man, "You know Chuck Finn and Demarcus Alexander are already out?"

He nodded. "Chuck stayed down South. Demarcus went out to LA where his mama's people live."

Amanda must have already known the answer, but she asked him, "Are they keeping their noses clean?"

"Chuck's got a belly habit for back-to-backs." Meaning he was shooting heroin, then smoking crack chasers. "Brother's gonna end up back in the joint if he don't die on the street first."

"Has he pissed anybody off?"

"Not that I've heard. Chuck's a cotton shooter, Mandy. He'd fuck his own mama for the swill in a spoon."

"And Demarcus?"

"I guess he's as clean as you can be with a felony rap hanging over your head."

"I hear he's working on getting his electrician's license."

"Good for him." Boyd seemed genuinely pleased. "Have you talked to Hump and Hop?" He meant Ben Humphrey and Adam Hopkins, his fellow detectives who were currently serving time at Valdosta State Prison.

Amanda gauged her words. "Should I talk to them?"

"It'd be worth a try, but I doubt they're still keyed in. They got four years left. Keeping their noses clean, and I don't guess they'd be too forthcoming with you considering your hand in their current incarceration." He shrugged. "Me, I got nothing to lose."

"I heard you got your date."

"September first." The room went quiet, as if whatever air was left had been sucked out. Boyd cleared his throat. His Adam's apple bobbed in his neck. "Gives you perspective on things."

Amanda leaned forward. "Like what?"

"Like not seeing my kids grow up. Never having the chance to hold my grandbabies." His throat worked again. "I loved being on the street, chasing down the bad guys. I had this dream the other night. We were in the raid van. Evelyn had that stupid song playing—you remember the one?"

"'Would I Lie to You?' "

"Annie Lennox. Stone cold. I could still hear it playing when I woke up. Pounding in my head, even though I ain't heard music in—what?—four years?" He shook his head sadly. "It's like a drug, ain't it? You bust down that door, you clear out all the trash, and then you wake up the next day and do it again." He

opened his hands as much as he could with the shackles. "They paid us for that shit? Come on. We shoulda been paying them."

She nodded, but Will was thinking about the fact that they had managed to pay themselves in myriad other ways.

Boyd said, "I was supposed to be a good man. But, this place ..." He glanced around the room. "It darkens your soul."

"If you'd stayed clean, you'd be out by now."

He stared blankly at the wall behind her. "They got it on tape—me going after those guys." There was no humor in the smile that came to his lips, just darkness and loss. "I had it in my head that it went down different, but they played it at my trial. Tape don't lie, right?"

"Right."

He cleared his throat twice before he could speak. "There was this guy beating that guard with his fists, wrapping a towel around the brother's neck. Eyes glowing like something out of a freak show. Screaming like a goddamn animal. It got me to thinking about my time on the streets. All those bad guys I took down, all those men I thought were monsters, and then I look at that guy on the tape, that monster taking down that guard, and I realize that it's me." His voice was almost a whisper. "That was me beating that man. That was me killing two guys—over what? And that's when it hit me: I've turned into everything I fought against all those years." He sniffed. There were tears in his eyes. "You become what you hate."

"Sometimes."

Will couldn't tell if Boyd was feeling sorry for the men he'd killed or sorry for himself. Probably, it was a combination of both. Everyone knew they were going to die eventually, but Boyd Spivey had the actual date and time. He knew the method. He knew when he would eat his last meal, take his last crap, say his last prayer. And then they would come for him and he would have to stand up and walk on his own two feet toward the last place he would ever lay down his head.

Boyd had to clear his throat again before he could speak. "I hear Yellow's been encroaching down the highway. You should talk to Ling-Ling over in Chambodia." Will didn't recognize the name, but he knew that Chambodia was the term used to describe the stretch of Buford Highway inside the Chamblee city limits. It was a mecca for Asian and Latino immigrants. "You can't go straight to Yellow. Not without an invitation. Tell Ling-Ling Spivey said keep it on the DL." The down low—don't tell anyone. "Watch your back. Sounds to me like this thing is getting out of hand."

"Anything else?"

Will saw Boyd's mouth move, but he couldn't make out the words. Will asked the guard, "Did you hear what he said?"

The guard shook his head. "No idea. Looked like 'amen' or something like that."

Will checked Amanda's reaction. She was nodding.

"All right." Boyd's tone indicated they were finished. His eyes followed Amanda as she got up from the chair. He asked, "You know what I miss the most?"

"What's that?"

“Standing when a lady enters the room.”

“You always had good manners.”

He smiled, showing his busted teeth. “Take care of yourself, Mandy. Make sure Evelyn gets back home to her babies.”

She walked around the table and stood a few feet from the prisoner. Will felt his stomach clench. The guard beside him tensed. There was nothing to worry about. Amanda put her hand to Boyd’s cheek, and then she left the room.

“Christ,” the guard breathed. “Crazy bitch.”

“Watch it,” Will warned the man. Amanda may have been a crazy bitch, but she was *his* crazy bitch. He opened the door and met her out in the hallway. The cameras hadn’t been focused on her face, but Will could tell now that she had been sweating inside the tiny, airless room. Or maybe it had been Boyd who brought out that reaction in her.

The two guards were back on point, standing on either side of Amanda and Will. Over her shoulder, he saw Boyd being duck-walked down the hall in his hand and leg shackles. There was only one guard with him, a small man whose hand barely wrapped around the prisoner’s arm.

Amanda turned around. She watched Boyd until he disappeared around the corner. She said, “It’s guys like that who make me want to bring back Old Sparky.”

The guards gave off deep belly laughs that echoed down the hallway. Amanda had been pretty soft on Spivey and she had to let them know it was all for show. Her act in the tiny room had been pretty convincing. Will had been momentarily fooled, even though the one time he’d heard Amanda ask about the death penalty, her response had been to say that the only issue she had with it was they didn’t kill them fast enough.

“Ma’am?” one of the guards asked. He indicated the gate at the end of the hall.

“Thank you.” Amanda followed him toward the exit. She checked her watch, telling Will, “It’s coming up on four o’clock. We’ve got at least an hour and a half back to Atlanta if we’re lucky. Valdosta is two and a half hours south of here, but it’ll be closer to four with traffic. We’ll never make it in time for a visit. I can pull some strings, but I don’t know the new warden and even if I did, I doubt he’d be foolish enough to yank two men out of maximum security that late at night.” Prisons ran on routine, and anything that changed that routine brought the risk of sparking up violence.

Will asked, “You still want me to go through my case files on the investigation?”

“Of course.” She said it like there had never been any question that they would talk about the investigation that led to Evelyn Mitchell’s forced retirement. “Meet me at the office at five tomorrow morning. We’ll talk about the case on the drive down to Valdosta. That’s about three hours each way. It shouldn’t take more than half an hour each to talk to Ben and Adam—if they’ll talk at all. That’ll put us back in town by noon at the latest to talk with Miriam Kwon.”

Will had almost forgotten about the dead kid in the laundry room. What he clearly remembered was that Amanda had skated over the fact that she knew Boyd Spivey well enough for him to call her Mandy. Will had to assume that Ben

Humphrey and Adam Hopkins were on the same familiar terms, which meant that yet again Amanda was working her own case within the case.

She told him, "I'll make some calls to parole in Memphis and Los Angeles to reach out to Chuck Finn and Demarcus Alexander. All we can do is send them a message that Evelyn's in trouble and we're willing to listen if they're willing to talk."

"They were all very loyal to Evelyn."

She stopped at the gate, waiting for the guard to find the key. "Yes, they were."

"Who's Ling-Ling?"

"We'll get to that."

Will opened his mouth to speak, but the air was pierced by a shrill alarm. The emergency lights flashed. One of the guards grabbed Will by the arm. Instinct took over, and Will jerked away from him. Amanda had obviously had a similar reaction, but she didn't stop there. She ran down the hall, her heels popping against the tile floor. Will jogged after her. He rounded the corner and nearly knocked into her when she came to a dead stop.

Amanda didn't speak. She didn't gasp or cry out. She just grabbed his arm, nails digging through the thin cotton of his T-shirt.

Boyd Spivey lay dead at the end of the hallway. His head was turned at an unnatural angle from his body. The guard beside him was bleeding from a large slit in his throat. Will went to the man. He dropped to his knees and pressed his hands to the wound, trying to stanch the flow. It was too late. Blood pooled onto the floor like a lopsided halo. The man's eyes locked on Will's, filling with panic, and then filling with nothing at all.

CHAPTER FIVE

Faith slowed the Mini as she neared her house. It was past eight o'clock. She had spent the last six hours going over and over what had happened at her mother's house, saying the same thing again and again, as her lawyer, her union rep, three Atlanta cops, and one special agent from the GBI asked questions, took notes, and basically made her feel like a criminal. On some level, it made sense that they believed Faith was wrapped up in whatever had gotten her mother kidnapped. Evelyn had been a cop. Faith was a cop. Evelyn had shot and killed a man. Faith had shot two men—two possible witnesses—seemingly in cold blood. Evelyn was missing. If Faith had been on the other side of the table, she might've been asking the same questions.

Did she have any enemies? Had she ever taken a bribe? Had she ever been approached to do something illegal? Had she ever taken money or gifts to look the other way?

But Faith wasn't on that side of the table, and no matter how much she racked her brain, there was no reason she could think of that anyone would want to take her mother. The worst part about being trapped in the interrogation room was that every minute that ticked by reminded Faith that five able-bodied officers were wasting time in an airless interrogation room when they could all be out looking for her mother.

Who would do this? Did Evelyn have enemies? What were they looking for?

Faith was just as clueless now as when the interrogation began. She pulled the car up to the curb in front of her house. All the lights were on, something she had never allowed in her life. The house looked like a Christmas decoration. A very expensive Christmas decoration. Four cars were parked in the driveway. She recognized Jeremy's old Impala that he'd bought from Evelyn when she'd gotten the Malibu, but the two trucks and black Corvette were new to her.

"Shhh ...," she shushed Emma, who was getting antsy now that the car had stopped. Defying all laws and basic common sense, Faith had put Emma in the front seat beside her. The drive from Mrs. Levy's was just a few minutes, but it wasn't laziness so much as neediness that made Faith want to keep her child close. She picked up Emma and held her tight. The baby's heart beat a soothing staccato against her chest. Her breathing was soft and familiar, like tissues being pulled out of a box.

Faith wanted her mother. She wanted to put her head on Evelyn's shoulder and feel her wiry, strong hands patting her back as she whispered that everything was going to be all right. She wanted to watch her mother tease Jeremy about his long hair and bounce Emma on her knee. Most of all, she wanted to talk to her mother about how awful today had been, to get her advice on whether or not to trust the union rep who was telling her she didn't need a lawyer, or to listen to the lawyer who was telling her the union rep was too tight with the Atlanta force.

"Oh, God," she breathed into Emma's neck. Faith needed her mother.

Tears flooded into her eyes, and for once she did not try to stop them. She was alone for the first time since she'd stepped foot inside her mother's house hours ago. She wanted to fall apart. She *needed* to fall apart. But Jeremy wanted his mother, too. He needed Faith to be strong. Her son needed to believe her when she said that she would do whatever it took to get his grandmother back in one piece.

Judging by the cars, there were at least three cops waiting inside with her son. Jeremy had been crying when she called him from the station—confused, worried, terrified for his grandmother as well as his mother. Amanda's warning came back to Faith. Standing in Mrs. Levy's living room, Faith had been surprised by Amanda's hug, but not by her words, whispered in a low warning: "You've got two minutes to pull yourself together. If these men see you cry, all you will be to them for the rest of your career is a useless woman."

Sometimes Faith thought that Amanda was fighting a battle that had been waged long ago, but sometimes she realized her boss was right. Faith used the back of her hand to wipe her eyes. She pushed open the car door and slipped her purse onto her free shoulder. Emma shifted, startled by the cold air. Faith pulled up her blanket and pressed her lips to the top of the baby's head. Her skin was warm. The fine hairs tickled Faith's lips as she walked up the driveway.

She thought of all the things she had to do before she could go to bed. The house would need to be straightened, no matter the circumstances. Emma needed to be put to bed. Jeremy would need reassurances, and probably dinner. She would have to talk to her brother Zeke at some point. If there was any grace in the world, he was somewhere over the Atlantic right now, flying home from Germany, so she wouldn't have to speak with him tonight. Their relationship had never been good. Thankfully, Amanda had handled the phone calls or Faith would've wasted most of the afternoon yelling at Zeke rather than talking to the Atlanta police. Faith felt a modicum of relief as she climbed the front stairs. Only the threat of having to talk to her brother could make the way she'd spent the last six hours look inviting. She reached for the doorknob just as the door swung open.

"Where the hell have you been?"

Faith stood with her mouth open, staring up at her brother Zeke. "How did you—"

"What happened, Faith? What did you do?"

"How—" Faith felt incapable of forming a complete sentence.

"Dude, chill." Jeremy pushed past his uncle and took Emma from Faith's arms. "You okay, Mom?"

"I'm fine," she told him, but it was Zeke who had her attention. "Did you come from Germany?"

Jeremy supplied, "He's living in Florida now." He pulled Faith into the house. "Did you eat? I can make you something."

"Yes—I mean, no. I'm fine." She stopped worrying about Zeke for a moment and concentrated on her son. "Are you okay?"

He nodded, but she saw he was putting on a brave face.

Faith tried to pull him closer, but he didn't budge, probably because Zeke was watching their every move. She told Jeremy, "I want you to stay here with me tonight."

He shrugged. *No big deal.* “Sure.”

“We’re going to get her back, Jaybird. I promise you.”

Jeremy looked down at Emma, jostling her in his arms. “Jaybird” had been Evelyn’s name for him until his entire elementary school heard her use it one day and teased him into tears. He said, “Aunt Mandy told me the same thing when she called. That she’ll get Grammy back.”

“Well, you know Aunt Mandy doesn’t lie.”

He tried to make a joke of it. “I’d hate to be those guys when she finds them.”

Faith put her hand to Jeremy’s cheek. There was stubble there, something she would never get used to. Her little boy was taller than her, but she knew that he wasn’t as strong. “Grandma’s tough. You know she’s a fighter. And you know she’ll do whatever it takes to get back to you. To us.”

Zeke made a disgusted sound, and Faith gave him a nasty look over Jeremy’s shoulder. He said, “Victor wants you to call him. You remember Victor, right?”

Victor Martinez was the last person on earth she wanted to talk to right now. She told Jeremy, “Go put Emma down for me, all right? And turn out some of those lights. Georgia Power doesn’t need all of my paycheck.”

“You sound like Grandpa.”

“Go.”

Jeremy glanced back at Zeke, reluctant to leave. His instinct had always been to protect Faith.

“Now,” she told him, gently pushing him toward the stairs.

Zeke at least had the decency to wait until Jeremy was out of earshot. He crossed his arms over his chest, puffing up his already sizable frame. “What the hell kind of mess did you get Mom into?”

“Glad to see you, too.” She pushed past him and walked down the hall toward the kitchen. Despite what she’d told Jeremy, Faith hadn’t eaten anything of substance since two o’clock, and she could feel that familiar throbbing headache and wave of nausea that signaled something wasn’t right.

“If anything happens to Mom—”

“What, Zeke?” Faith spun around to face him. He had always been a bully, and just like all of his kind, standing up to him was the only way to stop it. “What are you going to do to me? Throw away my dolls? Give me an Indian burn?”

“I didn’t—”

“I’ve spent the last six hours being grilled by assholes who think I got my mother kidnapped and went on a murderous rampage. I don’t need the same kind of crap from my asshole brother.”

She turned back around and walked toward the kitchen. There was a ginger-haired young man sitting at her table. His jacket was off. A Smith and Wesson M&P hung out of his tactical-style shoulder holster like a black tongue. The straps were tight around his chest, making his shirt blouse out. He was thumbing through the Lands’ End catalogue that had come in the mail yesterday, pretending he hadn’t just heard Faith screaming at the top of her lungs. He stood when she entered the room. “Agent Mitchell, I’m Derrick Connor with the APD hostage negotiation task force.”

“Thank you for being here.” She hoped her tone sounded genuine. “I take it there haven’t been any phone calls?”

"No, ma'am."

"Any updates?"

"No, ma'am, but you'll be the first to hear."

Faith doubted that very seriously. Ginger wasn't just here to catch phone calls. Until the brass said otherwise, Faith had a dark cloud hanging over her head. "There's another officer here?"

"Detective Taylor. He's checking the perimeter. I can get him for you if—"

"I'd just like some privacy, please."

"Yes, ma'am. I'll be right outside if you need me." Connor nodded to Zeke before leaving by the sliding glass door.

Faith groaned as she sat down at the table, feeling like she'd been on her feet for hours, even though she'd been sitting for most of the day. Zeke still had his arms crossed over his chest. He was blocking the doorway as if he thought she might try to bolt.

She asked, "Are you still in the Air Force?"

"I got transferred to Eglin four months ago."

Right around the time Emma was born. "In Florida?"

"Last time I checked." Her questions were obviously ratcheting up his anger. "I'm in the middle of a two-week in-service at the VA hospital on Clairmont. It's a good thing I just happened to be in town or Jeremy would've been alone all day."

Faith stared at her brother. Zeke Mitchell had always looked like he was standing at attention. Even at ten years old, he'd acted like an Air Force major, which was to say that he had been born with a giant steel rod shoved up his ass.

She asked, "Does Mom know you were stateside?"

"Of course she does. We were supposed to have dinner tomorrow night."

"You didn't think to tell me?"

"I didn't want the drama."

Faith let out a long sigh as she sat back in the chair. There it was—the defining word of their relationship. Faith had brought *drama* to Zeke's senior year by getting pregnant. Her *drama* had forced him to leave high school early and sign away ten years of his life to the military. There was more *drama* when she decided to keep Jeremy, and a heaping pile of *drama* when she'd cried uncontrollably at their father's funeral.

"I've been watching the news." He said it like an indictment.

Faith pushed herself up from the table. "Then you know I killed two men today."

"Where were you?"

Her hands shook as she opened the cabinet and took out a nutrition bar. She had said it like it was nothing—she had killed two men today. Faith had noticed during the interrogation that the more she talked about it, the more anesthetized she became to the reality of the act, so that saying it now only made her feel numb.

Zeke repeated, "I asked you a question, Faith. Where were you when Mom needed you?"

"Where were *you*?" She tossed the bar onto the table. Her mind was spinning out again. She should test her blood sugar before she ate anything. "I was at a training seminar."

"You were late."

She assumed he was making a lucky guess. "I wasn't late."

"I talked to Mom this morning."

Faith felt her senses sharpen. "What time? Did you tell the police?"

"Of course I told the police. I talked to her around noon."

Faith had gotten to their mother's house less than two hours later. "Did she seem okay? What did she say?"

"She said that you were late again, Faith, like you always are. That's how it is. The world bends to your schedule."

"Christ," she whispered. She couldn't take this right now. She was suspended from work for God only knew how long. Her mother could be dead. Her son was devastated and she couldn't get her brother out of her face long enough to catch her breath. Adding to the stress, her head felt like it was trapped in a vise. She fished around in her purse for her blood-testing kit. Slipping into a coma, while at the moment an attractive prospect, wasn't going to help anything.

Faith laid out the kit on the table. She hated being watched when she tested her blood, but Zeke didn't seem inclined to give her any privacy. Faith changed the needle in the pen, unwrapped a sterile wipe. Zeke watched her like a hawk. He was a doctor. She could almost hear his brain cataloguing the wrong way she was doing things.

Faith squeezed some blood onto the strip. The number flashed up. She showed Zeke the LED because she knew that he would ask.

He said, "When was your last meal?"

"I had some cheese crackers at the station."

"That's not enough."

She got up and opened the refrigerator. "I know."

"It's high. Probably from the stress."

"I know that, too."

"What's your last A1C?"

"Six point one."

He sat down at the table. "That's not bad."

"No," she agreed, getting her insulin out of the fridge door. It was actually a hair above her target, which was pretty damn good considering Faith had just had a baby.

"Do you really think what you said?" He paused, and she could tell it took a lot out of him to ask the question. "Do you think we'll get her back?"

She sat back down. "I don't know."

"Was she injured?"

Faith shook her head and shrugged at the same time. The police weren't sharing anything with her.

His chest rose and fell. "Why would someone take her? Are you ..." For a change, he tried to be sensitive. "Are you messed up in something?"

"Why are you such a jerk all the time?" She didn't expect an answer. "Mom ran a narc squad for fifteen years, Zeke. She made enemies. That was part of her job. And you know about the investigation. You know why she retired."

"That was four years ago."

"These things don't have a time limit. Maybe somebody decided they want something from her."

"Like what? Money? She doesn't have any. I'm on all her accounts. She's got her pension from the city, some of Dad's retirement, and that's it. Not even Social Security yet."

"It has to be related to a case." Faith drew the insulin into the syringe. "Her entire team went to prison. A lot of very bad people were pissed off to see their bought-and-paid-for cops taken out of the game."

"You think Mom's guys are involved in this?"

Faith shook her head. They had always called Evelyn's team "Mom's guys," mostly because it was easier to keep track of them that way. "I have no idea who's involved or why."

"Are you looking into all their old cases and interviewing perps?"

"Perps? Where the hell did you get that from?" Faith lifted up her shirt just enough to jab the needle into her belly. There was no immediate rush; the drug didn't work that way. Still, Faith closed her eyes, willing the nausea to pass. "I'm suspended, Zeke. They took my badge and my gun and told me to go home. Tell me what you want me to do."

He folded his hands on the table and stared at his thumbs. "Can you make some phone calls? Work some sources? I don't know, Faith. You've been a cop for twenty years. Call in some favors."

"Fifteen years, and there's no one to call. I killed two men today. Did you not see the way that cop was looking at me? They think I'm involved in this. No one is going to do me any favors."

His jaw worked. He was used to his orders being followed. "Mom still has friends."

"And they're all probably shitting their pants right now worried that whatever she's messed up in that got her kidnapped is going to blow back on them."

He didn't like that. His chin tucked into his chest. "All right. I guess there's nothing you can do. We're helpless. And so is Mom."

"Amanda's not going to take this lying down."

Zeke snorted in disbelief. He had never liked Amanda. It was one thing for his baby sister to try to boss him around, but he wasn't going to take it from someone who wasn't blood. It was a strange reaction considering Zeke, Faith, and Jeremy had all grown up calling her Aunt Mandy, an endearment that Faith was fairly certain would get her fired if she used it today. Still, they had always thought that Amanda was part of their family. She was so close to Evelyn that at times she'd passed for a surrogate.

But she was still Faith's boss, and she still kept her foot firmly planted on the back of Faith's neck, just like she did with everyone else who worked for her. Or came into contact with her. Or smiled at her in the street.

Faith opened the nutrition bar and took a large bite. The only sound in the kitchen was her chewing. She wanted to close her eyes, but was afraid of the images she would see. Her mother tied up, mouth gagged. Jeremy's red-rimmed eyes. The way those cops had looked at her today, like the stink of her involvement was too much to stomach.

Zeke cleared his throat. She thought that the hostilities had passed, but his posture indicated otherwise. If there was one constant in her life, it was Zeke's enduring sense of moral superiority.

She tried to get it over with. "What?"

"That Victor guy seemed surprised to hear about Emma. Wanted to know how old she was, when she was born."

She choked, trying to swallow. "Victor was here? In the house?"

"You weren't around, Faith. Someone had to stay with your son until I got here."

The string of curses that came to Faith's mind was probably worse than anything Zeke had heard while stitching up soldiers in Ramstein.

He said, "Jeremy showed him her picture."

Faith tried to swallow again. She felt like rusty nails were catching in her throat.

"Emma's got his coloring."

"Jeremy's?"

"This some kind of pattern with you? You like being an unwed mother?"

"Hey, didn't they tell you when you got back that Ronald Reagan isn't president anymore?"

"Jesus, Faith. Be serious for once. The guy has a right to know he's a father."

"Trust me, Victor's not interested in being a father." The man couldn't even pick up his dirty socks off the floor or remember to leave the toilet seat down. God only knew what he'd forget with a baby.

Zeke repeated, "He has a right to know."

"So, now he knows."

"Whatever, Faith. As long as you're happy."

Any normal human being would've trounced off after dropping that bon mot, but Zeke Mitchell never walked away from a fight. He just sat there, staring at her, willing her to crank it back up. Faith reverted to old ways. If he was going to act like he was ten, then so was she. She ignored his presence, flipping through the Lands' End catalogue, ripping out the page that showed the underwear Jeremy liked so she could order it for him later.

She flipped to the thermal shirts, and Zeke tilted back in his chair, staring out the window.

This tension was nothing new between the two of them. Faith's selfishness was Zeke's favorite one-note song. As usual, she accepted his disapproval as part of her penance. He had good reason to hate her. There was no moving past an eighteen-year-old boy finding out his fourteen-year-old sister was pregnant. Especially when Jeremy got older and Faith saw what it was like for teenage boys—not the walk in the park it had seemed when she was a teenage girl—Faith had felt guilty for what she'd done to her brother.

As hard as it was for her father, who was asked not to attend his men's Bible study, and her mother, who was ostracized by most every woman in the neighborhood, Zeke had endured a special hell because of Faith's unexpected pregnancy. He'd come home from school at least once a week with a bloody nose or black eye. When they asked him about it, he refused to talk. He sneered at Faith over the dinner table. He shot her looks of disgust if she walked by his room. He hated her for what she'd done to the family, but he would rain down hell on anyone who said a word against her.

Not that she could remember much from that time. Even now, it was one long, miserable blur of slobbering self-pity. It was hard to believe that so much had changed in twenty years, but Atlanta, or at least Faith's part of it, had been more

like a small town back then. People were still riding high on the Reagan/Bush wave of conservative values. Faith was a spoiled, selfish teenager when it happened. All she could focus on was how miserable her own life was. Her pregnancy had been a result of her first—and, at the time, she vowed last—sexual encounter. The father's parents had immediately moved him out of state. There was no birthday party when she turned fifteen. Her friends abandoned her. Jeremy's father never wrote or called. She had to go to doctors who probed and prodded her. She was tired all the time, and cranky, and she had hemorrhoids and back pain and everything ached every time she moved.

Faith's father was away a lot, suddenly required to take business trips that had never before been part of his job description. The church had been the center of his life, but that center was abruptly ripped away when he was informed by the pastor that he no longer had the moral authority to be a deacon. Her mother had taken off work to be with her—whether forced or voluntary, Evelyn still would not say.

What Faith did remember was that she and her mother were both trapped at home every day, eating junk food that made them fat and watching soap operas that made them cry. For her part, Evelyn bore Faith's shame like a hermit. She wouldn't leave the house unless she had to. She woke every Monday morning at the crack of dawn to go to the grocery store across town so that she wouldn't run into anyone she knew. She refused to sit in the backyard with Faith even when the air conditioning broke and the living room turned into a kiln. The only exercise she took was a walk around the neighborhood, but that only happened late at night or early morning before the sun came up.

Mrs. Levy from next door left them cookies on the doorstep, but she never came in. Occasionally, someone would leave religious tracts in the mailbox that Evelyn burned in the fireplace. Their only visitor the entire time was Amanda, who didn't have the option of dropping off her de facto sister-in-law's social calendar. She would sit in the kitchen with Evelyn and talk in a low voice that Faith couldn't hear. After Amanda left, Evelyn would go into the bathroom and cry.

It was no wonder that one day Zeke came home from school not with a busted lip but with a copy of his enlistment papers. He had five more months to go until graduation. His ROTC service and SAT scores had already lined up a full ride to Rutgers. But he took his GED and entered the pre-med program almost a full year ahead of schedule.

Jeremy was eight years old the first time he met his uncle Zeke. They had circled each other like cats until a game of basketball had smoothed things over. Still, Faith knew her son and she recognized his reticence toward a man he felt wasn't treating his mother right. Unfortunately, he'd had a lot of opportunity over the years to hone this particular emotion.

Zeke dropped his chair back onto the floor, but still did not look at her.

Faith chewed the nutrition bar slowly, forcing herself to eat despite the nausea that gripped her stomach. She looked out the sliding door and saw the kitchen table, Zeke's posture, straight as a board, reflected back. There was a glow of red beyond the glass. One of the detectives was smoking.

The phone rang, and they both jumped. Faith scrambled to answer the cordless just as the detectives came in from the backyard.

"No news," Will told her. "I was just checking in."

Faith waved away the cops. She took the phone with her into the living room, asking Will, "Where are you?"

"I just got home. There was a jackknifed trailer on 675. It took three hours to clear."

"Why were you down there?"

"The D&C."

Faith felt her stomach lurch.

Will didn't bother with small talk. He told her about his prison visit, Boyd Spivey's murder. Faith put her hand to her chest. When she was younger, Boyd had been a frequent guest at family dinners and backyard barbecues. He'd taught Jeremy how to ride a bike. And then he'd flirted so openly with Faith that Bill Mitchell suggested the man find an alternative way to spend his weekends. "Do they know who did it?"

"The security camera happened to be out in that one section. They've got the place in lockdown. All the cells are being tossed. The warden's not hopeful they'll find much of anything."

"There was outside help." A guard must have been bribed. No inmate would have the time it took to disable a camera mounted inside a prison corridor.

"They're talking to the staff, but the lawyers are already on scene. These guys aren't your everyday suspects."

"Is Amanda all right?" Faith shook her head at her stupidity. "Of course she's all right."

"She got what she wanted. We got a back door into your mom's case because of this."

The GBI had jurisdiction over all death investigations inside state prisons. "I guess that's some kind of positive news."

Will was quiet. He didn't ask her if she was doing okay, because he obviously knew the answer. Faith thought of the way he had held her hands that afternoon, making her pay attention as he coached her on what to say. His tenderness had been unexpected, and she'd had to bite the inside of her cheek hard enough to draw blood so that she wouldn't break down and cry.

Will said, "Do you know that I've never seen Amanda go to the bathroom?" He stopped himself. "Not in person, I mean, but when we left the prison, she pulled over at the gas station and went inside. I've never seen her take a break like that. Have you?"

Faith was used to Will's odd tangents. "I can't say that I have." Amanda had been at those family dinners and barbecues with Boyd Spivey. She had joked with him the way cops do—questioning his manhood, praising his progress on the force despite his lack of mental prowess. She wasn't completely made of stone. Watching Boyd die would've taken something out of her.

Will said, "It was very disconcerting."

"I can imagine." Faith pictured Amanda at the gas station, going into the stall, shutting the door, and allowing herself two minutes to mourn a man who had once meant something to her. Then she'd probably checked her makeup, fixed her hair, and dropped the key back with the gas station attendant, asking him if they locked the bathroom door to keep someone from cleaning it.

Will said, "She probably sees urinating as a weakness."

"Most people do." Faith sat back on the couch. He had given her the best gift she could possibly receive right now: a moment of distraction. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For being there today. For getting Sara to come. For telling me what to—" She remembered that the phone was tapped. "For telling me that everything was going to be okay."

He cleared his throat. There was a short silence. He was awful at this sort of thing, almost as bad as she was. "Have you thought about what they were looking for?"

"That's all I can think about." She heard the refrigerator door open and close. Zeke was probably making a list of foods she shouldn't stock in the house. "What's next?"

He hesitated.

"Tell me."

"Amanda and I are going down to Valdosta first thing."

Valdosta State Prison. Ben Humphrey and Adam Hopkins. They were talking to everyone from her mother's old team. Faith should've expected this, but the news of Boyd's death had thrown her off. She should've known that Will was going to reopen the case.

Faith said, "I should keep this line open in case someone calls."

"All right."

She hung up the phone because there was nothing more to say. He still thought her mother was guilty. Even after working with Faith for almost two years, seeing that she did things the right way because that was the kind of cop her mother had raised her to be, Will still thought Evelyn Mitchell was dirty.

Zeke loomed in the doorway. "Who was that?"

"Work." She stood up from the couch. "My partner."

"The asshole who tried to put Mom in prison?"

"The very same."

"I still don't know how you can work with that douche."

"I cleared it with Mom."

"You didn't clear it with me."

"Should I have sent the request to Germany or Florida?" He stared at her.

Faith wasn't going to explain herself to her brother. It was Amanda who had asked her to partner with Will, and Evelyn had told Faith to do what was best for her career. She didn't have to point out that it was not a bad idea to get out of the Atlanta Police Department, where Evelyn's forced retirement was considered either a coast or a crime depending on whom you asked. "Did Mom ever talk to you about the investigation?"

"Shouldn't you ask your partner about that?"

"I'm asking you," Faith snapped. Evelyn had refused to discuss the case against her, and not just because Faith could've been called as a potential witness. "If she said something, even something that was a little off but you didn't think about it at the time ..."

"Mom doesn't shop talk with me. That's your job."

There was the same tinge of accusation in his voice, as if Faith had the power to find their mother and was simply choosing not to exercise it. She looked at the clock on the wall. It was almost nine, too late to be doing this. "I'm going to

bed. I'll send down Jeremy with some sheets. The couch is pretty comfortable."

He nodded, and Faith saluted his dismissal. She was halfway up the stairs when he spoke. "He's a good kid." Faith turned around. "Jeremy. He's a good kid."

She smiled. "Yeah, he is." She was almost to the top of the stairs when the other shoe dropped.

"Mom did a good job."

Faith continued up the stairs, refusing to take the bait. She checked on the baby. Emma smacked her lips when Faith leaned down to kiss her forehead. She was in that deep, blissful sleep that only babies know. Faith checked the monitor to make sure it was on. She stroked her hand down Emma's arm, letting the baby's tiny fingers wrap around her one, before leaving.

In the next room, Jeremy's bed was empty. Faith lingered at the door. She hadn't changed his room, though it would've been nice to have an office. His posters were still on the wall—a Mustang GT with a bikini-clad blonde leaning over the hood, another with a half-naked brunette draped across a Camaro, a third and fourth showing concept cars with the ubiquitous big-bosomed model. Faith could still remember coming home from work one day to find his "Bridges of the Southeastern United States" posters replaced with these gems. Jeremy still thought that he'd cleverly tricked her into believing that puberty had brought on a sudden interest in automobiles.

"I'm in here."

She found him in her room. Jeremy was lying on his stomach, head at the foot of her bed, feet in the air, iPhone in his hands. The sound on the TV was muted but the closed captioning was on.

She asked, "Everything okay?"

He tilted the iPhone in his hands, obviously playing a game. "Yeah."

Faith remembered the fertile girlfriend. It was strange she wasn't here. They were usually attached at the hip. "Where's Kimberly?"

"We're taking a break," he said, and she almost sobbed with relief. "I heard you and Zeke yelling."

"There's a first time for everything."

He tilted the phone the other way.

She said, "I've been wanting one of those." He got the hint and put the device in his pocket. "I know you heard the phone ring. It was Will. He's working with Aunt Amanda."

He stared at the TV. "That's good."

Faith started to untie his sneakers. In typical teenage boy logic, he'd thought keeping his feet raised off the bed would stop debris from raining down. "Tell me what happened when Zeke got here."

"Dude was being an asshole."

"Tell me like I'm your mother."

She saw him color slightly in the glow of the TV. "Victor stayed with me. I told him he didn't have to, but he said he wanted to, so ..."

Faith untied his other sneaker. "You showed him Emma's picture?"

He kept staring at the set. Jeremy had really liked Victor—probably more than Faith had, which was only part of the problem.

She told him, "It's all right."

"Zeke was kinda shitty—I mean rude—to him."

"In what way?"

"Just kinda poking his chest out and pushing him around."

"Just being Zeke. "Nothing happened, right?"

"Nah, Victor's not the type."

Faith assumed as much. Victor Martinez worked in an office, read *The Wall Street Journal*, wore bespoke suits, and washed his hands sixteen times a day. He was about as passionate as a box of hair. It was Faith's lot in life that she would only ever be able to fall in love with the kind of man who would wear sleeveless T-shirts and punch her brother in the face.

She slid off Jeremy's shoe, frowning at the state of his sock. "Toes go on the inside, college boy." She made a mental note to get him more socks when she ordered his underwear. His jeans were looking ratty, too. So much for the three hundred dollars left in her checking account. Thank God they had suspended her with pay. Faith was going to have to dip into savings just to keep her son from looking like a hobo.

Jeremy rolled over onto his back to face her. "I showed Victor Emma's Easter picture."

She swallowed. Victor was a smart man, but it didn't take a genius to do the math. Even without that, Faith was blonde and fair. Emma had her father's dark coloring and rich brown eyes. "The one where she's wearing the bunny ears?"

He nodded.

"That's a good one." Faith could see the guilt well up in him like water spilling out of a glass. "It's all right, Jay. He would've found out eventually."

"Then why didn't you tell him?"

Because Faith was just the right mixture of emotionally stunted and controlling, which was something Jeremy would find out when his future wife screamed it in his face. For now, Faith said, "It's not something I'm going to talk to you about."

He sat up to face her. "Grandma likes Will."

Faith guessed he'd overheard her conversation with Zeke. "She told you that?"

He nodded. "She said he was an all right guy. That he treated her fairly, and that he had a hard job to do but he wasn't mean about it."

Faith didn't know whether her mother had been assuaging Jeremy's concerns or revealing her true opinion. Knowing her mother, it was probably a mixture of both. "Did she ever talk to you about why she retired?"

He tugged at a loose thread on the bedspread. "She said she was the boss, so it was her fault for not noticing what was going on."

This was more than she'd ever told Faith. "Anything else?"

He shook his head. "I'm glad Aunt Amanda has Will helping her. She can't do everything by herself. And he's really smart."

Faith stopped his hand and held it until Jeremy looked up at her. The television offered the only light in the room. It gave his face a green cast. "I know you're worried about Grandma, and I know there's nothing I can say to make this better for you."

"Thanks." He was being sincere. Jeremy had always appreciated honesty.

She pulled him up from the bed and wrapped her arms around him. His shoulders were thin. He was gangly, not yet the man he was going to be no

matter the fact that he ate his weight in macaroni and cheese every day.

He let her hug him for longer than usual. She kissed his head. "Everything's going to be all right."

"That's what Grandmamma always says."

"And she's always right." Faith squeezed him closer.

"Mom, you're suffocating me."

Reluctantly, she let him go. "Get some sheets for Uncle Zeke. He's going to sleep on the couch."

Jeremy slid his feet back into his sneakers. "Has he always been that way?"

Faith didn't pretend to miss his meaning. "When we were little, every time he had to fart, he would run into my room and tear it loose."

Jeremy started laughing.

"And then he said if I told on him, he'd gorge himself on beans and cheese and then hold me down and do it in my face the next time."

That sent him over the edge. He bent over, holding his stomach as he brayed like a donkey. "Did he do it?"

Faith nodded, which made him laugh even harder. She let him enjoy her humiliation a little longer before nudging him on the shoulder. "Time to go to bed."

He wiped tears from his eyes. "Man, I've got to do that to Horner."

Horner was his dorm mate. Faith doubted anyone would notice one more noxious odor in their shared quarters.

"Get Zeke a pillow from the closet." She pushed him out of the room. He was still laughing as he walked down the hallway. It was a small price to pay to see the worry momentarily absent from her son's face.

Faith pulled back the comforter on her bed. Dirt from Jeremy's sneakers was smeared into the sheets. She was too tired to change the bed. She was too tired to put on her nightgown or even brush her teeth. She slipped off her shoes and got into bed wearing the same GBI regs she'd put on at five o'clock that morning.

The house was quiet. Her body was so tense that she felt like she was lying on a board. Emma's soft snores came through on the baby monitor. Faith stared up at the ceiling. She'd forgotten to turn off the television. Light flashed like a strobe from the action movie Jeremy had been watching.

Boyd Spivey was dead. It seemed impossible to grasp. He was a big guy, larger than life, the sort of cop you imagined going out in a blaze of glory. He was the exact opposite of his partner. Chuck Finn was dour, full of gloomy predictions and terrified that he would be shot in the line of duty. His defense during the investigation was the only one Faith had found credible during the whole mess. Chuck had claimed he was just following orders. To those who knew him, it seemed entirely plausible. Detective Finn was the quintessential follower, which was exactly the personality type that men like Boyd Spivey knew how to exploit.

But Faith didn't want to think about Boyd or Chuck or any of her mother's team right now. The investigation had eaten up six months of her life. Six months of sleepless nights. Six months of worrying that her mother was going to have a heart attack or end up in prison or both.

Faith made herself close her eyes. She wanted to think of good times with her mother, to recall some moment of kindness or summon the pleasure of her

company. What she saw instead was the man in her mother's bedroom, the black hole in the center of his forehead where Faith had shot him. His hands jerked up. The hostage stared at Faith in disbelief. His mouth gaped open. She saw the silver grill on his teeth, that his tongue was pierced with a matching silver ball.

Almeja, he had said.

Money.

Faith heard the floorboards creak in the hall. "Jeremy?" She pushed herself up on her elbow and turned on the bedside lamp.

He gave her a sheepish look. "Sorry, I know you're tired."

"Do you want me to take the sheets down to Zeke?"

"No, it's not that." He pulled his iPhone out of his pocket. "Something came up on my Facebook page."

"I thought you stopped using that when I made you friend me." Faith had never been the kind of parent to completely trust her kid. Her own parents had trusted her and look where that had gotten them. "What's going on?"

His thumbs moved across the screen as he talked. "I got bored. I mean, not bored, but there was nothing to do, so ..."

"It's okay, baby." She sat up in bed. "What is it?"

"Lots of people have been posting stuff. I guess they heard about Grandma on the news."

"That's nice," Faith said, though she found it a bit ghoulish and, to borrow a word from her brother, *dramatic*. "What are they saying?"

"Mostly just that they're thinking about me and stuff like that. But there's this." He turned the phone around and handed it to her.

Faith read the message aloud. "'Hey, Jaybird, hope you're okay. I'm sure the bad guys will get fingered. Just remember what your grandma used to say: keep your mouth shut and your eyes open.'" Faith checked the screen name. "GoodKnight92. Is that someone you went to Grady with?" Jeremy's high school's mascot was the knight, and he had been born in 1992.

He shrugged. "Never heard of him."

Faith noted that the post had come in at 2:32 that afternoon, less than an hour after Evelyn had been abducted. She tried not to sound concerned when she asked, "When did he friend you?"

"Today, but a lot of people did. They kind of all came out of the woodwork."

She gave him the phone. "What does his profile say?"

"Just that he lives in Atlanta and works in distribution." He thumbed through the screen and showed it to Faith.

Her eyes were so tired she had trouble focusing. Faith held the phone close to her face so she could read the words. There was nothing more, not even a picture. Jeremy was GoodKnight's only friend. Faith felt her cop's intuition telling her something was wrong, but she handed back the phone as if it was nothing. "I'm sure it's someone you went to Morningside with. You were teased so bad about Grandma calling you Jaybird that you begged me to let you switch to another school."

"It's weird, though—right?"

She wasn't going to let him worry. "Most of your friends are weird."

He wouldn't be soothed. "How does he know that about Gran always saying that?"

"It's a pretty common saying," Faith answered. "Mouth shut, eyes open. I had a drill instructor at the academy who practically tattooed it on his forehead." She forced a lightness into her tone. "Come on. It's nothing. It's probably a cop's kid. You know the rule. Something bad happens and we're all family."

That finally seemed to mollify him. Jeremy had been dragged to his share of hospitals and strangers' homes when a police officer had been wounded or killed. He put the phone back into his pocket.

She asked, "You sure you're okay?"

He nodded.

"You can sleep in here if you want."

"That'd be weird, Mom."

"Wake me if you need me." Faith lay back down, slipping her hand under the pillow. Her fingers touched something wet. Familiar.

Jeremy immediately picked up on the change. "What's wrong?"

Faith's breath was trapped in her chest. She didn't trust herself to speak.

"Mom?"

"Tired," she managed. "I'm just tired." Her lungs ached for oxygen. She felt sweat break out all over her body. "Get the sheets before Zeke comes up here."

"Are you—"

"It's been a long day, Jeremy. I need to go to sleep."

He was still reluctant. "All right."

"Can you shut my door?" She wasn't sure she could move even if she wanted to.

Jeremy gave her another worried look as he pulled the door closed. Faith heard the click of the latch, then the soft padding of his feet as he walked down the hall to the laundry room. It was only when she heard the third stair from the bottom squeak that Faith allowed herself to pull her hand out from under the pillow.

She opened her clenched fist. The sharp pain of fear receded and now all Faith could feel was blinding fury.

The message on Jeremy's iPhone. His high school. His birth year.

Keep your mouth shut and your eyes open.

Her son had lain in this bed, his feet inches from what she had found.

I'm sure the bad guys will get fingered.

The words only made sense when Faith held her mother's severed finger in her hand.

CHAPTER SIX

Sara Linton was no stranger to self-loathing. She'd felt ashamed when her father saw her steal a candy bar from the honor box at church. She'd felt humiliated when she caught her husband cheating on her. She'd felt guilty when she lied to her sister about liking her brother-in-law. She'd felt embarrassed when her mother pointed out that she was too tall to wear capri pants. What she'd never felt like was trashy, and the knowledge that she was no better than a reality TV star cut her to the core of her being.

Even now, hours later, Sara's face still burned at the thought of her confrontation with Angie Trent. There was only one other time in her life that she could recall a woman talking to her the way Angie had. Jeffrey's mother was a mean drunk, and Sara had caught her on a very bad night. The only difference in this instance was that Angie had absolutely every right to label Sara a whore.

Jezebel, Sara's mother would've said.

Not that Sara was going to tell her mother about any of this.

She muted the television, the sound grating on her nerves. She'd tried reading. She'd tried cleaning up her apartment. She'd clipped the dogs' toenails. She'd washed dishes and folded clothes that were so wrinkled from being piled on her couch for so long that she'd had to iron them before they would fit in the drawers.

Twice, she'd headed toward the elevator to take Will's car back to his house. Twice she'd turned back around. The problem was his keys. She couldn't leave them in the car and she sure as hell wasn't going to knock on the front door and hand them to Angie. Leaving them in his mailbox was not an option. Will's neighborhood wasn't bad, but he lived in the middle of a major metropolitan city. The car would be gone in the time it took Sara to walk back home.

So she just kept assigning herself busywork, all the while dreading Will's arrival like a root canal. What would she say to him when he finally came to get his car? Words failed, though Sara had silently rehearsed plenty of speeches about honor and morality. The voice in her head had taken on the cadence of a Baptist preacher. This was all so sordid. It wasn't right. Sara was not going to be some tawdry other woman. She wasn't going to steal someone's husband, even if he was ripe for the taking. Nor was she going to engage in a catfight with Angie Trent. Most of all, she wasn't going to step into the middle of their incredibly dysfunctional relationship.

What kind of monster bragged about her husband trying to kill himself? It made Sara's stomach turn. And then there was the larger issue: to what depths had Will sunk where slicing a razor up his arm seemed like the only solution? How obsessed was he with Angie that he would do such a terrible thing? And how sick was Angie that she'd held him while he did it?

These questions were best handled by a psychiatrist. Will's childhood obviously had not been a walk in the park. That fact alone could cause some damage. His dyslexia was an issue, but it didn't seem to stop his life. He had his

quirks, but they were endearing, not off-putting. Had he worked through his suicidal tendencies or was he just good at hiding them? If he was past that point in his life, why was he still with that horrible woman?

And since Sara had decided nothing was going to happen between them, why was she still wasting her time thinking about these things?

He wasn't even her type. Will was nothing like Jeffrey. There was none of her husband's staggering self-confidence on display. Despite his height, Will wasn't a physically intimidating man. Jeffrey had been a football player. He knew how to lead a team. Will was a loner, content to blend into the background and do his job under the shadow of Amanda's thumb. He didn't want glory or recognition. Not that Jeffrey had been an attention seeker, but he was incredibly secure in who he was and what he wanted. Women had swooned in his presence. He knew how to do just about everything the right way, which was one of the many reasons Sara had thrown logic to the wind and married him. Twice.

Maybe she wasn't really interested in Will Trent at all. Maybe Angie Trent was partly right. Sara had liked being married to a cop, but not for the kinky reasons Angie had implied. The black-and-white nature of law enforcement appealed to Sara on a deep level. Her parents had raised her to help people, and you couldn't get much more helpful than being a police officer. There was also a part of her brain that was drawn to the puzzle-solving aspects of a criminal investigation. She had loved talking to Jeffrey about his cases. Working in the morgue as the county coroner, finding clues, giving him information that she knew would help him with his job, had made her feel useful.

Sara groaned. As if being a doctor wasn't a useful thing. Maybe Angie Trent was right about the perversion. Next, Sara would start trying to imagine Will in a uniform.

She shifted her two greyhounds off her lap so that she could stand. Billy yawned. Bob rolled onto his back to get more comfortable. She glanced around her apartment. An antsiness took over. She felt overwhelmed by the desire to change something—anything—so that she felt more in control of her life.

She started with the couches, siding them at an angle from the television while the dogs looked down at the floor passing underneath them. The coffee table was too big for the new arrangement, so she shifted everything again, only to find that that didn't work, either. By the time she finished rolling up the rug and muscling everything back into its original place, she was sweating.

There was dust on the top of the picture frame over the console table. Sara got the furniture polish out and started dusting again. There was a lot of space to cover. The building she lived in was a converted milk-processing factory. Red brick walls supported twenty-foot ceilings. All the mechanical workings were exposed. The interior doors were distressed wood with barn door hardware. It was the sort of industrial loft you expected to find in New York City, though Sara had paid considerably less than the ten million dollars such a place would fetch in Manhattan.

No one thought the space suited her, which was what had drawn Sara to the apartment in the first place. When she'd first moved to Atlanta, she'd wanted something completely different from her homey bungalow back home. She was thinking lately that she'd gone overboard. The open plan felt almost cavernous. The kitchen, with its stainless steel everything and black granite tops, had been

very expensive and very useless to someone like Sara, who had been known to burn soup. All the furniture was too modern. The dining room table, carved from a single piece of wood and large enough to seat twelve, was a ridiculous luxury considering she only used it to sort mail and hold the pizza box while she paid the delivery guy.

Sara put away the furniture polish. Dust wasn't the problem. She should move. She should find a small house in one of the more settled Atlanta neighborhoods and get rid of the low-lying leather couches and glass coffee tables. She should have fluffy couches and wide chairs you could snuggle into for reading. She should have a kitchen with a farmhouse sink and a cheery view to the backyard through the wide-open windows.

She should live somewhere like Will's house.

The television caught her eye. The logo for the evening news scrolled onto the screen. A serious-looking reporter stood in front of the Georgia Diagnostic and Classification Prison. Most insiders referred to it as the D&C, fully mindful of the play on words for Georgia's death row. Sara had seen the story of the two murdered men earlier and thought then what she thought now: here was yet another reason not to be involved with Will Trent.

He was working on Evelyn Mitchell's case. He had probably been nowhere near that prison today, but the minute Sara saw the story about a murdered officer, her heart had jumped into her throat. Even after they'd given the man's name as well as that of the dead inmate, her heart would not calm. Thanks to Jeffrey, Sara knew how it felt when the phone unexpectedly rang in the middle of the night. She remembered how every news story, every snippet of gossip, caused something inside of her to clench in fear that he would be going out on another case, putting his life in danger. It was a form of post-traumatic stress disorder. Sara hadn't realized until her husband was gone that she'd been living in dread for all those years.

The intercom buzzed. Billy gave a halfhearted growl, but neither dog got off the couch. Sara pressed the speaker button. "Yes?"

Will said, "Hi, I'm sorry I—"

Sara buzzed him in. She grabbed his keys off the counter and propped open the front door. She wouldn't invite him in. She wouldn't let him apologize for what Angie had said, because Angie Trent had every right to speak her mind, and what's more, she'd made some very good points. Sara would just tell Will that it was nice knowing him and good luck working things out with his wife.

If he ever got here. The elevator was taking its sweet time. She watched the digital readout show the car moving from the fourth floor down to the lobby. It took another forever for the numbers to start ascending. She whispered them aloud, "Three, four, five," and then finally the bell dinged for six.

The doors slid back. Will peered out behind a pyramid of two cardboard file boxes, a white Styrofoam carton, and a Krispy Kreme doughnut bag. The greyhounds, who only seemed to notice Sara around suppertime, ran out into the hall to greet him.

Sara mumbled a curse.

"Sorry I'm so late." He turned his body so that Bob wouldn't knock him over.

Sara grabbed both dogs by their collars, holding the door open with her foot so that Will could come in. He slid the boxes onto her dining room table and

immediately started petting the dogs. They licked him like a long-lost friend, their tails wagging, nails scratching against the wood floor. Sara's resolve, which had been so strong only seconds before, started to crack.

Will looked up. "Were you in bed?"

She had dressed appropriately for her mood in an old pair of sweat pants and a Grant County Rebels football jersey. Her hair was pulled back so tightly that she could feel it tugging the skin on her neck. "Here are your keys."

"Thanks." Will brushed the dog hair off his chest. He was still wearing the same black T-shirt from that afternoon. "Whoa." He pulled back Bob, who was making a play for the Krispy Kremes.

"Is that blood?" There was a dark, dried stain on the right-hand sleeve of his shirt. Instinctively, Sara reached for his arm.

Will took a step back. "It's nothing." He pulled down the cuff. "There was an incident at the prison today."

Sara got that familiar, tight feeling in her chest. "You were there."

"I couldn't do anything to help him. Maybe you ..." His words trailed off. "The staff doctor said it was a mortal wound. There was a lot of blood." He clamped his hand around his wrist. "I should've changed shirts when I got home, but I've got a lot of work to do, and my house is kind of upside down right now."

He had been home. Without reason, Sara had let herself think for just a moment that he hadn't seen his wife. "We should talk about what happened."

"Uh ..." He seemed to purposefully miss her point. "Not much to say. He's dead. He wasn't a particularly good guy, but I'm sure it'll be hard on his family."

Sara stared at him. There was no guile on his face. Maybe Angie hadn't told Will about the confrontation. Or maybe she had, and Will was doing his best to ignore it. Either way, he was hiding something. But suddenly, after spending the last few hours working herself into a frenzy, Sara didn't care. She didn't want to talk about it. She didn't want to analyze it. The only thing she was certain of was that she did not want him to leave.

She asked, "What's in the boxes?"

He seemed to note her shift in attitude, but chose not to acknowledge it. "Case files from an old investigation. It might have something to do with Evelyn's disappearance."

"Not kidnapping?"

His grin indicated he'd been caught. "I just have to know everything in these files by five tomorrow morning."

"Do you need help?"

"Nope." He turned to lift the boxes. "Thanks for getting Betty home for me."

"Being dyslexic is not a character flaw."

Will left the boxes on the table and turned around. He didn't respond immediately. He just looked at her in a way that made Sara wish that she had bothered to bathe. Finally, he said, "I think I liked it better when you were mad at me."

Sara didn't respond.

"It's Angie, right? That's what you're upset about?"

These shifting levels of subterfuge were new to her. "It seems like we were ignoring that."

"Would you like to continue along that path?"

Sara shrugged. She didn't know what she wanted. The right thing to do would be to tell him that their innocent flirtation was over. She should open the door and make him leave. She should call Dr. Dale tomorrow morning and ask him out on another date. She should forget about Will and let time erase him from her memory.

But it wasn't her memory that was the problem. It was that tightness in her chest when she thought about him being in danger. It was that feeling of relief when he walked through the door. It was the happiness she felt just from being near him.

He said, "Angie and I haven't been together—*together*—in over a year." Will paused, as if to let that sink in. "Not since I met you."

All Sara could say was, "Oh."

"And then when her mother died a few months ago, I saw her for maybe two hours, and she was gone. She didn't even go to the funeral." He paused again; this was obviously difficult for him. "It's hard to explain our relationship. Not without making myself look pitiful and stupid."

"You don't owe me an explanation."

He put his hands in his pockets and leaned against the table. The overhead light caught the jagged scar above his mouth. The skin was pink, a fine line tracing the ridge between his upper lip and nose. Sara couldn't begin to calculate the amount of time she'd wasted wondering how the scar would feel against her own mouth.

Too much time.

Will cleared his throat. He looked down at the floor, then back up at her. "You know where I grew up. How I grew up."

She nodded. The Atlanta Children's Home had closed many years ago, but the abandoned building was less than five miles from where they stood.

"Kids went away a lot. They were trying to get more of us into foster care. I guess it's cheaper that way." He shrugged, as if this was to be expected. "The older ones didn't usually work out. They lasted maybe a few weeks, sometimes only a couple of days. They came back different. I guess you can imagine why."

Sara shook her head. She didn't want to.

"There wasn't exactly a long line of people who wanted to foster an eight-year-old boy who couldn't pass the third grade. But Angie's a girl, and pretty, and smart, so she got sent out a lot." Again, he shrugged. "I guess I got used to waiting for her to come back, and I guess I got used to not asking what happened while she was gone." He pushed away from the table and picked up the boxes. "So, that's it. Pitiful and stupid."

"No. Will—"

He stopped in front of the door, the boxes held in front of him like a suit of armor. "Amanda wanted me to ask you if you know anyone at the Fulton ME's office."

Sara's brain took its time changing gears. "Probably. I did some of my training there when I started."

He shifted his grip. "This is from Amanda, not me. She wants you to make some calls. You don't have to, but—"

"What does she want to know?"

"Anything that comes up on the autopsies. They're not going to share with us."

They want to keep this case.”

He was turned toward the door, waiting. She looked at the back of his neck, the fine hairs at the nape. “All right.”

“You’ve got Amanda’s number. Just call her if anything comes up. Or call her if it doesn’t. She’s impatient.” He stood waiting for her to open the door.

Sara had spent most of the day wanting him out of her life, but now that he was leaving, she couldn’t take it. “Amanda was wrong.”

He turned back around to face her.

“What she said today. Amanda was wrong.”

He feigned shock. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard anyone say those words out loud before.”

“*Almeja*. The dying man’s last words.” She explained, “The literal translation is right—‘clams’—but it’s not slang for ‘money.’ At least not the way I’ve heard it used.”

“What’s it slang for?”

She hated the word, but she said it anyway. “ ‘Cunt.’ ”

His brow furrowed. “How do you know that?”

“I work in a large public hospital. I don’t think a week’s gone by since I started without someone calling me some variation of that word.”

Will dropped the boxes back on the table. “Who called you that?”

She shook her head. He looked ready to take on her entire patient roster. “The point is, the guy was calling Faith that name. He wasn’t talking about money.”

Will crossed his arms. He was obviously riled. “Ricardo,” he supplied. “The guy in the backyard who shot at those little girls—his name was Ricardo.” Sara held his gaze. Will kept talking. “Hironobu Kwon was the dead guy in the laundry room. We don’t know anything about the older Asian, except that he had a fondness for Hawaiian shirts and spoke with a southside southern drawl. And then there’s someone else who got injured, probably in a knife fight with Evelyn. You’ll probably see the notice at the hospital when you go back to work. Blood type B-negative, possibly Hispanic, stab wound to the gut, possibly a wound on his hand.”

“That’s quite a cast of characters.”

“Trust me, it’s not easy keeping up with them, and I’m not even sure any of them are the real reason all of this is happening.”

“What do you mean?”

“This feels personal, like there’s something else at play. You don’t wait around four years to rob somebody. It’s got to be about something more than money.”

“They say it’s the root of all evil for a reason.” Sara’s husband had always loved money motivations. In her experience, he tended to be right. “This injured guy—the one with the gut wound—is he in a gang?” Will nodded.

“They generally have their own doctors. They’re not bad—I’ve seen some of their handiwork at the ER. But a belly wound is pretty sophisticated to treat. They might need blood, and B-negative is hard to come by. They’d also need a sterile operating environment, medicines that you can’t just grab at your local drugstore. They’d only be at a hospital pharmacy.”

“Can you give me a list? I can have it added to the alert.”

“Of course.” She went to the kitchen to find a pad and paper.

He stayed by the dining room table. “How long could someone live with a

stab wound in their belly? It bled a lot at the scene.”

“It depends. Hours, maybe days. Triage can buy some time, but anything close to a week would be a miracle.”

“You mind if I eat my dinner while you do that?” He opened the Styrofoam box. She saw two foot-long hot dogs soaked in chili. He sniffed, then frowned. “I guess the guy at the gas station was going to throw them out for a reason.” Still, he picked up one of the hot dogs.

“Don’t you dare.”

“It’s probably fine.”

“Sit down.” She took out a frying pan from the cabinet and found a carton of eggs in the refrigerator. Will sat at the bar across from the stainless steel cooktop. The Styrofoam box was on the counter beside him. Bob poked it with his nose, then backed away.

She asked, “Was that really your dinner—two hot dogs and a Krispy Kreme doughnut?”

“Four doughnuts.”

“What does your cholesterol look like?”

“I guess it’s white like what they show in the commercials.”

“Very funny.” She wrapped the Styrofoam container in aluminum foil and threw it into the trash. “Why do you think Faith’s mother wasn’t kidnapped?”

“I didn’t actually say that. I just think a lot of things aren’t adding up.” He watched Sara break eggs into a bowl. “I don’t think she left willingly. She wouldn’t do that to her family. But I think she might know her kidnappers. Like, they had a previous working relationship.”

“How?”

He stood and walked to the dining room table, where he took out a handful of yellow folders from one of the boxes. He grabbed the bag of doughnuts before sitting back down at the kitchen bar. “Boyd Spivey,” he said, opening the top file and showing her a mugshot.

Sara recognized the face and name from the news. “That’s the man who was killed at the prison today.”

Will nodded, opening the next file. “Ben Humphrey.”

“Another cop?”

“Yep.” He opened another file. There was a yellow star stickered on the inside. “This is Adam Hopkins. He was Humphrey’s partner.” Another file, this one with a purple star. “This is Chuck Finn, Spivey’s partner, and this guy—” He fumbled open the last file. Green star. “Is Demarcus Alexander.” He’d forgotten one. Will went back to the table and found another yellow folder. This one had a black star, which seemed prophetic when he said, “Lloyd Crittenden. Died from a drug overdose three years ago.”

“All cops?”

Will nodded as he shoved half a doughnut into his mouth.

Sara poured the eggs into the pan. “What am I missing?”

“Their boss was Evelyn Mitchell.”

Sara almost spilled the eggs. “Faith’s mother?” She went back to the photographs, studying the men’s faces. They all had that same arrogant tilt to their chins, as if their present trouble was just a blip on the radar. She skimmed Spivey’s arrest report, trying to decipher the typos. “Theft during the

commission of a felony.” She flipped back the page and read the details. “Spivey issued a standing order to his team that they should remove ten percent off the top of every drug bust involving cash money exceeding two thousand dollars.”

“It added up.”

“To how much?”

“From what accounting could estimate, over the course of twelve years, they stole around six million dollars.”

She gave a low whistle.

“That’s a little less than a million each, tax free. Or at least it was. I’m sure Uncle Sam caught up with them their first day in prison.”

Even stolen money was taxable income. Most inmates got their notice from the IRS within the first week of their prison sentence.

Sara checked the front page of the arrest report, stopping on a familiar name. “You were the investigating officer.”

“It’s not my favorite part of the job.” He shoved the rest of the doughnut into his mouth.

Sara looked down at the file, pretending to read on. The typos hadn’t been much of a red flag. Every police report she’d ever read was riddled with grammar and spelling mistakes. Like most dyslexics, Will treated spell check as sacrosanct. He’d substituted words that made no contextual sense, then signed his name at the bottom. Sara studied his signature. It was little more than a squiggle running at an angle from the black line.

Will was watching her closely. She realized she needed to ask a question. “Who instigated the investigation?”

“An anonymous tip came into the GBI.”

“Why wasn’t Evelyn charged?”

“The prosecutor refused to bring a case. She was allowed to retire with her full pension. They called it early retirement, but she was way past her thirty years. She wasn’t working for the money. At least not the money she was getting from the city.”

Sara used a spatula to stir the eggs. Will ate another doughnut in two bites. The powdered sugar sprinkled onto the black granite countertop.

She said, “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“How does Faith work with you after you investigated her mother?”

“She thinks I’m wrong.” Bob was back. He propped his nose on the counter and Will started petting his head. “I know that she cleared it with her mother, but we’ve never really talked about it beyond that.”

Sara would not have believed anyone else telling her the same thing, but she could easily imagine how this worked. Faith wasn’t one to sit around talking about her feelings, and Will was just so damn decent that it was hard to assign him vengeful ulterior motives. “What’s Evelyn like?”

“She’s old school.”

“Like Amanda?”

“Not exactly.” He took another doughnut out of the bag. “I mean, she’s tough, but she’s not as intense.”

Sara understood what he meant. That generation didn’t have a lot of avenues for proving themselves to their male counterparts. Amanda had taken the ball-

breaking route with obvious relish.

"They came up together," Will told her. "They went to the academy together, then worked joint task forces through APD and the GBI. They're still good friends. I think Amanda dated Evelyn's brother, or her brother-in-law."

Sara couldn't think of a more obvious conflict of interest. "And Amanda was your senior officer when you were investigating Evelyn?"

"Yep." He inhaled another doughnut.

"Did you know this at the time?"

He shook his head, keeping the doughnut in his cheek like a squirrel with a nut so that he could ask, "You know the stove isn't on, right?"

"Crap." That explained why the eggs were still liquid. She clicked the dial until the flame whooshed up.

He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "I like to let them sit for a while, too. Gives them a woodsy character."

"That's *E. coli*." She checked the toaster, wondering why it hadn't popped up. Probably because there was nothing in there. Will smiled as she got a loaf of bread out of the cabinet. She said, "I'm not much of a cook."

"Do you want me to take over?"

"I want you to tell me about Evelyn."

He leaned back in the chair. "I liked her when I met her. I know that seems strange under the circumstances. I guess I was supposed to hate her, but you can't look at it that way. This is government work. Sometimes investigations get started for the wrong reason, and you find yourself sitting opposite somebody who's been jammed up for saying the wrong thing or ticking off the wrong politician." He brushed the powdered sugar into a pile as he talked. "Evelyn was very polite. Respectful. Her record was spotless until then. She treated me like I was just doing my job, not like I was a pedophile, which is what you normally get."

"Maybe she knew she'd never be prosecuted."

"I think she was worried about it, but her primary concern was her daughter. She worked really hard to keep Faith out of it. I never even met her until Amanda paired us up."

"She's a good mother at least."

"She's a classy lady. But she's also smart, strong, tough. I wouldn't bet against her on this."

Sara had forgotten the eggs. She used the spatula to scrape them off the bottom of the pan.

Will told her, "Evelyn was duct-taped to a chair while they searched her house. I found an arrowhead drawn underneath the seat. She used her own blood to do it."

"Where was it pointing?"

"Into the room. At the couch. Into the backyard." He shrugged. "Who knows? We didn't find anything."

Sara thought about it. "Just the head of an arrow? That's all?"

He fanned out the powdered sugar again and drew the shape.

Sara studied the symbol, silently debating how to proceed. She finally decided the truth was her only option. "It looks like a V to me. The letter V."

He was quiet in a way that changed the air in the room. She thought he was

going to change the subject, or make a joke, but he told her, "It wasn't perfect. It was smudged at the top."

"Like this?" She drew another line. "Like the letter A?"

He stared at the figure. "I guess Amanda wasn't pretending when she said she didn't know what I was talking about."

"She saw it, too?"

He brushed the powdered sugar into his hand and dropped it into the bag with the last doughnut. "Yep."

She put the plate of eggs in front of him. The toaster popped up. The bread was almost black. "Oh, no," she mumbled. "I'm so sorry. You don't have to eat this. Do you want me to get the hot dogs out of the trash?"

He took the burned toast from her and dropped it on the plate. It made a sound like a brick scraping concrete. "Some butter would be nice."

She had fake butter. Will dipped a knife out of the tub and coated the bread until it was soggy enough to fold in his hand. The eggs were closer to taupe than yellow, but he started in on them anyway.

Sara told him, "The name 'Amanda' starts with an A. *Almeja* starts with an A. And now Evelyn might've drawn an A on the bottom of her chair."

He put down the fork. His plate was clean.

She continued, "*Almeja* sort of sounds like 'Amanda.' The same number of syllables. The same first and last letter." He would've missed the alliterative. Most dyslexics couldn't rhyme two words if you put a gun to their heads.

He edged his plate away. "Amanda isn't telling me everything. She's not even admitting that the corruption case has anything to do with Evelyn's situation."

"But she told you to go over all your case files."

"Either she needs the information or she's trying to keep me busy. She knows this will take me all night."

"Not if I help you."

He picked up his plate and walked over to the sink. "Do you want me to wash this before I go?"

"I want you to tell me about the crime scene."

He rinsed his plate, then started to wash his hands.

"That's the cold," Sara said, and then because it was pointless to tell him that because she was left-handed, she'd switched the hot water valve to the right-hand side, she leaned in and adjusted the temperature for him.

Will opened his hand so that she could squirt some soap onto his palm. "Why do you smell like lemon furniture polish?"

"Why did you let me believe Betty belongs to your wife?"

He lathered the soap in his hands. "There are some mysteries that will never be solved."

She smiled. "Tell me about the crime scene."

Will told her what they had found: the upturned chairs and broken baby toys. He segued into Mrs. Levy and Evelyn's gentleman caller, Mittal's theory about the blood trail, and Will's own divergent theory about the same. By the time he got to the part where they had found the gentleman in the trunk, Sara had managed to get him to sit down at the dining room table.

She asked, "Do you think Boyd Spivey was killed because he talked to Amanda?"

"It's possible, but not likely." He explained, "Think about the timing. Amanda called the warden two hours before we got to the prison. The prison doc said a serrated knife was used. That's not something you can make out of your toothbrush. The camera was disabled the day before, which indicates this was planned at least twenty-four hours in advance."

"So, it was coordinated. Evelyn is taken. Boyd is killed a few hours later. Are the other men from her team safe?"

"That's a very good question." He pulled his cell phone out of his pocket. "Do you mind if I make some calls?"

"Of course not." She got up from the table to give him some privacy. The frying pan was still warm, so she ran cold water over it. The eggs were seared to the metal. She picked at the slime with her thumbnail before giving up and sticking it on the top rack of the dishwasher.

Sara opened Boyd Spivey's file again. Will had used a pink star to identify him, perhaps as a joke. The man looked the part of a corrupt cop. His moon-shaped face indicated steroid use. His pupils were barely discernible in his beady eyes. His height and weight were closer to a linebacker's.

She skimmed the details of Spivey's arrest while listening with half an ear as Will talked with someone at Valdosta State Prison. They discussed whether or not to move Ben Humphrey and Adam Hopkins into solitary confinement, and agreed that it would be best just to step up their monitoring.

Will's next call was more complicated. Sara assumed he was talking to someone at GBI headquarters about locating the remaining two men through their parole officers.

She opened Spivey's file and found his personnel record behind the arrest report. Sara read through the details of the man's professional life. Spivey had joined the academy fresh out of high school. He'd gone to night school at Georgia State in order to earn a BA in criminal science. He had three children and a wife who worked as a secretary at the Dutch consulate on the outskirts of the city.

Spivey's promotion onto Evelyn's team was a coup. The drug squad was one of the most elite in the country. They had all the best weapons and facilities, and enough high-profile bad guys in the Atlanta area to win them plenty of commendations and press time, which Spivey in particular seemed to enjoy. Will had collected newspaper clippings on the team's most noteworthy busts. Spivey was front and center of every news story, even though Evelyn was the leader of the team. One photo showed a clean-shaven Spivey with enough ribbons on his chest to decorate a girl's bicycle.

And it still had not been enough.

"Hey."

Sara looked up from her reading. Will had finished his phone calls.

"Sorry about that. I wanted to make sure they were safe."

"It's fine." Sara wasn't going to pretend she hadn't been listening. "You didn't call Amanda."

"No, I didn't."

"Give me some more files to read."

"You really don't have to do this."

"I want to." Sara was no longer being kind or trying to spend more time in his

company. She wanted to know what had made a man like Boyd Spivey turn into such a lowlife.

Will stared at her long enough to make her think he was going to say no. Then he opened one of the boxes. There was an ancient Walkman nestled in a pile of audio cassette tapes. None of them had labels, unless you counted the colored, star-shaped stickers. Will explained, "These are recordings of all the interviews I had with each suspect. None of them said much in the beginning, but they all ended up making deals to cut time off their sentences."

"They ratted each other out?"

"Not a chance. They had some information on a couple of local councilmen to trade. It gave them some leverage with the prosecutor."

Sara couldn't pretend to be shocked over politicians with drug problems. "How much leverage?"

"Enough to get them talking, not enough to make them give up the big fish." He opened the next box and started pulling out files. As with everything else, they were color-coded. He handed her the green ones first. "Witness testimony for the prosecution." He stacked the red ones, which were fewer in number. "Witnesses for the defense." He took out the blue ones. "High-dollar busts—anything where more than two thousand dollars was seized."

Sara went right to work, carefully reading the next personnel file. Ben Humphrey had been the same kind of cop as Boyd Spivey: solidly built, good at his job, driven to get press, and, in the end, absolutely corrupt. The same proved to be true of Adam Hopkins and Demarcus Alexander, both of whom were praised for their bravery under fire during a bank robbery, both of whom paid cash for their vacation homes in Florida. Lloyd Crittenden had earned his shield after flipping his cruiser six times during the pursuit of a man who'd shot up a seedy bar with a sawed-off shotgun. He also had a mouth on him. There were two write-ups for insubordination, but Evelyn's yearly reviews had been nothing if not glowing.

The only outlier was Chuck Finn, who seemed more cerebral than his colleagues. Finn had been in the process of earning his PhD in Italian renaissance art when he was busted. His lifestyle wasn't as lavish as the others'. He'd used his ill-gotten gains to educate himself and travel the world. He must've complemented the team in more subtle ways. Evelyn Mitchell had obviously handpicked each man for a reason. Some were leaders. Some, like Chuck Finn, were obviously followers. They all fit the same general profile: overachievers with a reputation in the department for doing whatever had to be done. Three were white. Two were black. One was part Cherokee Indian. All of them had given up everything for cold, hard cash.

Will flipped over the tape in the Walkman. He sat with his eyes closed, headphones tucked into his ears. She could hear the squeak of the wheels working in the tape player.

The next stack of folders detailed all of the high-dollar busts the team had made, and presumably skimmed from, over the years. Sara had thought these files would be the hardest to get through, but they all turned out to be fairly mundane. Such was the nature of the illegal drug trade that most of the men the team had arrested were either dead or incarcerated when Evelyn's squad was busted. Only a few were still on the street, but they were obviously active. Sara

recognized some of the names from the nightly news. Two looked promising for their own reasons. She set their files aside for Will.

Sara checked the time. It was well past midnight and she had an early shift in the morning. As if on cue, her mouth opened in such a wide yawn that her jaw popped. She glanced at Will to make sure he hadn't seen. There was still a large stack of folders in front of her. She was only halfway through, but she couldn't make herself stop if she wanted to. It was like trying to put together all the clues in a mystery novel. The good guys were just as corrupt as the villains. The villains seemed to take the graft as a cost of doing business. Both probably had a long list of justifications for their illegal actions.

She tackled the next pile of folders. The six men on Evelyn's team had never gone to trial, but they must have been close to starting when the deals were made. The prosecution's list of potential witnesses had been highly screened, but no more so than those representing the defendants. The names would be familiar to Will, but still, Sara carefully read through each file. After a solid hour of comparing statements, she let herself move on to the last file, which she'd held back as a reward for not giving up.

Evelyn Mitchell's booking photo showed a trim woman with an unreadable expression on her face. She must have felt humiliated to be booked and processed after spending so much time on the other side of the table. Nothing about her expression gave that away. Her mouth was set in a tight line. Her eyes stared blankly ahead. Her hair was blonde, like Faith's, with gray streaking through at the temples. Blue eyes, 138 pounds, five-nine—a little taller than her daughter.

Her career was the sort that garnered pioneer awards from the local Women's Club, which Captain Mitchell had twice received. Her promotion to detective was preceded by a hostage negotiation that had resulted in the freeing of two children and the death of a serial child molester. Her lieutenant rank came almost ten years after passing the test with the highest grade yet recorded. Her captainship was the result of a gender-bias lawsuit filed with the EEOC.

Evelyn had worked her way up the hard way, paying her dues on the street. She had two degrees, one from Georgia Tech, both with honors. She was a mother, a grandmother, a widow. Her children were in what Sara thought of as service—one to her community, the other to his country. Her husband had worked a solidly respectable job as an insurance salesman. In many ways, she reminded Sara of her own mother. Cathy Linton wasn't the sort of woman to carry a gun, but she was driven to do what she believed was right for herself and her family.

But she would've never taken a bribe. Cathy was painfully honest, the sort of person who would turn around and drive fifty miles back to a tourist trap in Florida because they had given her too much change. Maybe this explained why Faith could work with Will. If someone had told Sara that her mother had stolen almost a million dollars, she would've laughed in their face. It was the stuff of fairy tales. Faith didn't just think he was wrong about her mother. She thought he was deluded.

Will changed out another tape.

Sara motioned for him to take off his headphones. "It doesn't add up."

"What doesn't?"

"You said each team member netted just shy of a million dollars. You've accounted for sixty thousand, at best, in the out-of-state account that was opened in Bill Mitchell's name. Evelyn doesn't drive a Porsche. She doesn't have a mistress. Faith and her brother weren't in private schools, and the only vacations she took were to Jekyll Island with her grandson."

"It adds up after today," he reminded her. "Whoever took Evelyn wants that money."

"I don't buy it."

Most cops defended their cases like they would defend their children. Will just asked, "Why?"

"Gut feeling. Instinct. I just don't buy it."

"Faith doesn't know about the bank account."

"I won't tell her."

He sat up, clasping his hands together. "I've been listening to my early interviews with Evelyn. She talks about her husband, mostly."

"Bill, right? He was an insurance agent."

"He died a few years before the case was brought against Evelyn."

Sara braced herself for a widow question, but Will went in another direction.

"The year before Bill died, he was sued by the family of a policyholder for a claim denial. They said Bill filled out some paperwork incorrectly. A father of three had a rare kind of heart defect. The company denied treatment."

This wasn't a new story to Sara. "They said it was a pre-existing condition."

"Only it wasn't—at least not diagnosed. The family got a lawyer, but it was too late. The guy ended up dying because the wrong box was checked on a form. Three days later, his widow gets a letter in the mail from the insurance company saying that Bill Mitchell, the originating agent, made a mistake on the forms and her husband's treatment was approved."

"That's awful."

"Bill took it hard. He was a very careful man. His reputation was important to him, important to his work. He got an ulcer worrying about it."

That wasn't technically how ulcers worked, but she told him, "Go on."

"He was eventually cleared. They found the original forms. The insurance company had screwed up, not Bill. Some data entry person had clicked the wrong box. No malfeasance, just incompetence." Will waved this away. "Anyway, what Evelyn said was that Bill never got past it. It made her crazy because he wouldn't let it go. They argued about it. She thought he was just feeling sorry for himself. She accused him of being paranoid. He said people at work treated him differently. A lot of people thought the company took the bullet and it was really Bill's mistake."

Sara was dubious. "An insurance company took the bullet?"

"People get crazy ideas," Will said. "Anyway, Bill felt like it wiped out all the good he'd done over the years. Evelyn said that when the cancer came—Bill died of pancreatic cancer three months after his diagnosis—she thought part of the reason he couldn't fight it was that he had this guilt hanging over his head. And that she had never forgiven him for that, for not fighting the cancer. He just kind of accepted it and then waited to die."

Pancreatic cancer was not easily vanquished. The chances for long-term survival were less than five percent. "Stress like that can certainly impair your

immune system.”

“Evelyn was worried that the same thing was going to happen to her.”

“That she’d get cancer?”

“No. That the investigation would ruin her life, even if she was cleared. That it would hang over her head forever. She said that in all the years since her husband had died, she had never wanted him back more than she did that day so that she could tell him that she finally understood.”

Sara considered the weight of the statement. “That sounds like something an innocent person would say.”

“It does.”

“Does that mean you’re leaning away from your original conclusion?”

“It’s very kind of you to phrase your question so diplomatically.” He grinned.

“I don’t know. My case was shut down before I could wrap it up to my satisfaction. Evelyn signed her papers and took her retirement. Amanda didn’t even tell me it was over. I heard it on the news one morning—decorated officer retiring from the force to spend more time with her family.”

“You think she got away with it.”

“I keep coming back to one thing: she was in charge of a team that stole a whole lot of money. Either she turned a blind eye or she’s not as good as she reads on paper.” Will picked at the plastic seam on one of the audiotapes. “And there’s still the bank account. It might not seem like much compared to millions, but sixty thousand is a chunk of change. And it’s in her husband’s name, not hers. Why not change it over now that he’s dead? Why still keep it a secret?”

“All good points.”

He was quiet for a moment, the only sound in the room his thumbnail picking at the plastic seam. “Faith didn’t call me when it happened. I didn’t have my cell, so it would’ve been pointless, but she didn’t call me.” He paused. “I thought maybe she didn’t trust me because it was her mother involved.”

“I doubt she was even thinking about that. You know how your brain just blanks out when something like that happens. Did you ask her about it?”

“She’s got a lot more on her mind right now than holding my hand.” He gave a self-deprecating chuckle. “Maybe I should write about it in my diary.” He started packing up the boxes. “Anyway, I’ll let you get to bed. Did you find anything I should know about?”

Sara pulled out the two files she’d set aside. “These guys might deserve a closer look. They were in the high-dollar busts. One of them was also on Spivey’s defense witness list. I flagged him because he has a history of kidnapping for leverage over rival gangs.”

Will opened the top file.

Sara supplied the name. “Ignatio Ortiz.”

Will groaned. “He’s in Phillips State Prison on a manslaughter attempt.”

“So, it won’t be hard to find him.”

“He runs Los Mexicanos.”

Sara was familiar with the gang. She had treated her share of kids who were involved in the organization. Not many of them walked out of the ER in one piece.

Will said, “If Ortiz is wrapped up in this, he’ll never talk to us. If he’s not, then he’ll never talk to us. Whichever it is, driving to the prison would be three or

four hours out of our day for nothing.”

“He was going to be called as a witness for Spivey’s defense.”

“Boyd had a surprising number of thugs willing to testify that he hadn’t touched their money. There was a whole roster of criminals willing to stand up for Evelyn’s team.”

“Did you get anything from Boyd at the prison?”

Will frowned. “Amanda interviewed him. They talked in some kind of code. One thing I picked up on was that Boyd said the Asians were trying to cut the Mexicans out of the supply side.”

“Los Mexicanos,” Sara provided.

“Amanda told me their preferred method is slitting throats.”

Sara put her hand to her neck, trying not to shudder. “You think that Evelyn was still doing business with these drug dealers?”

He closed Ortiz’s file. “I can’t see how. She doesn’t have any juice without her badge. And I can’t picture her as a kingpin unless she’s some kind of sociopath. Granny-Nanny by day, drug lord by night.”

“You said Ortiz is in prison for attempted manslaughter. Who’d he try to kill?”

“His brother. He found him in bed with his wife.”

“Maybe this is the brother.” Sara opened the next file. “Hector Ortiz,” she told him. “He’s not a bad guy on paper, but he made the defense witness list. I pulled him because he has the same last name as Ignatio.”

Will unclipped the mugshot from the file to get a closer look. “Is your gut still telling you that Evelyn is innocent?”

Sara looked at her watch. She had to be at work in five hours. “My gut has turned in for the night. What is it?”

He held up Hector Ortiz’s photograph. The man was bald with a salt-and-pepper goatee. His shirt was rumpled. He held up his arm to show a tattoo to the camera: a green and red Texas star with a rattlesnake wrapped around it.

Will said, “Meet Evelyn’s gentleman friend.”



SUNDAY

CHAPTER SEVEN

The open-handed slaps had turned into punches hours ago. Days ago? Evelyn wasn't sure. She was blindfolded, sitting in total darkness. Something dripped—faucet, gutter, blood—she didn't know. Her body was so riddled with pain that even when she squeezed her eyes shut and tried to block out every screaming muscle, every broken bone, nothing felt undamaged.

She panted out a laugh. Blood sprayed from her mouth. Her missing finger. There was one bone that wasn't broken, one piece of flesh that wasn't bruised.

They had started on her feet, beating the soles with a galvanized metal pipe. It was a form of torture they had apparently seen in a movie, which Evelyn knew because one of them had helpfully coached, "The dude was swinging it back higher, like this." The sensation Evelyn had felt could not be called pain. It was a searing of the skin that her blood carried like fire through her entire body.

Like most women, it was rape that had always terrified her, but she knew now that there were far worse dangers. There was at least an animalistic logic to the crime of rape. These men were not deriving pleasure from hurting her. Their reward came from the cheers of their friends. They were trying to impress each other, pulling a game of one-upmanship to see who could make her scream the loudest. And Evelyn *did* scream. She screamed so loud that she was sure that her vocal cords would rupture. She screamed from pain. She screamed from terror. She screamed from anger, fury, loss. She screamed most of all because these competing emotions felt like burning hot lava rushing up her throat.

At one point, they'd had a protracted discussion about where her vagus nerve was located. Three of them took turns, punching her in the general area of her kidneys until, like children hitting a piñata, one hit pay dirt. They'd laughed uncontrollably as Evelyn seized as if electrocuted. The feeling was one of primal terror. She had never in her life felt so close to death. She had urinated herself. She had screamed into the darkness until there was no sound coming out of her mouth.

And then they had broken her leg. Not a clean break, but the result of the heavy metal pipe pounding again and again against her leg until there was the resounding crunch of a single bone splintering into two.

One of them pressed his hand over the break, his putrid breath in her ear. "This is what that stupid bitch did to Ricardo."

That stupid bitch was her baby. They had no way of knowing how the words had given Evelyn hope. She had been knocked out, dragged from the scene, shortly after Faith's car had pulled into the driveway. Evelyn had come to in the back of a van. The engine noise had been rumbling in her ears, but she'd heard two distinct gunshots, the second following the first by a good forty seconds.

But now Evelyn knew the answer to the only question that kept her from just giving up. Faith was alive. She had gotten away. After that, every horror they visited on her was inconsequential. She thought of Emma in her daughter's arms, Jeremy together with his mother. Zeke would be there. He was so full of

anger, but he had always taken care of his sister. The APD would surround them like a shroud. Will Trent would lay down his life to protect Faith. Amanda would move heaven and earth to find justice.

"Almeja ..." Evelyn's voice was raspy in the close space.

All that she could ask was for her children to be safe. No one could get her out of this. There was no promise of salvation. Amanda could not talk her through this pain. Bill Mitchell would not come riding up on his white horse to save her.

She had been so stupid. One mistake so many years ago. One terrible, stupid mistake.

Evelyn spit out a broken tooth. Her last right molar. She could feel the raw nerve responding to the cold in the air. She tried to cover the spot with her tongue as she breathed through her mouth. She had to keep the airway open. Her nose was broken. If she stopped breathing, or passed out with blood in her throat, she would choke to death. She should welcome the relief, but instead the thought of death still terrified her. Evelyn had always been a fighter. It was in her nature to dig in her heels the more she was pushed. And yet, she could feel herself starting to break—not from the pain, but from exhaustion. She could feel her resolve draining away like water through a sieve. If she gave in, they might get what they wanted. Her mouth might move, her voice might work, despite her mind willing her to be silent.

And then what?

They would have to kill her. She knew who they were, even though they had worn masks and blindfolded her. She knew their voices. Their names. Their smells. She knew what they were planning, what they had already done.

Hector.

She had found him in the trunk of her car. Even with a silencer, there was no such thing as a quiet gunshot. Evelyn had heard the noise twice in her life, and she instantly recognized the snip of gas passing through a metal cylinder.

At least she had protected Emma. At least she had made certain that her daughter's child was safe.

Faith.

Mothers were not supposed to pick favorites, but Zeke was the obvious choice. Driven. Smart. Capable. Loyal. He was her firstborn, a shy little boy who had clung to Evelyn's skirt when strangers visited the house. A toddler who sat with her while she cooked dinner and loved going to the store so he could help carry the bags. His little chest out. His arms overloaded. His teeth showing in a prideful, happy grin.

But it was Faith whom Evelyn felt closest to. Faith who had made so many mistakes. Faith whom Evelyn could always forgive because every time she looked at her daughter, she caught a glimpse of herself.

Their time together. Housebound. Those months of forced confinement. Forced exile. Forced misery.

Bill had never understood it, but then, it wasn't his nature to understand mistakes. He'd been the first to notice the swell of her stomach. He'd been the first to confront her about it. For nine long months, he was stoic and self-righteous, suddenly making Evelyn understand where Zeke had gotten these tendencies. During the hardest time, he had all but disappeared from their lives. Even after it was all over, and Jeremy had brightened up their lives like the sun

finally shining down after a summer storm, Bill had never been the same.

But then, Evelyn had never been the same, either. Nor had anyone. Faith was caught up in figuring out how to raise a child. Zeke, who had wanted nothing more than Evelyn's attention since he was a baby, had gone as far away as he could get from her without leaving the planet. Her little boy lost. Her heart split in two.

She couldn't bear to think about it anymore.

Evelyn straightened her spine, trying to take pressure off her diaphragm. She couldn't keep this up. She was breaking. These young men with their video games and film fantasies had an unlimited pool of ideas at their disposal. God only knew what they would resort to next. They had no problem laying their hands on drugs. Barbiturates. Ethanol. Scopolamine. Sodium Pentothal. Any one of them could act as a truth serum. Any one of them could pry the information out of her mouth.

Just the excruciatingly slow passage of time could make her talk. The unceasing agony. The relentless barrage of accusations. They were so angry, so hostile.

So barbaric.

She was going to die. Evelyn had known the minute she woke in the van that death was the only end to this. In the beginning, she thought it would be their death at her hands. She had quickly realized it was going to be the other way around. The only control she had over anything was her mouth. Through all of this, she had not once begged them to stop. She had not asked for mercy. She had not given them the power of knowing that they were so far into her head that every thought had a shadow lurking behind it.

But what if she told them the truth?

Evelyn had spent so many years hiding the secret that even thinking about unburdening herself brought her something akin to peace. These men were her torturers, not her confessors, but she was in no position to quibble. Perhaps her death would absolve her of her sins. Perhaps there would be a moment of relief when for the first time in a long while, Evelyn felt the weight of deceit finally lifting from her shoulders.

No. They would never believe her. She would have to tell them a lie. The truth was too disappointing. Too common.

It would have to be a believable lie, something so compelling that they would kill her without first waiting for verification. These men were hardened, but not experienced, criminals. They didn't have the patience to keep around an old woman who had defied them for so long. They would see killing her as the ultimate proof of their manhood.

Her only regret was that she wouldn't be there when they realized she'd tricked them. She hoped they heard her laughing at them from hell for the rest of their miserable, pathetic lives.

She laughed now, just to hear the sound, the desperation.

The door opened. A slash of light came under the blindfold. She heard men mumbling. They were talking about another TV show, another movie, that had a new technique they wanted to try out.

Evelyn inhaled deeply, even though her broken ribs stabbed into her lungs with every breath. She willed her heart to still. She prayed for strength to a God

she'd stopped talking to the day her husband died.

The one with the putrid breath said, "You ready to talk, bitch?"

Evelyn braced herself. She couldn't appear to give in too easily. She would have to let them beat her, make them think that they had finally won. It wasn't the first time that she'd let a man think he had complete control over her, but it sure as hell would be the last.

He pressed his hand into her broken leg. "You ready to bring on the pain?"

This would work. This had to work. Evelyn would do her part, and her death would finish it, wash away her sins. Faith would never find out. Zeke would never know. Her children and grandchildren would be safe.

Safe but for one thing.

Evelyn closed her eyes and sent out a silent message to Roz Levy, praying that the old woman would keep her mouth shut.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Faith's eyes were closed, but she couldn't sleep. Wouldn't sleep. The night had passed in inches, dragging along like Death's sickle being scraped across the floor. For hours, she had listened to every creak and groan of the house, straining to hear any movement downstairs that indicated Zeke was finally awake.

Her mother's finger was hidden in a half-empty box of Band-Aids in Faith's medicine cabinet. It was wrapped in a Ziploc bag she'd found in an old suitcase. Faith had debated about whether or not to put it on ice, but the thought of preserving her mother's finger had made bile come to the back of her throat. Besides, she hadn't wanted to go downstairs last night and face Zeke, or the detectives who were sitting at her kitchen table, or her son who would surely join them all if he heard his mother was up. Faith knew if she saw them, she would start crying, and if she started crying they would quickly figure out why.

Keep your mouth shut and your eyes open.

She was doing exactly that, though the cop inside of her was screaming that following the kidnapper's orders was an incredibly big mistake. You never gave them the upper hand. You never ceded to a request without getting something in return. Faith had coached families on these basic strategies dozens of times. She saw now that it was a different thing altogether when the threatened loved one was your own. If Evelyn's abductors had told Faith to douse herself in gasoline and light a match, she would've done it. Logic went out the window when there existed the very real possibility that she might never see her mother again.

Still, the cop in her wanted details. There were tests that could be done to determine whether or not Evelyn was alive when the finger was removed. There were other tests that would prove definitively whether or not the digit belonged to Evelyn in the first place. It looked like a woman's finger, but Faith had never spent much time studying her mother's hands. There was no wedding ring; Evelyn had stopped wearing that a few years ago. It was one of those things Faith didn't notice at first. Or maybe her mother was just a good liar. She'd laughed when Faith asked about her naked hand, saying, "Oh, I took that off ages ago."

Was her mother a liar? That was the central question. Faith lied to Jeremy all the time, but it was about things all mothers should lie to their children about: her dating life, what was happening at work, how she was managing her health. Evelyn had lied about Zeke being transferred back to the U.S. But, that was to keep the peace, and probably to prevent Zeke's disapproval from shadowing the happy occasion of Emma's birth.

Those sorts of lies didn't count. They were protective lies, not malignant lies that festered like a splinter under your skin. Had Evelyn lied to Faith in a way that counted? There was something bigger that Evelyn was hiding, something more than the obvious. Evelyn's house told that story. The circumstances of her kidnapping delivered chapter and verse. She had something in her possession

that some very bad men wanted. There was a drug connection. There was at least one gang involved. Her mother had worked narcotics. Had she been sitting on a pile of cash all this time? Was there a secret vault hidden somewhere? Would Faith and Zeke find out when Evelyn's will was read that their mother was actually wealthy?

No, that wasn't possible. Evelyn would know that her children would turn over any illicit cash, no matter how much easier it would make their lives. Mortgages. Car payments. Student loans. None of that would go away. Neither Zeke nor Faith would ever take dirty money. Evelyn had raised them better than that.

And she had raised Faith to be a better cop than to just sit around on her hands all night waiting for the sun to come up.

If Evelyn were here right now, what would she want Faith to do? The obvious answer was to call Amanda. The two women had always been close. "Thick as thieves," Bill Mitchell had often said, and not with flattery. Even after Faith's uncle Kenny had decided to make an ass of himself pursuing younger women on the beaches of South Florida, Evelyn had made it clear that she preferred to have Amanda at the family Christmas table rather than Kenny Mitchell. The two women shared a shorthand the way soldiers did when they came back from war.

But calling Amanda now was out of the question. She would come rushing in like a bull in a china shop. Faith's house would be turned upside down. A SWAT team would be in place. The kidnappers would take one look at the show of force and decide it was easier to put a bullet in their victim's head rather than negotiate with a woman who was hell-bent on revenge. Because that was exactly how Amanda would play it. She never went at anything quietly. It was always a hundred percent or nothing at all.

Will was good at going in soft. He'd perfected the technique. And he was her partner. She *should* call him, or at least get word to him. But what would she say? "I need your help but you can't tell Amanda and we may end up breaking the law, but please don't ask any questions." It was an untenable position. He'd bent the rules for her yesterday, but she couldn't ask him to break them. There was no one else she would trust more to have her back, but Will had a sometimes vexing sense of right and wrong. Part of her was afraid that he would tell her no. And a larger part of her was afraid that she would end up getting him into the kind of trouble that he could never get out of. It was one thing for Faith to throw her career out the window. She couldn't ask Will to do the same.

She dropped her head into her hands. Even if she wanted to reach out, the phones were tapped in case a ransom demand was made. Her email was through her GBI account, which was more than likely being monitored. They were probably listening in on her cell phone calls, too.

And that was just the good guys. Who knew what Evelyn's kidnappers had managed to do? They knew Jeremy's nickname, his birth year, his school. They had sent a warning through his Facebook account. Maybe they had bugged the house, too. You could get spy-quality devices off the Internet. Unless Faith went around removing switch plates and taking apart the phones, there was no telling whether or not someone was listening. And the minute she started acting paranoid around her family, they would know that something was wrong. Not to mention the Atlanta detectives, who were watching her every move.

Finally, she heard the downstairs toilet flush. A few seconds later, the front door opened and closed. Zeke was probably going for a run, or maybe the detectives had decided to get their fresh air in the front yard instead of the back.

Faith's hamstrings vibrated with pain as she put her feet on the floor. She'd been curled up for so long that her body was stiff. Other than checking on Emma, she hadn't dared walk around last night for fear of Zeke coming upstairs to ask her what the hell she was doing. The house was old, the floorboards were squeaky, and her brother was a light sleeper.

She started with her chest of drawers, carefully opening each one, checking through her underwear and T-shirts and nightgowns to see if anything had been disturbed. Nothing looked out of place. Next, she went to the closet. Her work wardrobe consisted mostly of black suits with stretch in the pants so that she didn't have to worry about whether or not they would button in the morning. Her maternity clothes were in a box on the lower shelf. Faith dragged over a chair and checked that the tape was still sealed. The stack of blue jeans beside it looked undisturbed. Still, she checked all the pockets, then went back to her suits and did the same.

Nothing.

Faith climbed back onto the chair and stretched on tiptoe to reach the top shelf, where she'd stored the box of Jeremy's childhood memorabilia. It nearly fell on her head. She caught it at the last minute, holding her breath for fear of making too much noise. She sat on the floor with the box between her legs. The cardboard was unsealed. The tape had been peeled off months ago. While she was pregnant with Emma, Faith had been obsessed with going through Jeremy's childhood keepsakes. It was a good thing she lived alone or someone would've seriously questioned her emotional stability. Just the sight of his bronzed shoes and little knitted booties had turned her into a weeping mess. His report cards. His school papers. Mother's Day cards he'd drawn in crayon. Valentines he'd cut with his tiny blunted scissors.

Her eyes stung as she opened the box.

A lock of Jeremy's hair rested on top of his twelfth-grade report card. The blue ribbon looked different. She held it up to the light. Time had faded the pastel-colored silk, giving the creases a dingy cast. The hair had darkened to a golden brown. Something felt different. She couldn't tell whether or not the bow had been retied or if it had come loose in the box. She also couldn't remember whether she'd stacked his report cards first grade to twelfth or the other way around. It seemed counterintuitive that the last was first, especially since the lock of hair was on top. Or maybe she was just talking herself into a frenzy when nothing was wrong.

Faith lifted up the stack of report cards and looked underneath. His papers were still there. She saw the bronze shoes, the booties, the construction paper greeting cards he'd made in school.

Everything seemed accounted for, yet she couldn't shake the feeling that the box had been tampered with. Had someone else gone through Jeremy's things? Had they seen the hearts he'd drawn on a picture of Mr. Billingham, his first dog? Had they rifled through his report cards and laughed because Mrs. Thompson, his fourth-grade teacher, had called him a little angel?

Faith closed the box. She hefted it up over her head and slid it onto the shelf.

By the time she shoved the chair back in place, she was shaking with fury at the thought of some stranger's grimy hands on her boy's things.

She went to Emma's room next. The baby didn't normally sleep through the night, but yesterday had been unusually long and tumultuous. She was still asleep when Faith checked the crib. Her throat made a clicking noise as she breathed. Faith laid a hand on her chest. Emma's heart felt like a bird trapped under Faith's hand. Quietly, she searched the closet, the small box of toys, the diapers and supplies.

Nothing.

Jeremy was still asleep, but Faith went into his room anyway. She picked up his clothes from the floor to give some pretense of belonging. Part of her just wanted to stand there and stare at him. He was in what she thought of as his John Travolta pose, sprawled on his stomach, right foot hanging off the bed, left arm sticking straight out above his head. His thin shoulder blades stuck out like chicken wings. His hair covered most of his face. There was a spot of saliva on his pillow. He still slept with his mouth open.

His room had been spotless yesterday, but his mere presence had altered everything. Papers covered the desk. His backpack spilled onto the floor. Wires from various pieces of computer equipment were draped across the carpet. His laptop, which she had saved for six months to buy, was open on its side like a discarded book. Faith used her foot to tip it right side up before leaving the room. Then, she went back in one more time, but only to pull the sheet up over his shoulders so that he wouldn't get cold.

Faith threw Jeremy's clothes on top of the washer and made her way downstairs. Detective Connor was sitting in his usual chair at the kitchen table. His shirt was different from yesterday, and his shoulder holster wasn't as tight around his chest. His red hair was tousled, probably from sleeping with his head on the table. She had started thinking of him as "Ginger" and was afraid to open her mouth for fear of the name slipping out.

He said, "Good morning, Agent Mitchell."

"My brother's out running?"

He nodded. "Detective Taylor went to get breakfast. I hope you like McDonald's."

The thought of food was enough to make Faith feel sick again, but she said, "Thank you."

Half the refrigerator's contents were gone, though that was probably down to Jeremy and Zeke, both of whom ate like eighteen-year-old boys. She took out the orange juice. The carton was empty. Neither her son nor her brother liked orange juice.

She asked Ginger, "Did you guys have some juice?"

"No, ma'am."

Faith shook the carton. It was still empty. She didn't think Ginger would lie about something like that. She had offered both detectives anything in the kitchen. Judging by her depleted stash of Diet Rite sodas, they had taken her up on the offer.

The phone rang. Faith checked the clock on the stove. It was exactly seven in the morning. "This will probably be my boss," she told Ginger. Still, he waited until she had answered the phone.

Amanda said, "No news."

Faith waved away the detective. "Where are you?"

She didn't answer the question. "How's Jeremy holding up?"

"As well as can be expected." Faith didn't offer more. She checked to make sure Ginger was in the living room, then opened the silverware drawer. The spoons were turned in the wrong direction, the flat handles to the right rather than the left. The forks were upside down. The tines pointed toward the front of the drawer instead of the back. Faith blinked, not sure about what she was seeing.

Amanda said, "You know about Boyd?"

"Will told me last night. I'm sorry. I know he did some bad things, but he was ..."

Amanda didn't make her finish the sentence. "Yes, he was."

Faith opened the junk drawer. All the pens were gone. She kept them bundled together with a red rubber band, tucked in the bottom right-hand corner. They were always in this drawer. She rifled through the coupons, scissors, and unidentified spare keys. No pens. "Did you know that Zeke was stateside?"

"Your mother was trying to protect you."

Faith opened the other junk drawer. "Apparently, she tried to protect me from a lot of things." She reached into the back and found the pens. The rubber band was yellow. Had she changed it out? Faith had a vague recollection of the band breaking a while back, but she would've sworn on a stack of Bibles that she'd used the red rubber band from the broccoli she'd bought at the store that same day.

"Faith?" Amanda's tone was terse. "What's going on with you? Has something happened?"

"I'm fine. It's just ..." She tried to think of an excuse. She was really doing this—she was locked into not telling Amanda that the kidnappers had been in touch. That they had left something of Evelyn's under Faith's pillow. That they knew far too much about Jeremy. That they had messed with her silverware. "It's early. I didn't sleep well last night."

"You need to take care of yourself. Eat the right foods. Sleep as much as you can. Drink lots of water. I know it's hard, but you have to keep up your strength right now."

Faith felt her temper flare. She didn't know if she was talking to her boss or to Aunt Mandy right now, but either one of them could kiss her ass. "I know how to take care of myself."

"I'm very glad to hear you think that, but from where I'm standing, it's not the case."

"Did she do something, Mandy? Is Mom in trouble because—"

"Do you need me to come by the house?"

"Aren't you in Valdosta?"

Amanda went silent. Faith had obviously crossed a line. Or maybe it was a simple case of her boss being smart enough to remember that their conversation was being recorded. Right now, Faith didn't care. She stared at the yellow rubber band, wondering if she was losing her mind. Her blood sugar was probably low. Faith's vision was slightly blurry. Her mouth was dry. She opened the fridge again and reached for the orange juice carton. Still empty.

Amanda said, "Think of your mother. She would want you to be strong."

If she only knew that Faith was about to lose her shit over a yellow rubber band. She mumbled, "I'm fine."

"We'll get her back, and we'll make sure that whoever did this pays for what they've put us through. You can take that to the bank."

Faith opened her mouth to say she didn't give a damn about retribution, but Amanda had already ended the call.

She tossed the orange juice carton into the trash. There was a bag of emergency candy in the cabinet. Faith pulled it out, and Jolly Ranchers scattered onto the floor. She looked at the bag. The bottom had been ripped open.

Ginger was back. He leaned down to help her pick up the candy. "Everything all right?"

"Yes." Faith tossed a handful of candy onto the counter and left the kitchen. She hit the light switch in the living room but nothing happened. Faith flipped the toggle down, then up again. Still nothing. She checked the bulb in the lamp. One turn made the light come on. She did the same to the bulb in the other lamp. She felt the heat singe her fingers as the light came on.

Faith fell heavily into the chair. Her temper kept revving up and down like scales on a piano. She knew that she needed to eat something, to test her blood and make the proper adjustments. Her brain wouldn't work properly until she was leveled out. But now that she was sitting down, she didn't have the strength to move.

The couch was across from her. Zeke had folded his sheets into a perfect square and placed them on top of his pillow. She could see the red stain on the beige cushion where Jeremy had spilled Kool-Aid fifteen years ago. She knew that if she flipped the cushion over, she would find a blue stain from a Maui punch Popsicle he had dropped two years later. If she turned over the cushion she was sitting on, there would be a tear where his soccer cleat had cut the material. The rug on the floor was worn from both their tracks back and forth to the kitchen. The walls were an eggshell they had painted during Jeremy's spring break last year.

Faith considered the very real possibility that she was losing her mind. Jeremy was too old for these kinds of games, and Zeke had never been one for psychological warfare. He would rather beat her to death than unscrew a couple of light bulbs. Regardless, neither one of them was in the mood for pranks. This couldn't just be Faith's blood sugar. The pens, the silverware, the lamps—it was little things that only Faith would notice. The sort of stuff that would make someone else think you were crazy if you told them about it.

She looked up at the ceiling, then let her eyes travel down to the shelves mounted on the wall behind the couch. Bill Mitchell had been a collector of kitsch. He had hula girl salt and pepper shakers from Hawaii. He had Mount Rushmore sunglasses, a foam Lady Liberty crown, and an enameled silver spoon set depicting some of the more notable scenery of the Grand Canyon. His most prized collection had been his snow globes. Every road trip, every flight, every time he left the house, Bill Mitchell looked for a snow globe to mark the occasion.

When her father died, there was no question in the family that these would go to Faith. As a child, she had loved shaking the globes and watching the snow

fall. Order into chaos. It was something Faith had shared with her father. In a rare splurge, she'd had custom shelves built for the globes and made Jeremy so scared of breaking one that for an entire month he took the long way to the kitchen just so he didn't accidentally brush against the shelves.

As she sat in the living room that morning, Faith looked up at the shelves to find that all of thirty-six globes had been turned around to face the wall.

CHAPTER NINE

Sara wondered if it was a southern peculiarity for little children to get sick in the half hour between Sunday school and church services. Most of her early patients that morning had fallen into that golden time period. Tummy aches, earaches, general malaise—nothing that could be pinned down by a blood test or an X-ray, but was easily cured by a set of coloring books or a cartoon on the television.

Around ten o'clock, the problems had turned more serious. The cases came in rapid succession, and were the kind Sara hated because they were largely preventable. One child had eaten rat poison he'd found under the kitchen cabinet. Another had gotten third-degree burns from touching a pan on the stove. There was a teenager she'd had to forcibly commit to the lockdown ward because his first hit of marijuana had pushed him into a psychotic break. Then a seventeen-year-old girl had come in with her skull split open. Apparently, she was still drunk when she drove home this morning. The girl had ended up wrapping her car around a parked Greyhound bus. She was still in surgery, but Sara guessed that even if they managed to control the swelling in her brain, she would never be the same person again.

By eleven, Sara wanted to go back to bed and start the day over.

Working at a hospital was a constant negotiation. The job could suck away as much of your life as you permitted. Sara had agreed to work at Grady knowing this truth, embracing it, because she didn't want a life after her husband had died. Over the last year, she'd been cutting back on her time in the ER. Keeping regular hours was a struggle, but Sara fought the uphill battle every day.

It was really a form of self-preservation. Every doctor carried around a cemetery inside them. The patients she could help—the little girl whose stomach she'd pumped, the burned toddler whose fingers she'd saved—were momentary blips. It was the lost ones that Sara remembered most. The kid who'd slowly, painfully succumbed to leukemia. The nine-year-old who'd taken sixteen hours to die from antifreeze poisoning. The eleven-year-old who'd broken his neck diving headfirst into a shallow swimming pool. They were all inside of her, constant reminders that no matter how hard she worked, sometimes—oftentimes—it was never enough.

Sara sat down on the couch in the doctors' lounge. She had charts to catch up on, but she needed a minute to herself. She'd gotten less than four hours of sleep last night. Will wasn't the direct reason her brain would not turn off. She'd kept thinking about Evelyn Mitchell and her corrupt band of brothers. The question of the woman's guilt weighed heavily on her mind. Will's words kept coming back to Sara: either Evelyn Mitchell was a bad boss or a dirty cop. There was no in-between.

Which was probably why Sara hadn't found the time this morning to call Faith Mitchell and check on her. Technically, Faith was Delia Wallace's patient, but Sara felt an odd sort of responsibility for Will's partner. It tugged at her the same

way Will seemed to tug at her every waking thought these days.

All of the tedium. None of the pleasure.

Nan, one of the student nurses, plopped down on the couch beside Sara. She scrolled through her BlackBerry as she talked. "I want to hear all about your hot date."

Sara forced a smile onto her face. That morning when she got to the hospital, there'd been a large bouquet of flowers waiting for her in the doctors' lounge. It seemed Dale Dugan had bought out the entire city's supply of baby's breath and pink carnations. Everyone in the ER had made a comment to Sara before she'd even managed to change into her lab coat. They all seemed caught up in the romance of the widow being swept off her feet.

Sara told the girl, "He's very nice."

"He thinks you're nice, too." Nan gave a sly grin as she typed an email. "I ran into him at the lab. He's super cool."

Sara watched the girl's thumbs move, feeling three hundred years old. She couldn't remember if she'd ever been that young. Neither could she imagine Dale Dugan sitting down and having a nice gossip with this giddy young nurse.

Nan finally looked up from the device. "He said you're fascinating, and that you had a great time, and that you shared a very nice kiss."

"You're emailing him?"

"No." She rolled her eyes. "He said that in the lab."

"Great," Sara managed. She didn't know how to deal with Dale, who was either deluded or a pathological liar. Eventually, she would have to talk with him. The flowers alone were a very bad sign. She would have to rip off the Band-Aid quickly. Still, she couldn't help wondering why the man she wanted was unavailable and the available man was unwanted. Thus continued her quest to turn her life into a television soap opera.

Nan started typing again. "What do you want me to tell him that you said?"

"I haven't said anything."

"But you could."

"Uh ..." Sara stood up from the couch. This was much easier when you could just slip a note into somebody's locker. "I should go get lunch while things are quiet."

Instead of heading toward the cafeteria, Sara took a left toward the elevators. She almost got mowed down by a gurney flying down the corridor. Stab wound. The knife was still sticking out of the patient's chest. EMTs screamed vitals. Doctors snapped orders. Sara pressed the elevator down button and waited for the doors to open.

The hospital had been founded in the 1890s, and was housed in four different locations before finding its final home on Jesse Hill Jr. Drive. Constant mismanagement, corruption, and plain incompetence meant that at any given time in its storied history, the hospital was about to go under. The U-shaped building had been added onto, remodeled, torn down, and renovated so many times that Sara was certain no one could keep count anymore. The land around the facility was sloped toward Georgia State University, which shared its parking decks with the hospital. The ambulance bays for the emergency department backed onto the interstate, at what was called the Grady Curve, and were a full story above the main front entrance on the street side. During Jim Crow, the

hospital was called the Grady's, because the white wings were on one side, looking onto the city, and the African American wings were on the other, looking onto nothing.

Margaret Mitchell had been rushed here, and died five days later, after being hit by a drunk driver on Peachtree Street. Victims from the Centennial Olympic Park bombing had been treated here. Grady was still the only Level 1 trauma center in the area. Victims with the most serious, life-threatening injuries were all flown here for treatment, which meant the Fulton County medical examiner's office had a satellite location to process intakes down in the morgue. At any given time, there were two or three bodies waiting for transport. When Sara had first taken the job as Grant County coroner, she had trained at the Pryor Street medical examiner's office downtown. They were constantly shorthanded. She'd spent many a lunch hour making body runs to Grady.

The elevator doors opened. George, one of the security guards, got off. His girth filled the hall. He had been a football player until a dislocated ankle had convinced him to pursue an alternative career path.

"Dr. Linton." He held the doors back for her.

"George."

He winked at her and she smiled.

A young couple was already in the car. They huddled together as the elevator moved down one floor. That was the other thing about working at a hospital. Everywhere you turned, you ran into someone who was having one of the worst days of their life. Maybe this was the change Sara needed in her life—not to sell her apartment and move into a cozy bungalow, but to return to private practice, where the only emergency during the day was deciding which pharmaceutical rep was going to buy lunch.

The temperature was colder two stories down in the sub-basement. Sara pulled her lab coat closed as she walked past the records department. Unlike the old days when she'd interned at Grady, there was no need to stand in line for charts. Everything was automated, a patient's information only as far away as the computerized tablets that worked on the hospital's intranet. X-rays were on the larger computer monitors in the rooms, and all medications were coded to patient armbands. As the only publicly funded hospital left in Atlanta, Grady was constantly teetering on bankruptcy, but at least it was trying to go out in style.

Sara stopped in front of the thick double doors that separated the morgue from the rest of the hospital. She waved her badge in front of the reader. There was a sudden whoosh of changing air pressure as the insulated steel doors swung open.

The attendant seemed surprised to find Sara in his space. He was as close to goth as you could get while wearing blue hospital scrubs. Everything about him announced that he was too cool for his job. His dyed black hair was pulled into a ponytail. His glasses looked like they had belonged to John Lennon. His eyeliner was something out of a Cleopatra movie. To Sara, the paunch at his stomach and the Fu Manchu made him look more like Spike, Snoopy's brother. "You lost?"

"Junior," she read off his nametag. He was young, probably Nan's age. "I was wondering if someone from the Fulton ME's office was here."

"Larry. He's loading up in the back. Is there a problem?"

"No, I just want to pick his brain."

"Good luck finding it."

A skinny Hispanic man came out of the back room. His scrubs hung on him like a bathrobe. He was around Junior's age, which was to say that he had probably been in diapers a few weeks ago. "Very funny, *jefe*." He punched Junior in the arm. "Whatchu need, Doc?"

This wasn't going as planned. "Nothing. Sorry to bother you guys." She started to turn away, but Junior stopped her.

"You're Dale's new lady, right? He said you were a tall redhead."

Sara bit her lip. What was Dale doing hanging around all these ten-year-olds?

Junior's face broke out into a grin. "Dr. Linton, I presume."

She would've lied but for her badge hanging off her jacket. And her name embroidered over the breast pocket. And the fact that she was the only doctor with red hair working in the hospital.

Larry offered, "I'd be pleased to help Dale's new squeeze."

"Hells yeah," Junior chimed in.

Sara plastered a smile onto her face. "How do you two know Dale?"

"B-ball, baby." Larry feigned a hoop shot. "What is the nature of your emergency?"

"No emergency—" she said, before realizing he was just being funny. "I had a question about the shooting yesterday."

"Which one?"

This time he wasn't joking. Asking about a shooting in Atlanta was like asking about the drunk at a football game. "Sherwood Forest. The officer-involved shooting."

Larry nodded. "Damn, that was freaky. Guy had a belly full of H."

"Heroin?" Sara asked.

"Packed into balloons. The gunshot split 'em open like ..." He asked Junior, "Shit, man, what're them things with sugar in 'em?"

"Dip Stick?"

"No."

"Is it chocolate?"

"No, man, like in the paper straw."

Sara suggested, "Pixie Stix?"

"Yeah, that's right. Dude went out on an epic high."

Sara waited through some fist bumping between the two. "This was the Asian man?"

"No, the Puerto Rican. Ricardo." He put an exotic spin on the r's.

"I thought he was Mexican."

"Yo, 'cause we all look alike?"

Sara didn't know how to answer him.

Larry laughed. "That's cool. I'm just playin' ya. Sure, he's Puerto Rican, like my moms."

"Did they get a last name on him?"

"No. But, he got the Neta tattooed on his hand." He pointed to the webbing between his thumb and index finger. "It's a heart with an N in the middle."

"Neta?" Sara had never heard the name before.

"Puerto Rican gang. Crazy dudes want to break off from the U.S. My moms

was all up in that shit when we left. All ‘we gotta get out from the rule of the colonial oppressors.’ Then she gets here and she’s all, ‘I gotta get me one’a them big-screen plasma TVs like your aunt Frieda.’ Word.” Another fist bump with Junior.

“You’re sure that’s a gang symbol—the *N* inside a heart?”

“One of ‘em. Everybody who joins up has to bring in more people.”

“Like Wiccans,” Junior provided.

“Exactly. Lots of ‘em drop out or move on. Ricardo there can’t be big-time. He don’t got the fingers.” Larry held up his hand again, this time with his index finger crossed in front of his middle finger. “Usually looks like this, with the Puerto Rican flag around the wrist. They’re all about independence. At least that’s what they say.”

Sara remembered what Will had told her. “I thought Ricardo had the Los Mexicanos tattoo on his chest?”

“Yeah, like I said, a lot of ‘em drop out or move on. Brother must’ve moved on and up. Neta ain’t got pull here like Mexicanos.” He hissed air through his teeth. “Scary stuff, man. Them Mexicanos don’t screw around.”

“Does the ME’s office know all of this?”

“They sent the pictures to the gang unit. Neta’s the top organization in PR. They’ll be in the Bible.”

The Gang Bible was the book used by police officers to track gang signs and movements. “Was there anything on the Asian men? The other victims?”

“One was a student. Some kind of math whiz. Won all kinds of prizes or some shit.”

Sara remembered Hironobu Kwon’s photo from the news. “I thought he was at Georgia State?” State wasn’t a bad school, but a math prodigy would end up at Georgia Tech.

“That’s all I know. They’re doing the other guy right now. That apartment fire got us backed up big-time. Six bodies.” He shook his head. “Two dogs. Man, I hate when it’s dogs.”

Junior said, “I feel ya, bro.”

“Thank you,” Sara said. “Thank you both.”

Junior pounded the side of his fist against his chest. “Be good to my man Dale.”

Sara left before more fists were bumped. She dug her hand into her pocket, trying to find her cell phone as she walked down the hallway. Most of the staff carried so many electronic devices that they were all likely going to die of radiation poisoning. She had a BlackBerry she received lab reports and hospital communiqués on as well as an iPhone for personal use. Her hospital cell phone was a flip-style that had previously belonged to someone with very sticky hands. Two pagers were clipped to her coat pocket, one for the emergency department and one for the pediatrics ward. Her personal phone was slim and usually the last thing she found, which was the case this time.

She scrolled through the numbers, pausing on Amanda Wagner’s name, then scrolling back up to Will Trent. His phone rang twice before he picked up.

“Trent.”

Sara was inexplicably tongue-tied by the sound of his voice. In the silence, she could hear wind blowing, the sound of children playing.

He said, "Hello?"

"Hi, Will—sorry." She cleared her throat. "I was calling because I talked to someone at the ME's office. Like you asked." She felt her face turning red. "Like Amanda asked."

He mumbled something, probably to Amanda. "What'd you find out?"

"The Mexicanos victim, Ricardo. No last name as of yet, but he was probably Puerto Rican." She waited while he relayed this information to Amanda. She asked the same question Sara had. Sara answered, "He had a tattoo on his hand for a gang, the Neta, which is in Puerto Rico. The man I talked with said Ricardo probably switched affiliations when he came to Atlanta." Again, she waited for him to tell Amanda. "He also had a belly full of heroin."

"Heroin?" His voice went up in surprise. "How much?"

"I'm not sure. The man I spoke with said the powder was packed in balloons. When Faith shot him, the heroin was released. That alone would've killed him."

Will told Amanda as much, then came back on the line. "Amanda says thank you for checking into this."

"I'm sorry there's not more."

"That's great what you came up with." He clarified, "I mean, thank you, Dr. Linton. This is all very useful information to have."

She knew he couldn't talk in front of Amanda, but she didn't want to let him go. "How's it going on your end?"

"The prison was a bust. We're standing outside Hironobu Kwon's house right now. He lived with his mother in Grant Park." He was less than fifteen minutes away from Grady. "The neighbor says his mother should be home soon. I guess she's probably making arrangements. She lives across the street from the zoo. We had to park about a mile away. Or, I did. Amanda made me drop her off." He finally paused for breath. "How are you doing?"

Sara smiled. He seemed to want to stay on the phone as much as she did. "Did you get any sleep last night?"

"Not much. How about you?"

She tried to think of something flirty to say, but settled on, "Not much."

Amanda's voice was too muffled to understand, but Sara got the tone. Will said, "So, I'll talk to you later. Thank you again, Dr. Linton."

Sara felt foolish as she ended the call. Maybe she should go back up to the lounge and gossip with Nan.

Or maybe she should talk to Dale Dugan and nip this in the bud before they both got any more embarrassed. Sara took out her hospital BlackBerry and looked up Dale's email address, then started to enter it into her iPhone. She would ask him to meet her in the cafeteria so they could talk this through. Or maybe she should suggest the parking lot. She didn't want to cause more gossip than was already circulating.

Up ahead, the elevator bell dinged and she caught sight of Dale. He was laughing with one of the nurses. Junior must've told him she was down here. Sara chickened out. She opened the first door she came to, which happened to be the records department. Two older women with matching, tightly groomed perms sat behind desks piled with charts. They were typing furiously on their computer keyboards and barely looked up at Sara.

One of them asked, "Help you?" turning the page on the chart opened beside

her.

Sara stood there, momentarily unsure of herself. She realized that somewhere in the back of her mind, she had been thinking about the records office since she got on the elevator. She dropped her iPhone back into her coat pocket.

“What is it, darlin’?” the woman asked. They were both staring at Sara now.

She held up her hospital ID. “I need an old chart from nineteen ...” She did the math quickly in her head. “Seventy-six, maybe?”

The woman handed her a pad and paper. “Give me the name. That’ll make it easier.”

Sara knew even as she wrote down Will’s name that what she was doing was wrong, and not just because she was breaking federal privacy laws and risking immediate termination. Will had been at the Atlanta Children’s Home from infancy. There wouldn’t have been a family physician managing his care. All of his medical needs would have been handled through Grady. His entire childhood was stored here, and Sara was using her hospital ID to gain access to it.

“No middle name?” the woman asked.

Sara shook her head. She didn’t trust herself to speak.

“Gimme a minute. These won’t be in the computer yet or you’d be able to pull them up on your tablet. We’ve barely dipped our toe into 1970.” She was out of her chair and through the door marked “File Room” before Sara could tell her to stop.

The other woman went back to her typing, her long red fingernails making a sound like a cat running across a tile floor. Sara looked down at her shoes, which were stained with God knows what from this morning’s cases. In her mind, she went over the possible culprits, but as hard as she tried, she could not shake the feeling that what she was doing was absolutely and without a doubt the most unethical thing she had ever done in her life. What’s more, it was a complete betrayal of Will’s trust.

And she couldn’t do it. She wouldn’t do it.

This wasn’t the way Sara operated. She was normally a forthright person. If she wanted to know about Will’s suicide attempt, or any details about his childhood, then she should ask him, not sneak around his back and look at his medical chart.

The woman was back. “No William, but I found a Wilbur.” She had a file tucked under her arm. “Nineteen seventy-five.”

Sara had used paper charts the majority of her career. Most healthy kids had a chart with twenty or so pages by the time they reached eighteen years of age. An unhealthy kid’s file could run around fifty. Will’s chart was over an inch thick. A decaying rubber band held together faded sheets of yellow and white paper.

“No middle name,” the woman said. “I’m sure he had one at some point, but a lot of these kids fell through the cracks back then.”

Her partner supplied, “Ellis Island and Tuskegee rolled up into one.”

Sara reached for the file, then stopped herself. Her hand hovered in the air.

“You all right, darlin’?” The woman glanced back at her office mate, then to Sara. “You need to sit down?”

Sara dropped her hand. “I don’t think I need that after all. I’m sorry to waste your time.”

“Are you sure?”

Sara nodded. She could not remember the last time she had felt this awful. Even her run-in with Angie Trent hadn't produced this amount of guilt. "I'm so sorry."

"No need to apologize. Felt good to get up." She started to tuck the file under her arm but the rubber band broke, sending papers flying onto the floor.

Automatically, Sara bent down to help. She gathered the pages together, willing herself not to read the words. There were lab reports printed in dot matrix, reams of chart notations, and what looked like an ancient Atlanta police report. She blurred her vision, praying she wouldn't pick up a word or a sentence.

"Look at this."

Sara looked up. It was a natural thing to do. The woman held a faded Polaroid picture in her hand. The shot was a close-up of a child's mouth. A small silver ruler was beside a laceration running the width of the philtrum, the midline groove between the top of the lip and nose. The injury wasn't from a tumble or bump. The impact had been significant enough to rend the flesh in two, revealing the teeth. Thick black sutures pulled together the wound. The skin was puffy and irritated. Sara was more accustomed to seeing this kind of baseball stitching in a morgue, not on a child's face.

"I bet he was in that poly-what's-it study," the woman said. She showed the photo to her friend.

"Polyglycolic acid." She explained to Sara, "Grady piloted a study on different types of absorbable sutures they were working on at Tech. Looks like he's one of the kids that had an allergic reaction. Poor little thing." She went back to her typing. "I guess it was better than sticking a bunch of leeches on him."

The other woman asked Sara, "You all right, hon?"

Sara felt as if she was going to be sick. She straightened up and left the room. She didn't stop walking until she had bolted up two flights of stairs and was outside, breathing fresh air.

She paced in front of the closed door. Her emotions pinballed back and forth between anger and shame. He was just a child. He'd been admitted for treatment and they had experimented on him like an animal. To this day, he probably had no idea what they had done. Sara wished to God she didn't know herself, though it served her right for prying. She should've never asked for his chart. But she had, and now Sara couldn't get that picture out of her head—his beautiful mouth crudely pulled together with a suture that couldn't meet the basic standards for government approval.

The faded Polaroid would be burned into her memory until she died. She had gotten exactly what she deserved.

"Hey, you."

She spun around. A young woman was standing behind her. She was painfully thin. Her greasy blonde hair hung to her waist. She scratched at the fresh needle tracks on her arms. "Are you a doctor?"

Sara felt her guard go up. Junkies lurked around the hospital. Some of them could be violent. "You should go inside if you need treatment."

"It's not me. There's a guy over there." She pointed to the Dumpster in a corner behind the hospital. Even in full daylight, the area was shadowed by the looming façade of the building. "He's been there all night. I think he's dead."

Sara moderated her tone. "Let's go inside and talk about this."

Anger flashed in the girl's eyes. "Lookit, I'm just trying to do the right thing. You don't gotta go all high and mighty on me."

"I'm not—"

"I hope he gives you AIDS, bitch." She limped off, mumbling more insults.

"Christ," Sara breathed, wondering how her day could get any worse. How she missed the manners of good country people, when even the junkies called her "ma'am." She started back toward the hospital, then stopped. The girl could've been telling the truth.

Sara walked back toward the Dumpster, not getting too close in case the girl's accomplice was hiding inside. The trash wasn't collected over the weekend. Boxes and plastic bags spilled out of the metal container and littered the ground. Sara took a step closer. There was someone lying underneath a blue plastic bag. She saw a hand. A deep gash splayed open the palm. Sara took another step closer, then stopped. Working at Grady had made her hyper-cautious. This could still be a trap. Instead of going to the body, she turned around and jogged toward the ambulance bay so that she could get help.

Three EMTs were standing around talking. She directed them toward the back and they followed her with a gurney. Sara pulled away the trash. The man was breathing but unconscious. His eyes were closed. His brown skin had a yellow, waxy look. His T-shirt was soaked in blood, obviously from a penetrating wound in his lower abdomen. Sara pressed her fingers to his carotid and saw a familiar tattoo on his neck: a Texas star with a rattlesnake wrapped around it.

Will's missing Type B-negative.

"Let's move it," one of the EMTs said.

Sara ran beside the gurney as they rolled the man into the hospital. She listened to the medics run down vitals as she pulled back the gauze over his belly. The entrance to the wound was thin, probably from a kitchen knife. The edge was rough from the serration. There was very little fresh blood, indicating a closed bleed. The gut was distended, and the telltale odor of rotting flesh told her that there was not much that she would be able to do for him in the ER.

A tall man in a dark suit jogged alongside her. He asked, "Is he going to make it?"

Sara looked for George. The security guard was nowhere to be found. "You need to stay out of the way."

"Doctor—" He held up his wallet. She saw the flash of gold shield. "I'm a cop. Is he going to make it?"

"I don't know," she said, pressing the gauze back in place. Then, because the patient might hear, she said, "Maybe."

The cop dropped back. She glanced up the hall, but he was gone.

The trauma team set up immediately, cutting off the man's clothes, drawing blood, connecting lines to hook him up to various machines. A cut-down tray was laid out. Surgical packs were opened. The crash cart appeared.

Sara called for two large-bore IVs to force fluids. She checked the ABCs: airway clear, breathing okay, circulation as good as could be expected. She noticed the pace slow considerably as people began to realize what they were dealing with. The team thinned. Eventually, she was down to just one nurse.

"No wallet," the nurse said. "Nothing in his pockets but lint."

"Sir?" Sara tried, opening the man's eyes. His pupils were fixed and dilated. She checked for a head injury, gently pressing her fingers in a clockwise pattern around his skull. At the occipital bone, she felt a fracture that splintered into the brainpan. She looked at her gloved hand. There was no fresh blood from the wound.

The nurse pulled the curtain closed to give the man some privacy. "X-ray? CT the belly?"

Sara was technically doing the regular attending's job. She asked, "Can you get Krakauer?"

The nurse left, and Sara did a more thorough exam, though she was sure Krakauer would take one look at the man's vitals and agree with her. There was no emergency here. The patient could not survive general anesthesia and he likely would not survive his injuries. They could only load him up with antibiotics and wait for time to decide the patient's fate.

The privacy curtain pulled back. A young man peered in. He was clean-shaven, wearing a black warm-up jacket and a black baseball hat pulled down low on his head.

"You can't be back here," she told him. "If you're looking for—"

He punched Sara in the chest so hard that she fell back onto the floor. Her shoulder slammed against one of the trays. Metal instruments clattered around her—scalpels, hemostats, scissors. The young man pointed a gun at the patient's head and shot him twice at pointblank range.

Sara heard screaming. It was her. The sound was coming out of her own mouth. The man pointed the gun at her head and she stopped. He moved toward her. She groped blindly for something to protect herself. Her hand wrapped around one of the scalpels.

He was closer, almost on top of her. Was he going to shoot her or was he going to leave? Sara didn't give him time to decide. She slashed out, cutting the inside of his thigh. The man groaned, dropping the gun. The wound was deep. Blood sprayed from the femoral artery. He fell to one knee. They both saw the gun at the same time. She kicked it away. He reached for Sara instead, grabbing the hand that held the scalpel. She tried to pull back but his grip tightened around her wrists. Panic took hold as she realized what he was doing. The blade was moving toward her neck. She used both her hands, trying to push him away as he inched the blade closer and closer.

"Please ... no ..."

He was on top of her, pressing her into the ground with the weight of his body. She stared into his green eyes. The whites were crisscrossed with a road map of red. His mouth was a straight line. His body shook so hard that she felt it in her spine.

"Drop it!" George, the security guard, stood with his gun locked out in front of him. "Now, asshole!"

Sara felt the man's grip tighten. Both their hands were shaking from pushing in opposite directions.

"Drop it now!"

"Please," Sara begged. Her muscles couldn't take much more. Her hands were starting to weaken.

Without warning, the pressure stopped. Sara watched the scalpel swing up,

the blade slice into the man's flesh. He kept his hand wrapped tightly around hers as over and over again he plunged the scalpel into his own throat.

CHAPTER TEN

Will had been trapped in the car so long with Amanda that he was worried he was going to develop Stockholm syndrome. He was already feeling himself weaken, especially after Miriam Kwon, mother of Hironobu Kwon, had spit in Amanda's face.

In Ms. Kwon's defense, Amanda hadn't exactly been tender toward the woman. They had practically ambushed her on her front lawn. She'd obviously just come from arranging her son's funeral. Pamphlets with crosses on them were clutched in her hand as she approached the house. Her street was lined with cars. She'd had to park some distance away. She looked exhausted and limp, the way any mother would look after choosing the coffin in which her only son would be buried.

After mumbling the perfunctory condolences on behalf of the GBI, Amanda had gone straight for the jugular. From Ms. Kwon's reaction, Will gathered the woman hadn't been expecting her dead son's name to be sullied in such a manner, despite the nefarious circumstances surrounding his death. It was the nature of Atlanta news stations that every dead young man under the age of twenty-five was celebrated as an honor student until proven otherwise. According to his criminal record, this particular honor student had been a fan of Oxycontin. Hironobu Kwon had been arrested twice for selling the drug. Only his academic promise had saved him from serious jail time. The judge had ordered him to rehab three months ago. Apparently, that hadn't worked out too well.

Will checked the time on his cell phone. The recent change to daylight savings time had switched the phone into military hours. He couldn't for the life of him figure out how to change it back to normal. Thankfully, it was half past noon, which meant he didn't have to count on his fingers like a monkey.

Not that he didn't have ample time to perform mathematical equations. Despite traveling almost five hundred miles this morning, they had nothing to show for it. Evelyn Mitchell was still missing. They were about to hit the twenty-four-hour mark since her abduction. The dead bodies were stacking up, and the only clue Will and Amanda had been given thus far had come from the mouth of a death row inmate who had been murdered before the state could kill him.

Their trip to Valdosta State Prison may as well have never happened. Former drug squad detectives Adam Hopkins and Ben Humphrey had stared at Amanda as if gazing through a piece of glass. Will had expected as much. Years ago, they had each refused to talk to Will when he'd shown up on their respective doorsteps. Lloyd Crittenden was dead. Demarcus Alexander and Chuck Finn were probably just as unreachable. Both ex-detectives had left Atlanta as soon as they were released from prison. Will had talked to their parole officers last night. Alexander was on the West Coast trying to rebuild his life. Finn was in Tennessee, wallowing in the misery of drug addiction.

"Heroin," Will said.

Amanda turned to him, looking as if she'd forgotten that he was in the car. They were heading north on Interstate 85, toward another bad guy who was more than likely going to refuse to talk to them.

He told her, "Boyd Spivey said that Chuck Finn had a belly habit for heroin. According to Sara, Ricardo was packed full of heroin."

"That's a very tenuous connection."

"Here's another one: Oxy usually leads to heroin addiction."

"These straws are mighty thin. You can't throw a brick without hitting a heroin addict these days." She sighed. "If only we had more bricks."

Will tapped his fingers against his leg. He'd been holding back something all morning, hoping he'd catch Amanda off guard and get the truth. Now seemed as good a time as any. "Hector Ortiz was Evelyn's gentleman friend."

The corner of her mouth turned up. "Is that so?"

"He's Ignacio Ortiz's brother, though I gather from your expression that this isn't a news flash."

"Ortiz's cousin," she corrected. "Are these observations courtesy of Dr. Linton?"

Will felt his teeth start to grind. "You already knew who he was."

"Would you like to waste the next ten minutes discussing your feelings or do you want to do your job?"

He wanted to spend the next ten minutes throttling her, but Will decided to keep that to himself. "What was Evelyn doing mixed up with the cousin of the guy who runs all the coke in and out of the southeastern United States?"

"Hector was a car salesman, actually." She glanced at him. There was something like humor in her eyes. "He sold Cadillacs."

That explained why the man's name hadn't come up on Will's vehicle search. He was driving a dealer car. "Hector had a Mexicanos tattoo on his arm."

"We all make mistakes when we're young."

Will tried, "What about the letter A that Evelyn drew under the chair?"

"I thought we were calling that an arrowhead?"

"*Almeja* rhymes with 'Amanda.' "

"It kind of does, doesn't it?"

"It's slang for 'cunt.' "

She laughed. "Why, Will, are you calling me a cunt?"

If she only knew how many times he'd been tempted.

"I suppose I should reward your good police work." Amanda pulled a folded sheet of paper from the sun visor. She handed it to Will. "Evelyn's phone calls from the last four weeks."

He scanned the two pages. "She's been calling Chattanooga a lot."

Amanda gave him a curious look. Will glared back at her. He could read, just not quickly and certainly not under scrutiny. The Tennessee Bureau of Investigation's eastern field office was in Chattanooga. He'd called them constantly to coordinate meth cases while he was working in North Georgia. The 423 area code appeared at least a dozen times in Evelyn's phone records.

He asked, "Is there something you want to say to me?"

For once, she was silent.

Will pulled out his cell phone to call the number.

"Don't be stupid. It's Healing Winds, a rehab facility."

"Why was she calling there?"

"I had the same question." She signaled, pulling into the next lane. "They're not allowed to give out patient information."

Will checked the dates against the numbers. Evelyn had only started calling the facility in the last ten days, the same time period in which Mrs. Levy said that Hector Ortiz's visits with Evelyn had picked up.

Will said, "Chuck Finn lives in Tennessee."

"He lives in Memphis. That's a five-hour drive from Healing Winds in Chattanooga."

"He has a serious drug addiction." Will waited for her to respond. When she didn't, he said, "Guys get clean, sometimes they want to unburden themselves. Maybe Evelyn was afraid he would start talking."

"What an interesting theory."

"Or maybe it took clearing his mind for Chuck to realize that Evelyn was still sitting on her share of the cash." He pushed on. "It's hard to find work with a rap sheet like Chuck's. He was kicked off the force. He spent serious time in prison. He's got his habit to battle. Even if he's clean, no one would go out of their way to hire him. Not in this economy."

Amanda dropped another dollop of information. "There were eight sets of prints in Evelyn's house, excluding hers and Hector's. They've identified three. One set belonged to Hironobu Kwon, another belonged to Ricardo the heroin mule, and another set belonged to our Hawaiian shirt aficionado. His name is Benny Choo. He's a forty-two-year-old enforcer for the Yellow Rebels."

"Yellow Rebels?"

"It's an Asian gang. Don't ask me where they got the name. I suppose they're very proud to be hillbillies. Most of them are."

"Ling-Ling," Will guessed. That was who they were going to see. "Spivey said you should talk to Ling-Ling."

"Julia Ling."

Will was surprised. "A woman?"

"Yes, a woman. My laws, how the world has changed." Amanda glanced in the rearview mirror and darted into the next lane. "The nickname comes from the now-disproven perception that she's not very smart. Her brother likes to rhyme things. 'Ding-a-ling' turned into 'Ling-a-Ling,' shortened to 'Ling-Ling.'"

Will had no idea what she was talking about. "That makes sense."

"Madam Ling is the outside boss of the Yellow Rebels. Her brother Roger still pulls the strings from inside, but she runs the day-to-day. If Yellow is making a play for Brown, then it's being made by Roger via Ling-Ling."

"What's he in for?"

"He's serving life for the rape and murder of two teenage girls. Sixteen and fourteen. They were tricking for him. He didn't think they were pulling their weight, so he strangled them to death with a dog leash. But not before raping both of them and ripping off their breasts with his teeth."

Will felt a shudder working its way up his spine. "Why isn't he on death row?"

"He took a deal. The State was worried about him making an insanity plea—which, between you and me, wouldn't be much of a stretch, because the man is absolutely nuts. This wasn't the first time Roger was caught with human flesh between his teeth."

The shudder made his shoulders flex. "What about the victims?"

"They were both runaways who fell into drugs and prostitution. Their families were more about divine retribution than an eye for an eye."

Will was familiar with the concept. "They probably ran away for a reason."

"Young girls usually do."

"Roger's sister still supports him?"

She gave him a meaningful look. "Don't be fooled, Will. Julia talks a very good game, but she could slit your throat and not lose a wink of sleep. These people are not to be messed with. There are procedures that have to be followed. You must show them the utmost respect."

Will repeated Boyd's words. "You can't go to Yellow without an invitation."

"You have such a remarkable memory."

Will checked out the number for the next exit. They were heading toward Buford Highway. Chambodia. "Maybe Boyd was only half right. Heroin is a lot more addictive than coke. If the Yellow Rebels flood the market with cheap heroin, then Los Mexicanos will lose its cocaine customer base. That points to a power struggle, but it doesn't explain why two Asian men and a Texicano were in Evelyn Mitchell's house looking for something." Will stopped. She'd sidetracked him again. "Hironobu Kwon and Benny Choo. What's Ricardo's last name?"

She smiled. "Very good." She offered the information like another reward. "Ricardo Ortiz. He's Ignatio Ortiz's youngest son."

Will had interviewed ax murderers who were more forthcoming. "And he was muling heroin."

"Yes, he was."

"Are you going to tell me if any of these guys are connected or do I have to find that out on my own?"

"Ricardo Ortiz was thrown into juvie twice, but he never crossed paths inside with Hironobu Kwon. Neither of them have visible connections to Benny Choo, and as I said, Hector Ortiz was just a simple car salesman." She zipped in front of a delivery truck, cutting off a Hyundai in the process. "Believe me, if I saw a connection between any of these men, we'd be working it."

"Except for Choo, they're all young guys, early twenties." Will tried to think of where they might've met. AA meetings. Nightclubs. Basketball courts. Church, maybe. Miriam Kwon wore a gold cross around her neck. Ricardo Ortiz had a cross tattooed on his arm. Stranger things had happened.

Amanda said, "Check the number Evelyn called the day before she was taken. 3:02 p.m."

Will traced his finger under the first column, finding the time. He moved across. The number had an Atlanta area code. "Am I supposed to recognize this?"

"I'd be surprised if you did. It's the precinct number for Hartsfield." Hartsfield-Jackson, Atlanta's airport. "Vanessa Livingston is the commander. I've known the old gal a long time. She partnered with Evelyn after I left APD."

Will waited, then asked, "And?"

"Evelyn asked her to check for a name on the flight manifests."

"Ricardo Ortiz," Will guessed.

"You must've gotten your sleep last night."

He'd stayed up until three listening to the rest of the recordings, apparently for no reason but to find out things that Amanda already knew. "Where did Ricardo fly in from?"

"Sweden."

Will frowned. He hadn't been expecting that.

Amanda merged onto the exit ramp for I-285. "Ninety percent of all heroin in the world comes from Afghanistan. Your tax dollars at work." She slowed for the curve as they went through Spaghetti Junction. "The bulk of the European supply runs through Iran, up into Turkey and farther points north."

"Like Sweden."

"Like Sweden." She accelerated again as they merged into fast-moving traffic. "Ricardo was there for three days. Then he took a flight from Gothenburg to Amsterdam, then straight into Atlanta."

"Filled with heroin."

"Filled with heroin."

Will rubbed his jaw, thinking about what had happened to the young man.

"Someone beat the hell out of him. He was full of balloons. Maybe he couldn't pass them."

"That would be a question for the ME."

Will had assumed that she'd gotten all of this information from the medical examiner's office. "You didn't ask him?"

"They've kindly promised me their full report by end of business this evening. Why do you think I asked you to have Sara reach out?" She added, "How's that going, by the way? I'm assuming from your good night's sleep that there's not a lot of progress."

They were coming up on the Buford Highway exit. U.S. Route 23 ran from Jacksonville, Florida, to Mackinaw City, Michigan. The Georgia stretch was around four hundred miles, and the part that went through Chamblee, Norcross, and Doraville was one of the most racially diverse in the area, if not the country. It wasn't exactly a neighborhood—more like a series of desolate strip malls, flimsy apartment buildings, and gas stations that offered expensive rims and quick title loans. What it lacked in community it made up for in raw commerce.

Will was fairly certain Chambodia was a pejorative term, but the name for the area had stuck, despite DeKalb County's push to call it the International Corridor. There were all kinds of ethnic subsets, from Portuguese to Hmong. Unlike most urban areas, there didn't seem to be a clear line of segregation between any of the communities. Subsequently, you could find a Mexican restaurant beside a sushi place, and the farmer's market was the sort of melting pot that people thought of when they pictured the United States.

The strip was much closer to the land of opportunity than the amber waves of grain in the heartland. People could come here with little more than a work ethic and build a solidly middle-class life. For as long as Will could remember, the demographics were in constant flux. The whites complained when the blacks moved in. The blacks complained when the Hispanics moved in. The Hispanics complained when the Asians moved in. One day they would all be grumbling about the influx of whites. The gerbil wheel of the American dream.

Amanda pulled into the middle strip that served as the turning lane for both sides of the highway. Will saw a bunch of signs stacked one on top of the other

like a Jenga game. Some of the characters were unrecognizable, more like pieces of art than letters.

"I've had a car sitting on Ling-Ling's shop all morning. She hasn't had any visitors." Amanda floored the gas, narrowly missing a minivan as she made the turn. Horns blared, but she talked over them. "I made some phone calls last night. Roger was transferred to Coastal three months ago. They had him at Augusta for six months prior, but he evened out on his meds, so they sent him back into the cattle shoot." Augusta Medical Hospital provided Level 4 mental health services to inmates on a transient basis. "Roger's first day at Coastal ended with a nasty incident involving a bar of soap wrapped in a tube sock. Apparently, he's not happy with his new accommodations."

"You're going to offer to transfer him?"

"If it comes to that."

"Are you going to use Boyd's name?"

"That might not be a wise idea."

"What do you think Roger's going to give us?" Will did a mental head slap. "You think he's behind Evelyn's kidnapping."

"He may be clinically insane, but he'd never be stupid enough to do something like that." She gave Will a meaningful look. "Roger's extremely intelligent. Think chess, not checkers. There's no gain for him in taking Evelyn. His whole organization would be disrupted."

"Okay, so, you think Roger knows who's involved?"

"If you want to know about a crime, ask a criminal." Her cell phone started to ring. She checked the number. Will felt the car slow. Amanda pulled to the side of the road. She answered the phone, listened, then hit the unlock button on the door. "A little privacy, please?"

Will got out of the SUV. The weather had been spectacular the day before, but now it was cloudy and warm. He walked toward the edge of the strip mall. There was a shack of a restaurant near the street entrance. He guessed from the rocking chair painted on the sign that it was some kind of country-cooking establishment. Strangely, Will didn't feel his stomach rumble at the thought of food. The last thing he'd had to eat was a bowl of instant grits that he'd forced down this morning. His appetite was gone, which was something he'd only experienced once before in his life—the last time he'd been around Sara Linton.

Will sat down on the curb. Cars whirled by behind him. Fragments of beats bounced from their radios. A glance toward Amanda told him she was going to be a while. She was gesturing with her hands, never a good thing.

He took out his phone and scrolled through the numbers. He should call Faith, but he didn't have anything he could report and their conversation last night hadn't ended well. Whatever happened with Evelyn wasn't going to make things better. No matter what tricky verbal maneuvering Amanda was doing, there were still some hard facts she couldn't talk around. If the Asians were really making a play for the Mexicanos drug market, then Evelyn Mitchell had to be at the center of it. Hector might've called himself a car salesman, but he still had the tattoo that connected him to the gang. He still had a cousin in prison running that same gang. His nephew had been shot dead at Evelyn's house, and Hector himself was dead in Evelyn's trunk. There was no reason for a cop, especially a retired one, to be mixed up with these kind of bad guys unless there

was something dirty going on.

Will looked down at his phone. Thirteen hundred hours. He should go into the setup menu and try to figure out how to switch it back to the normal time display, but Will didn't have the patience right now. Instead, he scrolled to Sara's cell phone number, which had three eights in it. He had stared at it so many times over the last few months that he was surprised the numbers weren't burned into his retinas.

Unless you counted the unfortunate misunderstanding with the lesbian who lived across the street, Will had never been on a real date before. He'd been with Angie since he was eight years old. There had been passion at one time, and for a short while, something that felt close to love, but he could not ever recall a point in his life when he felt happy to be with her. He lived in dread of her showing up on his doorstep. He felt enormous relief when she was gone. Where she got him was the in-between, those rare moments of peace when he got a glimpse of what a settled life could be. They would have meals together and go to the grocery store and work in the yard—or Will would work and Angie would watch—and then at night they'd go to bed and he would find himself lying there with a smile on his face because this was what life was like for the rest of the world.

And then he would wake up in the morning and she'd be gone.

They were too close. That was the problem. They had lived through too much, seen too many horrors, shared too much fear and loathing and pity, to look at each other as something other than victims. Will's body was like a monument to that misery: the burn marks, the scars, the various slings and arrows he had suffered. For years, he had wanted more from Angie, but Will had recently come to the hard realization that there was nothing more that she could give.

She wasn't going to change. He knew that truth even when they finally got married, which had come about not through careful planning but because Will had bet Angie that she wouldn't go through with it. Gambling aside, she was never going to see being with Will as anything other than a safe haven at best and a sacrifice at worst. There was a reason she never touched him unless she wanted something. There was a reason he didn't try to call her when she disappeared.

He slid his thumb inside his sleeve and felt the beginnings of the long scar that traced up his arm. It was thicker than he remembered. The skin was still tender to the touch.

Will pulled away his hand. Angie had flinched the last time her fingers had accidentally brushed against his bare arm. Her reactions to him were always intense, never half measures. She liked to see how far she could push him. It was her favorite sport: how bad did she have to be before Will finally had enough and abandoned her just like everyone else had in her life?

They had teetered on that line many times, but somehow, she always managed to yank him back at the last second. Even now, Will felt the pull. He hadn't seen Angie since her mother had died. Deidre Polaski was a junkie and a prostitute who'd overdosed herself into a vegetative coma when Angie was eleven. Her body had held on for twenty-seven years before finally giving up. Four months had passed since the funeral. Not much in the scheme of things—Angie had disappeared for a whole year once—but Will felt a warning in his

spine that told him something was wrong. She was in trouble or she was hurt or she was upset. His body knew it just like it knew that it needed to breathe.

They had always been connected like this, even back when they were kids. Especially when they were kids. And if there was one thing Will knew about his wife, it was that she always came to him when things were bad. He didn't know when she would show up, whether it would be tomorrow or next week, but he knew one day soon he'd come home from work and find Angie sitting on his couch, eating his pudding cups and making derogatory comments about his dog.

That was why Will had gone to Sara's house last night. He was hiding from Angie. He was fighting the inevitable. And, if he was being honest, he had been aching to see Sara again. That she had bought his excuse about his house being upside down made him think that maybe she had wanted him there, too. As a kid, Will had trained himself to not want things he couldn't have—the latest toys, shoes that actually fit, home-cooked meals that didn't come out of a can. His power to deny himself disappeared where Sara Linton was concerned. He could not stop thinking about how her hand had felt on his shoulder when they'd stood in the street yesterday. Her thumb had stroked the side of his neck. She had lifted her heels off the ground so that they were the same height, and for just a second, he'd thought that she was going to kiss him.

"Christ," Will groaned. He visualized the carnage at Evelyn Mitchell's house, the blood and brain matter spattered across her kitchen and laundry room. And then he tried to blank his mind completely, because he was pretty sure thinking about sex and then picturing scenes of violence was how serial killers got their start.

The SUV jerked into reverse. Amanda rolled down the window. Will stood.

She told him, "That was a source at APD. Looks like our Type B-negative showed up by the Dumpster at Grady. Unconscious, barely breathing. They found his wallet in one of the trash bags. Marcellus Benedict Estevez. Unemployed. Lives with his grandmother."

Will wondered why Sara hadn't called him about this. Maybe she had already left work. Or maybe it wasn't her job to keep him in the loop. "Did Estevez say anything?"

"He died half an hour ago. We'll swing by the hospital after this."

Will thought that was a pointless trip considering the guy was dead. "Did he have something on him?"

"No. Get in."

"Why are we—"

"I don't have all day, Will. Wipe the dirt out of your vagina and let's get going."

Will got into the SUV. "Did they confirm Estevez is blood type B-negative?"

She punched the gas. "Yes. And his fingerprints have been positively identified as one of the eight sets found in Evelyn's house."

He was missing something again. "That was a long conversation for just that little bit of information."

For once, she was forthcoming. "We got a call-back on Chuck Finn. Why didn't you tell me that you talked to his parole officer last night?"

"I suppose I was being petty."

"Well, you certainly showed me. The parole officer did a spot check on Chuck

this morning. He's been gone for two days."

"Wait a minute." Will turned toward her. "Chuck's PO told me last night that he was accounted for. He said that Chuck never missed a sign-in."

"I'm sure the Tennessee parole office is as overburdened and understaffed as ours is. At least he had the balls to come clean this morning." She gave him a meaningful look. "Chuck Finn signed himself out of treatment two days ago."

"Treatment?"

"He was at Healing Winds. He's on his third month of sobriety."

Will felt a slight vindication.

"Healing Winds is also where Hironobu Kwon got treatment. They were there at the same time."

Will had to be silent for a moment. "When did you find all of this out?"

"Just now, Will. Don't pout. I know an old gal who works in records down at the drug court." Apparently, Amanda knew an old gal everywhere. "Kwon was sent to Hope Hall for his first offense." The drug court's inpatient treatment facility. "The judge wasn't inclined to give him a second chance on the state's dime, so the mother stepped in and said she'd secured him a place at Healing Winds."

"Where he met Chuck Finn."

"It's a large facility, but you're right. It would be quite a stretch to say that these two particular men just happened to be there at the same time."

Will was shocked to hear her concede the point, but he kept going. "If Chuck told Hironobu Kwon that Evelyn had money sitting around..." He smiled. Finally, something was making sense. "What about the other guy? The Type B-negative who showed up at Grady? Does he have any connection to Chuck or Hironobu?"

"Marcellus Estevez has never been arrested. He was born and raised in Miami, Florida. Two years ago, he moved to Carrollton to attend West Georgia College. He dropped out last quarter. He hasn't had contact with his family since."

Another kid in his mid-twenties who had gotten mixed up with some very bad people. "You seem to know an awful lot about Estevez."

"APD has already spoken with his parents. They filed a missing persons report as soon as the school informed them that their son wasn't attending class."

"Since when is Atlanta sharing information with us?"

"Let's just say I reached out to some old friends."

Will was beginning to form an image of a network of steely old ballbusters who either owed Amanda a favor or had worked with Evelyn at some point in their long careers.

She said, "The point is that we don't know how Type B, Marcellus Estevez, ties into this. Except for Hironobu Kwon and Chuck Finn, there's no hint of a connection between anyone else in the house. They all went to different high schools. Not all of them were in college, but the ones who were didn't go together. They didn't meet in prison. None of them share a gang affiliation or a social club. They all have different backgrounds, different ethnicities."

Will felt like she was being honest at least about this. In any investigation involving multiple perpetrators, the key was always to find out how they knew each other. Human beings were largely predictable in their habits. If you found out where they met, how they knew each other, or what had brought them

together, then you could generally find someone outside the group, just hovering around the periphery, who wanted to talk.

He told her what he'd been thinking since he first saw Evelyn's upturned house. "This feels like a personal vendetta."

"Most vendettas are."

"No, I mean it feels like it's about something more than money."

"That will be one of the many questions we ask these imbeciles once we have the cuffs on them." Amanda twisted the steering wheel, taking a sudden turn that jerked Will to the side. "I'm sorry."

He couldn't remember a time Amanda had ever apologized for anything. He stared at her profile. Her jaw was more prominent than usual. Her skin was sallow. She was looking downright beaten. And she had given him more information in the last ten minutes than she had in the last twenty-four hours. "Is something else going on?"

"No." She stopped in front of a large commercial warehouse with six loading docks. There were no cargo trucks, but several vehicles were parked in front of the large bay doors. Any one of the vehicles would've cost more than Will's pension—BMW's, Mercedes, even a Bentley.

Amanda circled the lot, making sure there would be no surprises. The space was large enough for an eighteen-wheeler to turn around, and sloped toward the docks to facilitate loading and unloading. She made a lazy U-turn, going back the way they had come. The tires squealed as she cut the wheel hard, taking a space as far from the building as she could get without parking on the grass. Amanda cut the engine. The SUV was directly across from what appeared to be the front office. About fifty yards of wide-open space separated them from the building. A set of crumbling concrete steps led to a glass door. The railing had rusted so badly it keeled to the side. The sign over the entrance had a set of kitchen cabinets bolted to the front. A Confederate flag waved in the breeze. Will read the first word on the sign, then guessed at the rest, "Southern Cabinets? That's an unusual drug front."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "It's like watching a dog walk on its hind legs."

Will got out of the car. He met Amanda behind the SUV. She used the key-fob remote to pop open the trunk. In Valdosta this morning, they had locked up their weapons before going into the prison. The black SUV was regulation GBI, which meant the entire back end was taken up by a large steel cabinet with six drawers. Amanda pressed the combination into the pushbutton lock and pulled open the middle drawer. Her Glock rested in a dark purple velvet bag that had the Crown Royal logo stitched into the hem. She dropped it into her purse while Will clipped his paddle holster onto his belt.

"Hold on." She reached into the back of the drawer and pulled out a five-shot revolver. This particular type of Smith and Wesson was called an "old-timer," because mostly old-timers carried them. The gun was lightweight, with an internal hammer that made it easy to conceal. Despite the "Lady Smith" logo etched above the trigger, the recoil could leave a nasty bruise the entire length of your hand. Evelyn Mitchell's S&W was a similar model, with a cherry handle instead of Amanda's custom walnut. Will wondered if the two women had bought their guns together on a shopping trip.

Amanda said, "Stand straight. Try not to react. We're just in view of the

camera.”

Will fought to follow her orders as she reached under the back of his jacket and shoved the revolver down his pants. He stared ahead at the warehouse. It was metal, wider than it was deep, about half the length of a football field. The whole building was on a concrete foundation that raised the height of the ground floor by at least four feet, the standard height of a loading dock. Except for the steep flight of concrete steps leading up to the front door, there was no way in and out. At least not unless you were willing to pull yourself up onto the loading dock and muscle open one of the large metal doors.

He asked, “Where are the guys you had sitting on this place?”

“Doraville needed an assist. We’re on our own.”

He watched the camera over the door track back and forth. “This doesn’t seem like a bad idea at all.”

“Stand up straight.” She slapped him on the back, making sure the gun was snug. “And for God’s sake, don’t hold in your stomach or it’ll fall straight through to the ground.” She had to go up on the tips of her toes to pull the trunk closed. “I don’t know why you wear your belt so loose. It’s pointless to even have one if you’re not going to use it right.”

Will walked behind her as she headed toward the entrance. The walk was a brisk one, fifty yards of exposed space. The camera had stopped its sweep to track their progress. They might as well have targets on their chests. He concentrated on the top of Amanda’s head, the way her hair swirled at the crown like a spiral ham.

The glass door opened when they reached the concrete steps to the entrance. Amanda shielded her eyes from the sun, staring up at an angry-looking Asian man. He was huge, his body seemingly comprising equal parts fat and muscle. The guy stood wordlessly, holding open the front door as he watched them make their way up the steps. Will followed Amanda inside. His eyes took their time adjusting in the tiny, airless front office. The fake paneling on the wall had buckled from humidity. The carpet was brown in ways that would repulse a more fastidious man. The whole place smelled of sawdust and oil. Will could hear machines running in the warehouse: finish nailers, compressors, lathes. Guns N’ Roses played on the radio.

Amanda told the man, “Mrs. Ling should be expecting me.” She smiled at the camera mounted above the doorway.

The man didn’t move. Amanda dug into her purse like she was looking for her lipstick. Will didn’t know if she was reaching for her gun or if she just needed lipstick. His answer came when the door was opened by a tall, lithe woman with a grin on her face.

“Mandy Wagner, it’s been ages.” The woman seemed almost pleased. She was Asian, roughly Amanda’s age with short salt-and-pepper hair. She was as thin as a teenager. Her sleeveless shirt showed well-toned arms. She spoke in a distinctive, slow southern drawl. There was something catlike in the languid way she moved, or maybe the smell of pot clinging to her body had something to do with that. She was wearing moccasins with beads on the top, the sort of souvenir you’d find at a tourist trap outside an Indian reservation.

“Julia.” Amanda gave a convincing smile. “It’s so good to see you.” They hugged, and Will saw the woman’s hand linger at Amanda’s waist.

"This is Will Trent, my associate." She put her hand over Julia's as she turned to Will. "I hope you don't mind his tagging along. He's in training."

"How fortunate to learn from the best," Julia cooed. "Tell him to leave his gun on the counter. You too, Mandy. You still using that old Crown Royal bag?"

"Keeps the lint out of the firing pin." The gun made a thud as she dropped the bag on the counter. The dour man checked the contents, then nodded at his boss. Will wasn't as quickly compliant. Giving up his gun was not something he was comfortable with.

"Will," Amanda said. "Don't embarrass me in front of my friends."

He unclipped the paddle holster from his belt and put his Glock on the counter.

Julia Ling laughed as she waved them through the door. The warehouse was even bigger than it looked from the outside, but the operation was small, the sort of thing that would've fit into a two-car garage. There were at least a dozen men putting together cabinets. Will couldn't tell whether they were Asian, Hispanic, or anything else, because their hats were pulled down and their faces were turned away. Whoever they were, they were obviously working. The smell of glue was pungent. Sawdust littered the floor. A gigantic Confederate flag served as a divider between the work area and the vacant-looking rear of the building. The stars were yellow instead of white.

Julia led them through another door and they found themselves in a small but well-furnished back office. The carpet underfoot was plush. There were two couches with overstuffed pillows. A plump Chihuahua sat in a recliner by the window, its eyes closed to what little sun came through the panes. Heavy metal bars framed the view to the service alley behind the building.

"Will has a Chihuahua," Amanda said, because Will hadn't been emasculated enough today. "What's its name again?"

Will felt barbed wire sticking in his throat. "Betty."

"Really?" Julia picked up the dog and sat on the couch with it. She patted the cushion beside her, and Amanda sat down. "This is Arnoldo. He's a chunky little thing. Is yours long-haired or short?"

Will didn't know what else to do. He reached around to pull out his wallet, too late remembering Amanda's revolver. It shifted dangerously, and he sat on the couch across from the women, opening his wallet to show Betty's picture.

Julia Ling made a tsk-ing sound with her tongue. "Isn't she adorable?"

"Thank you." Will took back the picture and dropped his wallet into his coat pocket. "Yours is nice, too."

Julia had already tuned Will out. She ran her hand along Amanda's leg. "What brings you here, buttercup?"

Amanda did a good job of blocking out Will, too. "I trust you've heard about Evelyn?"

"Yes," Julia said, drawing out the word. "Poor Almeja. I hope they are kind to her."

Will fought to keep his mouth from dropping open. Evelyn Mitchell was Almeja.

Amanda laid her hand over Julia's. Instead of taking it off her knee, she left it there. "I don't suppose you've heard anything on her whereabouts?"

"Not a peep, but you know I'd come straight to you if I did."

"Obviously, we're doing everything we can to make sure she's returned home safely. I would pull some considerable strings to make this come out right."

"Yes," Julia repeated. "She's a grandmother now, right? Again, I mean. Such a fertile family." She laughed as if there was a joke between them. "How is that dear, sweet child doing?"

"This is a difficult time for everyone in the family."

"Yes." It seemed this was her favorite word.

"I'm sure you've heard about Hector."

"Bless his heart. I was thinking of trading down for a Cadillac."

"I thought business was going well?"

"It's not really the time to drive something so flashy." She lowered her voice. "Carjackings."

"Awful." Amanda shook her head.

"These young boys are such a problem." She tsked her tongue. Will thought he understood at least this part of the conversation. Julia Ling was referring to the young men who had broken into Evelyn's house. "They see all the gangsters on TV and think it's so easy. Scarface. The Godfather. Tony Soprano. You can see their little brains spinning. Before long, they get these notions into their heads and they pop off without considering the consequences." She tsked her tongue again. "I just lost one of my workers through this kind of careless action."

She meant Benny Choo, the man in the Hawaiian shirt. Will had been right. Julia Ling had sent her strongarm in to clean up the mess Ricardo and his friends had made. And then Faith had killed him.

Amanda must have known this, too, but she treaded carefully. "Your line of business isn't without its risks. Mr. Choo understood this as well as anyone."

Julia Ling hesitated long enough to make Will worry for Faith, then finally let out a slow, "Yes. The cost of doing business. I think we'll let Benny rest in peace."

Amanda appeared as relieved as Will felt. "I hear your brother's coping with his new surroundings."

"Yes," she said. "'Coping' is a good word for it. Roger's never liked the heat. Savannah is practically *tropical*."

"You know, there's a vacancy at the D&C. Perhaps I could see if they'll take Roger? Might be nice to give him a change of scenery."

She pretended to think about it. "Still a little too warm." She smiled. "How about Phillips?"

"Well, that is a nice facility." It was also where Ignatio Ortiz was serving his manslaughter rap. Amanda shook her head like she was very sorry to say that that particular holiday had already been booked by another family. "Doesn't seem like the right fit."

"Baldwin is a better drive for me."

"Baldwin isn't really suited to Roger's temperament." Most likely because the prison only handled minimum to medium security inmates. "Augusta? It's close but not too close."

She wrinkled her nose. "With the sex offender release site?"

"Good point." Amanda seemed to think on it, though she must've already cleared the deal with the state attorney's office. "You know, Arrendale has started taking in some maximum security prisoners. Only with good behavior, of

course, but I'm sure that Roger could swing that."

She gave a chuckle. "Oh, Mandy. You know Roger. He's always getting into trouble."

Amanda's offer was firm. "Still, I'd think about Arrendale. We could certainly make sure his transition was a pleasant one. Evelyn has a lot of friends who want nothing more than to see that she's returned home safely. Roger might as well get something for himself in the process."

Julia stroked the dog. "I'll see what he says the next time I go visit him."

"A phone call might be better." Amanda added, "I'm sure he'll want to hear about Benny from you rather than a stranger."

"God rest his soul." She squeezed Amanda's leg. "It's horrible to lose people you care about."

"It is."

"I know that you and Evelyn were close."

"We still are."

"Why don't you get rid of Tonto here and we can comfort each other?"

Amanda's laughter sounded genuinely delighted. She patted Julia's knee, then stood up from the couch. "Oh, Jules. It's been nice seeing you again. I wish we could do this more."

Will started to stand, but then remembered the revolver. He put his hands in his pockets to keep his pants tight enough to hold it in place. All he needed was to break up whatever game Amanda was playing by dropping a gun through the leg of his pants.

Amanda said, "Let me know about Arrendale. It really is a lovely place. The windows are four inches wider in the close-security wing. Lots of sunshine and fresh air. I think Roger will love it."

"I'll let you know his decision. I think we can all agree that uncertainty is bad for business."

"Tell Roger I am at his beck and call."

Will opened the door for Amanda. They walked back through the shop together. The crew had obviously taken a break. The machines were idle, the stations vacant. The radio had been turned down to a low hum. He mumbled to Amanda, "That was interesting."

"We'll see if she does her part." He could tell she was hopeful. The bounce was back in her walk. "I'd bet my left one Roger knows exactly what happened at Ev's house yesterday. Julia probably told him herself. She would've never let us step foot in here if she wasn't willing to deal. We'll know something within the hour. Mark my word."

"Ms. Ling seems eager to please you."

She stopped and looked up at him. "Do you really think so? I can never tell if she's just being affectionate or ..." Amanda shrugged in lieu of finishing the sentence.

He thought she was joking, then realized she wasn't. "I guess. I mean—" He felt himself start to sweat. "You've never—"

"Grow up, Will. I *did* go to college."

He could still hear her chuckling as they walked toward the front office. Will guessed that he was doomed to have this woman play him like a banjo for the rest of his life. She was almost as bad as Angie.

He was reaching for the doorknob when he heard the first pop, almost like a champagne bottle being uncorked. Then he felt his ear sting, saw the door splinter in front of him, and knew that it was a bullet. And another. And another.

Amanda was faster than Will. She had pulled the gun from the back of his pants, swung around, and fired off two shots, before he hit the floor.

The sound of a machine gun ripped the air. Bullets sprayed inches from his head. There was no telling where the threat was coming from. The back of the warehouse was dark. It could be Ling-Ling, the men who had been working on the cabinets, or both.

“Go!” Amanda yelled. Will shouldered open the door to the front office. Of course their guns were gone from the counter. The disapproving Asian who’d let them in was dead on the floor. Will felt something hard hit him in the back of the head. He was stunned for a few seconds before he realized that Amanda had thrown her purse at him.

Will tucked the bag under his arm and slammed open the front door. The sudden, sharp sunlight blinded him so badly that he tripped down the concrete stairs. The old railing bent under his weight, softening what could’ve been a catastrophic fall. Quickly, he righted himself and headed straight across the parking lot toward the parked SUV. The contents of Amanda’s purse scattered behind him as he searched for the key fob. He thumbed the button and the trunk was open by the time he got to the back of the vehicle. Will pressed the numbers on the combination lock. The drawer rolled open.

In Will’s experience, you were either a shotgun person or a rifle person. Faith preferred the shotgun, which was counterintuitive considering her diminutive stature and the fact that the kick from a shotgun could tear your rotator cuff. Will liked the rifle. It was clean, precise, and extremely accurate, even at a hundred fifty feet—a good thing, considering this was the approximate distance between the SUV and the entrance to the building. The GBI provided agents with the Colt AR-15A2, which Will rolled up to his shoulder as the front door shattered open.

Will put his eye to the scope. Amanda handled the sunlight better than he had. Without missing a beat, she bolted down the concrete stairs, firing backward, her shots missing the stocky-looking man who was chasing her. He had on dark sunglasses. A machine gun was in his hands. Instead of taking the easy shot at Amanda’s retreating back, he held up the gun in the air as he jumped down the flight of stairs. It was a cowboy move, which gave Will equal opportunity to pull one of his own. He pressed back on the trigger. The man jerked midair and dropped to the ground.

Will lowered the rifle. He looked for Amanda. She was walking back toward the man on the ground. She held her gun down at her side. She must’ve been out of ammunition. Will pressed his eye to the scope again to give Amanda cover in case anyone else came out of the building. She kicked away the machine gun. He could see her mouth moving.

Without warning, Amanda dove behind the concrete steps. Will took his eye away from the scope so he could locate the new threat. It was the man on the ground. Impossibly, he was still alive. He had Will’s Glock in his hand. It was pointed toward the SUV. He fired off three shots in rapid succession. Will knew the heavy-gauge steel cabinet would shield him, but he still ducked as metal

pinged against metal.

The shooting stopped. Will's heart was pumping so hard that he could feel his pulse throbbing in his stomach. He chanced a look back at the building. The shooter must've been hiding behind the Mercedes, probably on the other side of the gas tank. Will lined up the rifle, hoping the guy would do something stupid like poke up his head. The Glock came up instead. Will shot, and the gun quickly receded.

"Police!" Will yelled, because it had to be done. "Show me your hands!"

The guy shot blindly toward the SUV, missing by several yards.

Will mumbled some choice words. He looked at Amanda as if to ask what the plan was. She shook her head, not to tell him no, but in exasperation. If Will had made the first shot, they wouldn't be having this conversation.

He couldn't think of a way to gesture to her that he had made the shot—without getting fired—so he pointed to the magazine jutting out from his rifle to pose the question. Was she out of bullets? Her revolver held five rounds. Unless she'd gotten her speed loader out of her purse, there was not much she could do.

Even from this distance, he saw her annoyed expression. Of course she had gotten her speed loader out of her purse. She had probably stopped to put on some lipstick and make some phone calls, too. He checked the Mercedes again, scanning the sights along the contour of the big sedan. When he looked back at Amanda, she had already spun open the S&W, dropped the empty shells on the ground, and reloaded. She waved her hand at him to get on with it.

"Sir!" Will yelled. "I am giving you one more warning to surrender."

"Fuck you!" The man shot at Will again, hitting the side door panel of the SUV.

Amanda did a crouched walk to the edge of the concrete stairs, then bent her head to the ground to try to see where the man was hiding. She sat back up. She didn't look at Will. She didn't pause to line up the shot. She simply rested her hand on the third step from the bottom and squeezed the trigger.

Television had done a great disservice to bad guys. They didn't show that bullets could go through Sheetrock walls and metal car doors. They also didn't explain that a ricochet was nothing like a rubber ball. Bullets came out at a very high velocity, and they wanted to go forward. Shooting a bullet into the ground does not mean it will pop back up in the air. Shooting one into the ground underneath a car means it skips across the pavement, pierces the tire, and, if you are sitting the right way, lodges into your groin.

Which is exactly what happened.

"Jesus Christ!" the man screamed.

Will ordered, "Show me your hands!"

Two hands shot up. "I give! I give!"

This time, Amanda kept her gun trained on the man as she walked over to the car. She kicked away the Glock, then jammed her knee into the man's back, all the while keeping her eye on the office door.

She was watching the wrong door. One of the cargo bays flew open. A black van screeched out, sailing through the air. Sparks flew as it skipped across the asphalt. Rubber burned. The wheels slid in place before they got purchase. Will saw two young men in the cab. They were wearing black warm-up jackets and matching black baseball caps. The van momentarily blocked his view of

Amanda. Will raised the rifle, but he couldn't shoot—not without risking the bullet cutting through the van and hitting Amanda. Two more quick pops sounded. Gunfire. The van screeched away.

Will ran into the parking lot to line up a shot. He stopped. Amanda was on the ground.

"Amanda?" He felt his chest tighten. His throat didn't want to work. "Amanda? Are you—"

"Dammit!" she screamed, rolling over so that she could sit up. Her face and chest were covered in blood. "Goddamn it."

Will dropped to one knee. He put his hand on her shoulder. "Are you shot?"

"I'm fine, you idiot." She slapped away his hand. "This one's dead. They tapped him twice in the head while they were driving off."

Will could see as much. The man's face was gone.

"That's a damn good shot out of a moving car." She glared at him as he helped her up. "Much better than yours. When was the last time you were on the range? This is unacceptable. Absolutely unacceptable."

Will knew better than to argue with her, but if he was the arguing type, he might've mentioned what a bad idea it'd been to leave their guns on the counter, or how stupid it was to go into this place without backup.

"I swear to God, Will, when this is over—" She didn't finish her sentence. She paced off, stepping on the plastic compact from her purse. "Goddamn it!"

Will knelt down in front of the dead man. Out of habit, he checked for a pulse. There was a hole in the black warm-up jacket, about two inches from his heart. It was big enough for Will's finger to poke through. He tugged down the zip, revealing the top of a military-grade tactical assault vest. The bullet's full metal jacket had expanded on impact, smashing into the shock plate, flattening out like a dog trying to crawl underneath a couch.

K-5, right in the center of the chest.

Amanda was back. She stared down at the dead man without saying a word. She must have been standing downblast when he was shot. Bits of gray matter stuck to her face. There was a piece of bone in the collar of her blouse.

Will stood up. He couldn't think of anything to do but offer his handkerchief.

"Thank you." She wiped her face with a steady hand. The blood smeared like clown makeup. "Thank God I have a change of clothes in the car." She looked up at him. "Your jacket is ripped."

He looked at his sleeve. There was a small tear where his shoulder had met asphalt.

"You should always keep a change of clothes in your car. You never know what's going to happen."

"Yes, ma'am." Will rested his hand on the butt of his rifle.

"Ling-Ling's gone." Amanda wiped her forehead. "She came out of her office with that stupid dog under her arm. Guns blazing. I'm under no impression that she was trying to save me, but it seemed rather obvious that they were trying to kill her, too."

Will tried to process this new piece of information. "I assumed the shooters were working for Ling-Ling."

"If Julia wanted us dead, she would've taken both of us out in her office. Didn't you see the sawed-off shotgun under the couch cushion?"

Will nodded, though he hadn't seen the gun and the thought of it now brought out a cold sweat. "The shooters worked in her shop. I recognized them from when we first went in. They were putting together cabinets. Why would they try to kill Julia? Or us, for that matter?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Amanda finally realized it wasn't. "They didn't want her talking to me. They certainly don't want her talking to Roger. She must know something."

Will tried to put the pieces together. "Julia said that the young boys were getting ahead of themselves. Trying to be gangsters. I don't imagine a bunch of twenty-something-year-old, testosterone-filled guys want to be ordered around by a middle-aged woman."

"And here I was thinking that men loved that." Amanda looked down at the dead man. "He's sweating like a pig. No doubt he was on something."

Something that had made him capable of taking the impact of a .223-caliber 55-grain full metal jacket to the chest and popping up seconds later like a Toaster Strudel.

Amanda prodded the man with the toe of her shoe, pushing him over so she could check for his wallet. "These youngsters certainly don't like to leave witnesses." She slid out the driver's license. "Juan Armand Castillo. Aged twenty-four. Lives on Leather Stocking Lane in Stone Mountain." She showed Will the license. Castillo looked like a schoolteacher, not the kind of guy who would chase a GBI agent into a parking lot with a machine gun.

She unzipped Castillo's jacket the rest of the way. Her Glock was tucked into his pants. She took it out, saying, "Well, at least he didn't shoot at me with my own gun."

Will helped her unloop the side clasps on the Kevlar vest.

"He smells, too." Amanda lifted up the shirt, checking his chest. "No tattoos." She checked his arms. "Nothing."

"Try the hands."

Castillo's fists were clenched. She uncurled the fingers with her bare hand, which was technically against every procedure in the book, but Will was an accomplice already, so it didn't really matter.

She said, "Nothing."

Will scanned the parking lot. There were only two cars now, the Bentley and the Mercedes. "Do you think someone else is inside?"

"The Bentley is Ling-Ling's. I imagine she keeps another car close by that she's using right now to go as far underground as possible. The Merc belongs to Perry." She explained, "The dead man in the front office."

"You certainly seem to know a lot about these people. Mandy."

"I'm in no mood for that, Will."

"Julia Ling is high up in the pecking order. She's practically the beak."

"Is there a reason you're talking like Foghorn Leghorn?"

"I'm just saying that it takes either a large set of balls or an extreme amount of stupidity to try to take out someone with Julia Ling's kind of juice. Her brother's not going to just roll over. You told me yourself that he's practically insane. Shooting at his sister is an open act of war."

"Finally, a salient point." She handed back his handkerchief. "Did you get a good look at the men in the van?"

He shook his head. "Young, I guess. Sunglasses. Hats. Jackets. Nothing else I could swear to."

"I'm not asking you to swear. I'm asking you to—" The air was pierced by the sound of sirens. "Took them long enough."

Will guessed the first gunshot had been fired less than five minutes ago. By his calculations, that was pretty good response time.

He asked, "Did *you* get a look at them?"

She shook her head. "I suppose we should be looking for someone with drive-by experience."

She was right about the shots. Nailing someone in the head, twice, from a moving vehicle, even at a short distance, was not something you got lucky at. It took practice, and obviously Castillo's killer hadn't worried about missing.

Will asked, "Why didn't they shoot you?"

"Are you complaining or asking a question?" Amanda rubbed something off her arm. She looked down at Castillo. "I guess we're down to two now. At least our odds are getting better."

She was talking about the fingerprints found at Evelyn's house. "It's three."

She shook her head, still looking down at the corpse.

He counted it out on his fingers. "Evelyn killed Hironobu Kwon. Faith took care of Ricardo Ortiz and Benny Choo. Marcellus Estevez died at Grady, and Juan Castillo here makes five." She didn't say anything. He worried about his math. "Eight sets of prints at Evelyn's house minus five dead guys equals three."

She watched the squad cars speeding down the road. "Two," she told him. "One tried to kill Sara Linton an hour ago."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Dale Dugan rushed into the doctors' lounge. "I came as soon as they let me."

Sara closed her eyes as she shut her locker. She had spent nearly two hours going over her statement with the Atlanta police. Then the hospital administration had swarmed around her for another hour, ostensibly to help, but Sara had quickly realized that they were more concerned that they would be sued. Once she'd signed a paper absolving them of all responsibility, they left as quickly as they had arrived.

Dale asked, "Can I get you anything?"

"Thank you, but I'm fine."

"Can I drive you home?"

"Dale, I—" The door slammed open. Will stood there, a panicked look on his face.

For a few suspended seconds, nothing mattered anymore. Sara was blind to everything else in the room. Her peripheral vision was gone. Everything tunneled to Will. She didn't see Dale leave. She didn't hear the constant throng of ambulance sirens and ringing phones and screaming patients.

She just saw Will.

He let the door close, but didn't move toward her. There was sweat on his brow. His breath was labored. She didn't know what to say to him, what to do. She just stood there staring at him as if this was another ordinary day.

He asked, "Is that a new outfit?"

She laughed, the sound getting caught in her throat. She'd changed into scrubs. Her clothes were in police evidence.

The corner of his mouth went up in a forced smile. "It brings out the green in your eyes."

Sara bit her lip to keep tears from falling. She had wanted to call him as soon as it happened. Her cell phone had been in her hands, his number up on the screen, but she had tucked the phone into her purse because Sara knew if she saw Will before she was ready, she would shatter like a delicate piece of china.

Amanda Wagner knocked as she entered the room. "I hate to interrupt, Dr. Linton, but could we have a word with you?"

Anger flashed across Will's face. "She doesn't—"

"It's all right," Sara interrupted. "There's not much that I can tell you."

Amanda smiled as if this was some sort of social gathering. "Anything at all would be appreciated."

Sara had talked about it so much over the last few hours that she recited the events as if by rote. She gave them the abbreviated version of her statement, not going into a detailed description of the female junkie, which, on paper, had sounded like every junkie Sara had ever seen. Nor did she describe the trash around the Dumpster or the EMTs, or list the procedures she followed. She cut to what mattered: the young man who'd peered at her from behind the curtain. He had punched her in the chest. He had shot her patient twice in the head. He was

thin, Caucasian, mid-to-late twenties and wearing a black warm-up jacket and baseball cap. In the short time that elapsed between her first sight of him and his death, he had not uttered one word. The only sound she'd heard was a grunt, and then the air whistling from his neck as his breath seeped out.

She finished, "His hand was gripped around my hand. I couldn't stop it. He's dead. They're both dead."

Will seemed to have trouble speaking. "He hurt you."

Sara could only nod, but her mind conjured the image she had seen in the bathroom mirror: an oblong, ugly bruise over her right breast where the man had punched her.

Will cleared his throat. "All right. Thank you for your cooperation, Dr. Linton. I know you probably want to get home." He turned to leave, but Amanda made no move to follow.

"Dr. Linton, I noticed a soda machine in the waiting room. Would you like something to drink?"

Sara was taken off guard. "I'm—"

"Will, could you get a Diet Sprite for me and—I'm sorry, Dr. Linton. What did you want?"

Will's jaw tightened like a ratchet. He wasn't stupid. He knew that Amanda was trying to get her alone, just like Sara knew that Amanda wouldn't give up until she got what she wanted. She tried to make this easier for Will, saying, "A Coke would be nice."

He didn't give in that easy. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. I'm sure."

He wasn't happy, but he left the room.

Amanda checked the hallway, making sure Will was gone. She turned back to Sara. "I'm rooting for you, you know."

Sara didn't have a clue what she was talking about.

"Will," she explained. "He's got one too many bitches in his life, and I'm not going anywhere."

Sara was in no mood to joke. "What do you want, Amanda?"

She got to the point. "The bodies are still downstairs in the morgue. I need you to examine them and give me your professional opinion." She added, "A coroner's opinion."

Sara felt a cold chill at the thought of seeing the man again. Every time she blinked, she could see his expressionless face hovering over her. She couldn't grip her hand without feeling his fingers wrapped around her own. "I can't cut them open."

"No, but you can answer some questions for me."

"Such as?"

"Drug use, gang affiliations, and whether or not one of them has a stomach full of heroin."

"Like Ricardo."

"Yes, like Ricardo."

Sara didn't give herself time to think about the request. "All right. I'll do it."

"Do what?" Will was back. He must've run the entire way. He was out of breath again. He held two sodas in one hand.

"There you are," Amanda said, as if she was surprised to see him. "We were

about to go down to the morgue.”

Will looked at Sara. “No.”

“I want to do this,” Sara insisted, though she was not sure why. For the last three hours, all she could think about was going home. Now that Will was here, the thought of returning to her empty apartment was unimaginable.

“We don’t need these.” Amanda took the soda cans and dropped them into the trash. “Dr. Linton?”

Sara led them down the corridor toward the elevators, feeling like a lifetime had passed since she’d made the same walk this morning. A loaded gurney rolled by, EMTs shouting stats, doctors giving orders. Sara held out her arm, guiding Will back against the wall so that the patient could get past. Her hand hovered just in front of his tie. She could feel the silk material sway against her fingertips. He was wearing a suit, his normal work attire, but without the usual vest. His jacket was dark blue, the shirt a lighter shade of the same color.

The cop. Sara had forgotten the cop. “I didn’t—”

“Hold that thought,” Amanda said, as if she was afraid the walls had ears.

Sara fumed at herself as they waited for the elevator. How had she forgotten about the cop? What was wrong with her?

The doors opened. The elevator was packed. It took an interminable amount of time for the old pulleys and lifts to groan into action. They went down a floor and most of the people exited. Two young orderlies rode with them to the sub-basement. They got off and headed toward the stairwell, probably for an illicit tryst.

Amanda waited until they were well beyond earshot. “What is it?”

“There was a man when we came in from the Dumpster. I nearly ran him over. I told him to get out of the way, and he flashed a badge. It looked like a badge. I’m not sure anymore. He acted like a cop.”

“In what way?”

“He acted like he had every right to question me, and he was irritated when I didn’t answer immediately.” Sara gave her a meaningful look.

“Sounds like a cop to me,” Amanda wryly admitted. “What did he want?”

“To know whether or not the patient was going to make it. I told him maybe, even though it was obvious ...” Sara let her voice trail off, willing herself to remember. “He was wearing a dark suit, charcoal. White shirt. He was very thin, almost gaunt. He reeked of cigarette smoke. I could smell it even after he left.”

“Did you see which way he went?”

She shook her head.

“White? Black?”

“White. Gray hair. He was older. He looked older.” She put her hand to her face. “His cheeks were sunken. His eyes were heavily lidded.” She remembered something else. “He was wearing a hat. A baseball hat.”

“Black?” Will asked.

“Blue,” she said. “Atlanta Braves.”

“We’ll probably get some nice images of the top of it from the security cameras,” Amanda commented. “We’ll have to share this information with the APD. They may want to see if you can work with a sketch artist.”

Sara would do whatever it took. “I’m sorry I didn’t remember earlier. I don’t know what—”

"You were in shock." Will seemed ready to say more. He glanced at Amanda, then indicated the double doors at the other end of the hallway. He said, "I think it's this way."

In the morgue, Junior and Larry were nowhere to be seen. Instead, there were two gurneys, each with a body, each with a white sheet covering the dead. Sara assumed one was the man she had found outside by the Dumpster and the other was the man who had shot the first, then tried to kill her.

There was an older woman leaning against the door to the walk-in freezer. She looked up from her BlackBerry as they walked into the room. Her hospital badge was tucked into her pants pocket. No white lab coat, just a well-tailored black pantsuit. She was clearly on the administration side of the hospital. She was older, more gray than black in her hair. She pushed away from the freezer and walked over. Her posture was ramrod straight, her sizable chest out in front of her like the prow of a ship.

She didn't stop for introductions. She pulled a small spiral-bound notebook out of her jacket pocket and read, "The shooter's name is Franklin Warren Heeney. APD found his wallet on him. Local boy, lives in Tucker with his parents. Dropped out of Perimeter College his sophomore year. No employment records. No adult arrest history, but at thirteen, he spent six months in juvie for breaking windows. He has one child, a daughter, six years old, who lives with an aunt out in Snellville. The baby mama is in county lockup for shoplifting and a Baggie of meth they found in her purse. That's all I could get on him." She indicated the other body. "Marcellus Benedict Estevez. As I said on the phone, his wallet was found in the trash by the Dumpster. I assume you've already looked into him?" Amanda nodded, and the woman closed her notebook. "That's all I have for now. Nothing else has come down on the wire."

Amanda nodded again. "Thank you."

"I bought you an hour before the body boys come. Dr. Linton, the films you ordered for Estevez are in the transport packet. I've gathered together some tools that might be useful. I'm sorry it can't be more."

She had done plenty. Sara looked over the four Mayo trays laid out beside the bodies. Whoever the woman was, she had some medical knowledge and was high enough up the Grady food chain to raid the supply closet without setting off alarms. "Thank you."

The woman nodded her goodbyes, then left the room.

Will's tone was sharp when he asked Amanda, "Let me guess, one of your old gals?"

Amanda ignored him. "Dr. Linton, if we could get started?"

Sara had to force herself to move or she would've just stood rooted to the floor until the building fell down around her. There was a pack of sterile gloves hanging from a cleat on the wall. She took out a pair and forced them over her sweating hands. The powder rolled into tiny balls that stuck to her palm like dough.

Without preamble, she pulled back the sheet covering the first body, revealing Marcellus Estevez, the man she had found by the Dumpster. He had two closely spaced bullet holes in his forehead. Powder burns tattooed the skin. She smelled cordite, which was impossible considering the man had been shot hours ago.

Amanda said, "Two rounds to the center of the forehead, just like our drive-by

at the warehouse.”

Will's voice was low. “You don't have to do this.”

“I'm fine.” Sara forced herself to get on with it, starting with the easy stuff. “He's approximately twenty-five years of age,” she mumbled. “Five-eight or nine. Around one hundred eighty pounds.” She pressed open his eyes, feeling herself fall into the routine of examination. “Brown. Jaundiced. His wound was septic. Necropsy will probably show infiltration into the larger organs. He was in systemic shutdown when we found him.” She rolled down the sheet so she could look at the belly again, this time with an eye toward forensic evaluation rather than treatment.

The man was nude; his clothes had been cut off when they'd brought him into the ER. Sara could clearly see the penetrating stab wound in the lower left quadrant of his abdomen. She pressed on either side of the cut to see if she could discern the path of the blade. “The small intestines were pierced. It looks like the knife went in at an upward angle. Right-handed thrust from a supine position.”

Amanda asked, “He was on top of her?”

“I would assume. We're talking about Evelyn here, right?” Will was still being stoic, but Amanda nodded. “The blade entered at an oblique angle to the abdominal Langer's lines, or the natural direction of the skin. If I reorient the edges like this”—she twisted the skin into the position it had been in when the man was stabbed—“you can see the point of penetration suggests Evelyn was on her back, most likely on the floor, with her attacker on top of her. He was slightly bent at the waist. The knife went in like this.” Sara reached for a scalpel on the tray, but changed her mind and grabbed a pair of scissors instead. She illustrated the action, holding her hand down at her hip with the scissors angled upward. “It was more defensive than deliberate. Maybe they struggled and fell at the same time. The knife went in. The man rolled over while the blade was still lodged—you can see how the wound is incised significantly more at the lateral edge, indicating movement.”

“Kitchen knife?” Amanda asked.

“Statistically, it's the most likely weapon, and the struggle took place in the kitchen, so it makes sense. They'll have to do a comparison at the ME's office to be sure. Did they find the weapon at the scene?”

“Yes,” she answered. “Are you sure about this? She was on her back?”

Sara could see that Amanda was not pleased with the evaluation. She wanted her friend to be a fighter, not someone who got lucky. “The majority of fatal stab wounds are in the left chest region. If you want to kill someone, you go for the heart, overhanded, straight into the chest. This was defensive.” She indicated the man's sliced palm. “But Evelyn didn't go easily. At some point, she must've come at him directly, because he grabbed the blade of the knife.”

Amanda seemed only slightly placated by this information. “Is there anything in his stomach?”

Sara reached under the gurney and pulled out the transportation packet destined for the Fulton County medical examiner. Krakauer had filled in most of the information while Sara was being interviewed by the police. The form was standard. The ME performing the autopsy needed to know drugs on board, procedures followed, which marks came from the hospital and which had more

nefarious origins. Sara found a thermal reproduction of the X-rays on the last page.

She said, "The belly looks clear of any foreign objects. They'll know for sure when they cut him open, but I'm assuming that the amount of heroin we're talking about, something worth dying for, would be easy to spot."

Will cleared his throat. He seemed reluctant as he asked, "Would Evelyn have a lot of blood on her from stabbing this guy?"

"It's not likely. Most of the bleeding happened inside the belly, even after the knife was pulled out. There's the defensive wound on his hand, but the ulnar and radial arteries are intact and none of the digital arteries were compromised. If the cut on his hand was deeper or if one of the fingers was sliced open or off, you could expect a significant amount of blood loss. But that's not the case with Estevez, so I'm guessing Evelyn would've had a minimal amount of blood on her clothes."

Will said, "There was a lot of blood on the floor. You could see footprints back and forth across the tiles."

"How big was the space?"

"Kitchen sized," he said. "Bigger than yours, but not by much, and enclosed. The house is older, ranch-style."

Sara thought about it. "I'd have to see the crime scene photos, but I'm fairly certain that if there was enough blood on the floor to show a struggle, that blood didn't come from Estevez's hand or belly. At least not all of it."

"Could Estevez just get up on his own and walk off after sustaining his injuries?"

"Not without help. Any type of damage to the abdominal wall makes it difficult to breathe, let alone move." Sara put her hand to her stomach. "Think about how many muscles have to fire just to sit up."

Amanda asked Will, "What are you getting at?"

"I'm just wondering who struggled with Evelyn if this guy couldn't get up after being stabbed and there wasn't a lot of blood from his wound."

Sara followed his logic. "You think Evelyn was injured."

"Maybe. They did blood typing on scene, but they didn't look at all of it, and DNA won't be back for another few days." He shrugged. "If Evelyn was hurt, and Estevez didn't bleed much, that could explain the extra blood."

"I'm sure if she's injured it's nothing serious." Amanda waved away Will's theory as if swatting a fly. Any logical person would've already accepted the very real possibility that Evelyn Mitchell's chances of survival were very slim considering how much time had elapsed. Amanda seemed to be holding on to the opposite theory.

Sara wasn't going to be the one to tell her otherwise.

There was a large magnifying glass on one of the trays. Sara pulled down the overhead light and went back to the examination, checking the dead man head to toe for trace evidence, needle marks, anything unusual that might lead them to a clue. When it was time to roll him over, Will put on a pair of surgical gloves and helped flip the body.

"Well, that's interesting," Amanda said with her usual flair for under statement.

Estevez had a large tattoo of an angel on his back. The image covered the

width of his shoulders and reached the bottom of his sacrum, and was so intricate that it more closely resembled a carving. "Gabriel," Sara said. "The archangel."

Will asked, "How do you know that?"

She pointed to the horn in the angel's mouth. "There's no biblical foundation, but some religions believe that Judgment Day comes when Gabriel blows his horn." Sara knew that Will had never been to church. "It's the sort of thing they teach kids in Sunday school. And it tracks with his name—Marcellus Benedict. I believe those are the names of two different popes."

Amanda asked, "How recently would you say this tattoo was worked on?"

The skin at the small of his back was still irritated from the needle. "A week, maybe five days?" She leaned in closer to look at the scrollwork. "This was done in stages. Whoever did this took a long time. Probably months. It's not the kind of thing you'd forget, and I imagine it'd be very expensive."

Will held the dead man's hand in his. "Did you see this under the fingernails?"

"I saw they're dirty," she admitted. "That's fairly typical for a man this age. I can't do any scrapings. The ME's office would have a fit and anything I found would be inadmissible because we haven't established the chain of evidence."

Will put his nose close to the man's fingers. "It smells like oil to me."

Sara smelled for herself. "I can't tell. The police told me that they checked the outside security cameras. They're not static. They sweep back and forth across the back lot, which the bad guys obviously knew because they managed not to get caught leaving the body. The time stamp says that Estevez was by the Dumpster at least twelve hours. The smell could be anything." She rolled over the hand to show Will. "This is more interesting. Estevez obviously worked with his hands. There's a hardening of the skin on the ball of the thumb and here on the side of the index finger. He held some kind of tool for long periods of time. It would've had some weight to it and moved around a bit."

He asked Amanda, "You said he was unemployed?"

"The state shows he's been collecting unemployment insurance for almost a year."

Sara thought of something else. "Can you hand me that?" She pointed to the magnifying glass. Will picked it up and waited as Sara forced open Estevez's mouth. The jaw was stiff. The tendon popped when she pried open the lips. "Hold it here," she told Will, indicating he should focus on the upper teeth. "Do you see these tiny indentations in the bottom edges of his top front teeth?" Will leaned in closer, then let Amanda take a look. "These are repetitive impressions. They come from constantly gripping something between his teeth. You see this sort of thing with seamstresses who bite thread or finish carpenters who put nails in their mouth."

"Or cabinetmakers?" Will asked.

"That's possible." Sara looked at Estevez's hand again. "These calluses could come from holding a nail gun. I'd have to see the tool for comparison, but if you told me he worked as a carpenter, I'd agree that his hands show signs of working in that industry." She picked up the man's left hand. "Do you see these scars on his index finger? These line up with common injuries for carpenters. Hammers slip. A nail pinches the skin. Threads from screws scrape off the top dermal layer. Do you see this scar down the center line of his nail?" Will nodded. "It

cuts through his cuticle, too. Carpenters use carpet knives to cut edges or score wood. Sometimes the blade skips down the fingernail or shaves the skin off the side of the finger. A lot of times they'll use their nondominant hand to smooth out putty or caulk, which causes wearing at the tip. His fingerprints would be different week-to-week, sometimes day-to-day."

Amanda said, "So, he's been at this job for a while?"

"I'd say whatever job he's been working at that caused these marks has been going on for two to three years."

"What about Heeney, the shooter?"

Sara reached under the sheet to check the other man's hands. She did not want to look at his face again. "He was left-handed, but I would hazard he worked in the same industry as Estevez."

Will said, "There's one connection, at least. They both worked for Ling-Ling."

Sara asked, "Who's Ling-Ling?"

"A missing person of interest." Amanda checked her watch. "We should hurry this along. Dr. Linton, can you examine our other friend here?"

Sara didn't give herself time to think about it. She pulled back the sheet in one quick motion. It was the first time she'd looked at Franklin Warren Heeney's face since he'd tried to kill her. His eyes were open. His lips were wrapped around the tube that had been inserted into his throat to help him breathe. A crusty layer of blood circled his neck where the flesh gaped open. He was still dressed from the waist down, but his jacket and shirt had been cut open so that the ER staff could try to save his life. The exercise had been perfunctory; the man had sliced open his own jugular. He'd lost nearly half his blood volume before they'd managed to pick him up off the floor and put him on the table. Sara knew this because she had been the doctor working on him.

She looked up. Both Amanda and Will were staring at her.

"Sorry," she apologized. She had to clear her throat before she could talk again. "He's around the same age as Estevez. Mid-to-late twenties. Underweight for his build." She pointed to the needle tracks on his arm. The IV port she'd inserted was still taped to his skin. "Recent user, at least intravenously." She found an otoscope and checked inside the man's nose. "There's significant scarring in the nasal passages, probably from snorting powder." She shoved the scope in farther. "He's had surgery to repair the septum, so you're looking at coke or meth, maybe Oxy. They're all extremely corrosive to cartilage."

Will asked, "What about heroin?"

"Oh, heroin, of course." Sara apologized again. "Sorry, most of the heroin users I see are smokers or needle junkies. The snorters usually go straight to the morgue."

Amanda crossed her arms. "What about his stomach?"

Sara didn't have to check the file. No X-rays had been taken. The man had expired before any tests could be ordered. Instead of continuing the exam, Sara found herself looking at his face again. Franklin Heeney hardly resembled a choirboy, but the acne-scarred skin and sunken cheeks were recognizable to someone out in the world. He had a mother. He had a father, a child, perhaps a sister or brother, who right at this moment was probably hearing that their loved one was dead.

Their loved one who had killed a man in cold blood and punched Sara so

violently that the breath had gone out of her body. She felt the bruise on her chest start to throb at the memory. She had a mother, too—a sister, a father—all of whom would be horrified if they heard what had happened to Sara today.

Amanda asked, “Dr. Linton?”

“Sorry.” In the time it took to walk over to the box of gloves and put on a fresh pair, she had managed to pull herself back together. She ignored Will’s look of concern and pressed her fingers into the dead man’s belly. “I don’t feel anything unusual. The organs are in their proper position and are normal size. No swelling or compaction in the bowel or stomach.” She snapped off the gloves and threw them into the trash. The water in the sink was cold, but Sara washed her hands anyway. “I can’t send him to X-ray because they’ll need a patient ID, and frankly, I’m not going to make a living person wait to satisfy a curiosity. The ME’s office will have to give you a definitive answer.” She squirted antibacterial gel into her palm, fighting to keep her voice steady. “Is that all?”

“Yes,” Amanda said. “Thank you, Dr. Linton.”

Sara didn’t acknowledge the answer. She ignored Will. She ignored the two bodies. She kept her eyes on the door until she had passed through it. In the hallway, she concentrated on the elevator, the button she would press, the numbers that would light up over the door. She only wanted to think about the steps ahead, not the ones behind her. She had to get out of this place, to get home and wrap herself in a blanket on the couch and pull the dogs around her and forget this miserable day.

There were footsteps behind her. Will was running again. He caught up with her quickly. She turned around. He stopped a few feet away.

He said, “Amanda’s putting out an APB on the tattoo.”

Why was he just standing there? Why did he keep rushing up to her and doing absolutely nothing?

He said, “Maybe we’ll find—”

“I really don’t care.”

He stared at her. His hands were in his pockets. The sleeve of his jacket was tight around his upper arm. There was a small tear in the material.

Sara leaned her shoulder against the wall. She hadn’t noticed before, but there was a fresh cut at the top of his earlobe. She wanted to ask him about it, but he would probably tell her that he’d cut himself shaving. Maybe she didn’t want to know what had happened. The Polaroid of his damaged mouth still burned in her memory. What else had they done to him? What else had he done to himself?

Will said, “Why is it that none of the women in my life call me when they need help?”

“Doesn’t Angie call you?”

He looked down at the floor, the space between them.

She said, “I’m sorry. That wasn’t fair. It’s been a really long day.”

Will didn’t look up. Instead, he took her hand. His fingers laced through hers. His skin was warm, almost hot. He traced his thumb along the inside of her palm, the webbing between her fingers. Sara closed her eyes as he slowly explored every inch of her hand, caressing the lines and indentations, pressing his thumb gently against the pulse beating in her wrist. His touch was palliative. She felt her body starting to relax. Her breathing took on an easy cadence that

matched his.

The doors to the morgue swished open. Sara yanked away her hand at the same time as Will. Neither of them looked at each other. They were like two kids caught in the back of a parked car.

Amanda held her cell phone in the air, triumphant. "Roger Ling wants to talk."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Faith felt as close to a nervous breakdown as she'd ever been in her life. Her teeth kept chattering despite the sweat dripping down her body. She'd thrown up her breakfast and had to force down lunch. Her head ached so badly that it hurt to even close her eyes. Her blood sugar levels were just as fragile. She'd had to call her doctor's office to find out what to do. They had threatened to put her in the hospital if she didn't get her numbers under control. Faith had promised to report back, then she'd gone into the bathroom, turned on the shower as hot as she could stand it, and sobbed for half an hour.

The same series of thoughts kept running through her mind like tires wearing a groove in a gravel road. They had been in her house. They had touched her things. Touched Jeremy's things. They knew when he was born. They knew his schools. They knew his likes and dislikes. They had planned this—all of it, down to the last detail.

The threat was like a death sentence. Mouth shut. Eyes open. Faith didn't think her eyes could open any wider or her mouth could close any tighter. She'd searched the house twice. She was constantly checking her phone, her email, Jeremy's Facebook page. It was three o'clock in the afternoon. She had been trapped in the house like a caged animal for nearly ten hours.

And still nothing.

"Hey, Mom?" Jeremy came into the kitchen. Faith was sitting at the table, staring at the backyard, where Detective Taylor and Ginger were talking earnestly to the ground. She could tell from their bored demeanors that they were just waiting for the word from their boss so they could get back to their real jobs. As far as they were concerned, this case had come to a screeching halt. Too many hours had passed. No one had made contact. She could read the truth in their eyes. They honestly believed that Evelyn Mitchell was dead.

"Mom?"

Faith rubbed Jeremy's arm. "What is it? Is Emma up?" The baby had slept too long last night. She was fussy and irritable, and had screamed for nearly a full hour before finally relenting to her afternoon nap.

"She's fine," Jeremy answered. "I was gonna go for a walk. Get out of the house for a minute. Take some fresh air."

"No," she told him. "I don't want you leaving the house."

His expression told her how hard her voice was.

She squeezed his arm. "I want you to stay here, all right?"

"I'm tired of being cooped up inside."

"So am I, but I want you to promise me you won't leave the house." She played at his emotions. "I've already got Grandma to worry about. Don't make me add you to my list."

His reluctance was obvious, but he told her, "All right."

"Just do something with your uncle Zeke. Play cards or something."

"He pouts when he loses."

"So do you." Faith shooed him out of the kitchen. She charted his path through the house and up to his room by the familiar squeaks in the floorboards and on the stairs. She should put Zeke to work on her list of handyman repairs. Of course, that would involve actually talking to him, and Faith was doing her best to avoid her brother. Miraculously, he seemed to be doing the same. He'd been in the garage for the last three hours, working on his laptop.

Faith pushed herself up from the table and started pacing in hopes that she could work out some of her nervous energy. That didn't last long. She leaned over the table and tapped the keyboard on her laptop to wake it up. She moused up to reload Jeremy's Facebook page. The rainbow wheel started to spin. Jeremy was probably playing some game upstairs that was slowing down the wireless network.

The phone rang. Faith jumped. She startled any time there was an unexpected noise. She was as nervous as a cat. The back door slid open. Ginger waited while she took the receiver off the hook. She could tell from his tired expression that he felt this was not only perfunctory, but beneath his talents.

She put the phone to her ear. "Hello?"

"Faith."

It was Victor Martinez. She waved away Ginger. "Hey."

"Hi."

Now that the easy part was out of the way, neither of them seemed capable of talking. She hadn't spoken to Victor in thirteen months, not since she'd sent him a text that he needed to get his stuff out of her house or she was going to leave it on the street.

Victor broke the silence. "Is there any news on your mother?"

"No. Nothing."

"It's been over twenty-four hours, right?"

She didn't trust herself to speak. Victor had a habit of pointing out the obvious, and his love of crime shows meant that he knew as well as Faith that time was against them.

"Is Jeremy all right?"

"Yes. Thank you for bringing him home yesterday. And staying with him." She thought to ask, "You didn't see anything unusual when you were here, right? No one hanging around the house?"

"Of course not. I would've told the police."

"How long were you here before they arrived?"

"Not long. Your brother came about an hour later and I left."

Faith's exhausted brain struggled to do the math. Evelyn's kidnappers hadn't hesitated. They'd driven straight here from her house. They were familiar enough with the space to walk right upstairs to her room and plant the finger under Faith's pillow. Maybe they were watching the house even before that. Maybe they had listened to Faith's phone calls or checked her calendar on her laptop and knew that she would be away. Nothing in the house was password protected because she had always assumed that she was safe here.

Faith had missed something Victor said. "What?"

"I said, your brother's kind of an asshole."

Faith snapped, "It's not exactly an easy time for him, Victor. Our mother is missing. God knows whether she's dead or alive. Zeke dropped everything to be

with Jeremy. I'm sorry if you thought he was rude. It's kind of hard to be friendly right now."

"Hold on, all right? I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

Her breathing was revved up again. Faith tried to get her control back. She wanted to yell at someone. That person probably didn't need to be Victor.

"Are you there?" he asked.

Faith couldn't drag this out any longer. "I know that Jeremy showed you Emma's picture."

He cleared his throat.

"What you're thinking about her ..." Faith pressed her fingers to her closed eyelids. "You're right."

He was silent for what felt like an eternity. Finally, he said, "She's beautiful."

Faith dropped her hand. She looked up at the ceiling. Her hormones were so out of whack that the stupidest thing could set her off. She cradled the phone against her shoulder and tried to reload Jeremy's Facebook page again.

"I'd like to meet her when this is all over."

Faith watched the wheel spin on the computer screen as the processor worked. She couldn't think about seeing Victor with Emma. Holding her in his arms. Stroking her hair. Pointing out that looking into her light brown eyes was like looking into a mirror. Faith could only think about right now, and how every second that ticked by made it less likely that Evelyn Mitchell would see her granddaughter's first birthday.

"Your mom's a fighter," Victor said. Then, almost ruefully, "Just like you."

The page finally loaded. GoodKnight92 had posted a comment eight minutes ago.

"I have to go." Faith hung up the phone. Her hand hovered over the laptop. She stared at the words on the screen. They had a familiar ring.

You must be feeling cooped up. Why don't you get out of the house and take some fresh air?

They had contacted Jeremy again, and her son, her little boy, had been ready to walk out the front door and put his life on the line so that he could get his grandmother back.

She raised her voice, calling, "Jeremy?"

Faith waited. There were no footsteps overhead, no squeaks on the stairs or floorboards.

"Jeremy?" she called again, going into the living room. An eternity passed. Faith grabbed the back of the couch so she wouldn't fall down. Her voice trilled in panic. "Jeremy!"

Her heart stopped at the thumping sound from upstairs, heavy footsteps across the floor. But it was Zeke who called from the top of the landing. "Jesus, Faith, what's wrong?"

Faith could barely speak. "Where's Jeremy?"

"I told him he could go for a walk."

Ginger came in from the kitchen, a puzzled look on his face. Before he could say anything, Faith grabbed the gun out of his shoulder holster and bolted from the room. She didn't remember opening the front door or running down the driveway. It wasn't until she was in the middle of the street that Faith stopped. She saw a figure up ahead. He was about to turn the corner onto the next street.

Tall, lanky, baggy jeans and a yellow Georgia Tech sweatshirt.

"Jeremy!" she yelled. A car pulled up to the intersection, stopping a few feet from her son. "Jeremy!" He didn't hear her. He walked toward the car.

Faith ran all out, arms pumping, bare feet pounding the pavement. She gripped the gun so tightly in her hand that it felt like part of her skin.

"Jeremy!" she screamed. He turned around. The car was in front of him. Dark gray. Four doors. New-model Ford Focus with chrome trim. The window rolled down. Jeremy turned back to the car, bent down to look inside. "Stop!" Faith yelled, her throat clenching around the word. "Get away from the car! Get away from the car!"

The driver was leaning toward Jeremy. Faith saw a teenage girl behind the wheel, mouth agape, obviously terrified by the armed madwoman running down the street. The car screeched off as Faith reached her son. She bumped into him, almost pushing him down.

"Why?" she asked, gripping his arm so tight that her fingers hurt.

He pulled away, rubbing his arm. "Jesus, Mom, what is wrong with you? She was lost. She needed directions."

Faith was dizzy from fear and adrenaline. She bent over and put her hand on her knee. The gun was at her side. So was Ginger.

He snatched the weapon back. "Agent Mitchell, that was not cool."

His words filled her with anger. "Not cool?" She thumped her open palm against his chest. "Not cool?"

"Agent." His tone of voice implied she was acting hysterical, which only served to amp up her fury another notch.

"How about letting my son walk out the door when you were assigned to watch him? Was that not cool, too?" She pushed him again. "How about you and your partner standing around holding your dicks while my boy is gone?" Another push. "Is that cool?"

Ginger held up his hands in surrender.

"Faith," Zeke said. She hadn't noticed her brother standing there, maybe because for once he wasn't making things worse. "Let's just go back to the house."

She held out her hand to Jeremy, palm up. "iPhone."

He looked appalled. "What?"

"Now," she ordered.

"That's got all my games on it."

"I don't care."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"Read a book!" she screamed, her voice screeching. "Just stay offline. Do you hear me? No Internet!"

"Jesus." He glanced around for support, but Faith didn't care if God Himself came down and told her to give the kid a break.

She said, "I'll tie you to my waist with a rope if I have to."

He knew she wasn't bluffing; she'd done it before. "This isn't fair." He slapped the phone in her hand. She would've thrown it to the ground and crushed it with her foot if the damn thing hadn't cost so much.

"No Internet," Faith repeated. "No phone calls. No communication of any kind, and you stay in the fucking house. Do you hear me?" He walked toward

the house, giving her his back. Faith wasn't going to let him off that easy. "Do you hear me?"

"I heard you!" he yelled. "God!"

Ginger shoved his gun back into the holster, adjusting the straps like a haughty cheerleader. He followed Jeremy down the street. Faith limped along after them. Her feet were bruised from the rocky asphalt. Zeke fell in beside her. His shoulder brushed against hers. Faith braced herself for some kind of tirade, but he was mercifully silent as they walked up the driveway and entered the house.

Faith threw Jeremy's iPhone onto the kitchen table. No wonder he wanted to leave. The space was beginning to feel like a prison. She leaned heavily against the chair. What had she been thinking? How could any of them be safe here? Evelyn's kidnappers knew the layout of the house. They had obviously targeted Jeremy. Anyone could've been in that car. They could've rolled down the window, pointed a gun at Jeremy's head, and pulled the trigger. He could've bled out in the middle of the street and Faith wouldn't have known until his stupid Facebook page loaded that something was wrong.

"Faith?" Zeke was standing in the middle of the kitchen. His tone indicated this wasn't the first time he'd said her name. "What's wrong with you?"

Faith crossed her arms low on her stomach. "Where have you been staying? You weren't sleeping at Mom's. I would've seen your stuff."

"Dobbins." She should've known. Zeke had always loved the soulless anonymity of base housing, even if Dobbins Air Reserve was an hour drive from the VA hospital where he was doing his inservice.

"I need you to do me a favor."

He was instantly skeptical. "What?"

"I want you to take Jeremy and Emma back to the base with you. Today. Right now." The Atlanta police couldn't protect her family, but the United States Air Force could. "I don't know how long it'll be for. I just need you to keep them on the base. Don't let them off until I tell you."

"Why?"

"Because I need to know that they're safe."

"Safe from what? What are you planning?"

Faith checked the backyard to make sure the detectives weren't listening. Ginger stared at her, his jaw rigid. She turned her back to him. "I need you to trust me."

Zeke snorted a laugh. "Why would I start doing that?"

"Because I know what I'm doing, Zeke. I'm a police officer. I was trained to do this kind of thing."

"What kind of thing? Run into the street barefooted like you're escaping from the loony bin?"

"I'm going to get Mom back, Zeke. I don't care if it kills me. I'm going to get her back."

"You and what army?" he scoffed. "You gonna call in Aunt Mandy and go smear lipstick all over them?"

She punched him in the face. He looked more shocked than hurt. Her knuckle felt like it might be broken. Still, she got some satisfaction when she saw a thin line of blood drip onto his upper lip.

“Christ,” he muttered. “What the hell was that for?”

“You’ll need to take my car. You can’t fit a car seat in the Corvette. I can give you some money for gas and groceries and I—”

“Wait.” His voice was muffled by his hand as he felt the bridge of his nose for damage. He looked at her—really looked at her—for the first time since she’d walked through her own front door. Faith had hit her brother before. She’d burned him with a match. She’d beaten him with a clothes hanger. To her recollection, this was the first time any violence between them actually seemed to work.

“All right.” He used the toaster to check his reflection. His nose wasn’t broken, but a deep, purple bruise was working its way underneath his eye. “But I’m not taking your Mini. I’m going to look retarded enough as it is.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Will had never been quick to anger, but once he got there, he held on to it like a miser with a pot of gold. He didn't throw things or use his fists. He didn't rage or even raise his voice. Actually, the opposite happened. He went quiet—completely silent. It was as if his vocal cords were paralyzed. He kept it all on the inside because, in his vast experience with angry people, Will knew that letting it out meant that someone could end up very badly hurt.

Not that this particular expression of anger didn't have its drawbacks. His stubborn silence had gotten him suspended from school on more than one occasion. Years ago, Amanda had transferred him to the nether regions of the north Georgia mountains for his refusal to respond to her questions. Once, he'd stopped speaking to Angie for three whole days for fear of saying things to her that could never be taken back. They'd lived together, slept together, dined together, done everything together, and he hadn't uttered one word to her for a full seventy-two hours. If there had been a category in the Special Olympics for functionally illiterate mutes, Will would've had no problem cinching the gold.

This was all to say that not speaking to Amanda during the five-hour drive down to Coastal State Prison was nothing in the scheme of things. The worrying part was that the intensity of Will's anger would not dissipate. He had never hated another human being as much as he did when Amanda told him that, by the way, Sara had almost been murdered. And that hatred would not go away. He kept waiting to feel that click of it letting up, the pot going from a boil to a simmer, but it wouldn't come. Even now as Amanda paced back and forth in front of him, going from one end of the empty visitors' waiting room to the other like a duck in a shooting gallery, he felt the rage burning inside him.

The worst part was that he wanted to speak. He yearned to speak. He wanted to lay it all out for her and watch her face crumble as she realized that Will truly and irrevocably despised her for what she had done to him. He had never been a petty man, but he really, really wanted to hurt her.

Amanda stopped pacing. She put her hands on her hips. "I don't know what you've been told, but sulking is not an attractive trait in a man."

Will stared at the floor. Grooves had been worn into the linoleum by the women and children who had wiled away their weekends waiting to visit the men inside the cells.

She said, "As a rule, I only let someone call me that word once. I think you picked an appropriate time."

So, he hadn't been completely mute. When Amanda had told him about Sara, he'd called her the word that rhymes with her name. And not in Spanish.

"What do you want, Will, an apology?" She huffed a laugh. "All right, I'm sorry. I apologize for not letting you get distracted so that you could do your job. I apologize for making sure your head didn't get blown off. I apologize—"

His mouth moved of its own accord. "Could you just shut up?"

"What was that?"

He didn't repeat himself. He didn't care whether or not she heard him, or if his job was in jeopardy, or if she was going to unleash a new kind of hell on him for standing up to her. Will could not remember the last time he had experienced the kind of agony he'd suffered this afternoon. They'd sat outside that damn warehouse for a full hour before the Doraville police released them. Will understood intellectually why the detectives wanted to talk to them. There were two dead bodies and bullet holes everywhere. There was a stockpile of illegal machine guns on a shelf in the back. There was a large safe in Julia Ling's office with the door swinging open and hundred-dollar bills scattered on the floor. You didn't just roll up on a scene like that and release the only two witnesses. There were forms to be filled out, questions to be answered. Will had to give a statement. He'd had to wait while Amanda gave hers. It seemed like she had taken her time. He'd sat in the car, watching her talk to the detectives, feeling like an earthquake was going off in his chest.

His cell phone had been in and out of his hand a dozen times. Should he call Sara? Should he leave her alone? Did she need him? Wouldn't she call him if she did? He had to see her. If he saw her, he would know how to react, to do what she needed. He would wrap his arms around her. He would kiss her cheek, her neck, her mouth. He would make everything better.

Or, he would just stand there in the hallway like a jackass, molesting her hand.

Amanda snapped her fingers for his attention. Will didn't look up, but she talked anyway. "Your emergency contact is Angela Polaski. Or I should say Angie Trent, I suppose, since she's your wife." She paused for effect. "She is still your wife?"

He shook his head. He had never wanted to punch a woman so badly in his life.

"What did you expect me to do, Will?"

He kept shaking his head.

"So, I tell you that your—I don't know, what is Dr. Linton to you these days? Mistress? Girlfriend? *Pal*?—is in trouble, and then what? We drop everything so you can go make googly eyes at her?"

Will stood up. He wasn't going to do this. He would hitchhike back to Atlanta if he had to.

She sighed like the world was against her. "The warden will be here any minute. I need you to pull up your big-girl pants so I can prep you for your conversation with Roger Ling."

Will looked at her for the first time since they'd left the hospital. "Me?"

"He asked for you specifically."

This was some kind of trick, but he couldn't see where it was going. "How does he even know my name?"

"I imagine his sister filled him in."

As far as Will knew, Julia Ling was still on the run. "She called him at the prison?"

She crossed her arms over her chest. "Roger Ling is in solitary confinement for hiding a razor blade in his rectum. He doesn't get phone calls. He doesn't get visitors."

Isolation had never deterred the prison message system. There were so many

illegal cell phones inside the walls that last year during a statewide prisoner strike, *The New York Times* had been flooded with calls from inmates making their demands.

Still, Will said, "Roger Ling asked for me specifically?"

"Yes, Will. The request came through his lawyer. He asked for you specifically." She allowed, "Of course, they called me first. No one knows who the hell you are. Except for Roger, apparently."

Will sat back down in the chair. He felt his jaw ratcheting tight. The silence wanted to come back. He could feel it like a shadow looming behind him.

She asked, "Who do you think the cop is who confronted Dr. Linton in the hospital?"

He shook his head. He didn't want to think about Sara anymore. He felt sick every time he thought about what she'd been through today. Alone.

Amanda repeated herself. "Who do you think the cop is?" Again, she snapped her fingers to get his attention.

He looked up. He wanted to break her hand.

"This isn't about me. This is about Faith and getting back her mother. Now, who do you think the cop is?"

He cleared the glass out of his throat. "How do you know all of these people?"

"What people?"

"Hector Ortiz. Roger Ling. Julia Ling. Perry the bodyguard who drives a Mercedes. Why are you on a first-name basis with all these people?"

She was silent, obviously debating about whether or not to answer. Finally, she relented. "You know I came up in the job with Evelyn. We were cadets together. We were partners before they got tired of us busting all their cases." She shook her head at the memory. "These are the bad guys who were on the other side. Drugs. Rape. Murder. Assault. Hostage negotiation. RICO cases. Money laundering. They've been around as long as we have." She added ruefully, "Which is a very, very long time."

"You've worked cases against them?"

There were fifty chairs in the room, but she sat down right beside him. "Ignatio Ortiz and Roger Ling didn't just vault to the top. There are bodies they climbed over. Lots and lots of dead bodies. And the sad part is that they were human beings once. They were nice, normal people who went to church every Sunday and clocked into their jobs during the week." Amanda shook her head again, and Will could tell that her words invoked memories she'd rather forget.

Still, she told him, "You know the word *underbelly* refers to the part of society that's never seen, but it also means the vulnerable part. The weak part. That's what monsters like Roger Ling and Ignatio Ortiz prey on. Addiction. Greed. Poverty. Desperation. Once these guys figured out how to exploit these people, they never looked back. They cut their teeth doing carhops for dealers when they were twelve. They murdered before they were old enough to legally buy a drink in a bar. They've slit throats and beaten old women to death and done whatever it takes to get to the top and hold on to that power. So, when you ask me why I'm on a first-name basis with them, it's because I *know* them. I know who they are. I have stared into the darkness of their souls. But I guarantee you it doesn't go the other way. They don't have a damn idea who I am, and I've spent my career keeping it that way."

Will was finished treading carefully. "They know Evelyn."

"Yes," Amanda allowed. "I think they do."

He sat back in his chair. It was a stunning admission. He didn't know how to respond. Unfortunately—or maybe fortunately—she didn't give him the chance.

She clasped her hands together. Sharing time was over. "Let's talk about this cop who confronted Sara in the hospital."

Will was still trying to wrap his brain around what had just happened. For just a moment, he'd forgotten all about Sara.

"Chuck Finn," she prompted.

Will leaned his head against the wall. The concrete block felt cold against his scalp. "He used to be a cop. You don't lose that no matter how much heroin you shoot up. He's tall. He's probably lost a lot of weight from his habit. Sara wouldn't have recognized him from his mugshot. I'm assuming he's a smoker. Most junkies are."

"So, at the hospital: you think Chuck Finn discerned from Sara that Marcellus Estevez might live, so he sent Franklin Heeney in to kill him."

"Don't you?"

Amanda wasn't quick with her response. He could tell what she'd said about Evelyn Mitchell still weighed heavily on her. "I don't know what I think anymore, Will. And that's the God's honest truth."

She sounded tired. Her shoulders were slumped. There was a sort of detachment about her. He went back over their conversation, wondering what had finally made her admit that Evelyn Mitchell wasn't squeaky clean. He had never in his life seen Amanda give up on anything. Part of him felt sorry for her, and another part of him realized that he might not ever have this chance again.

He struck while her defenses were down. "Why didn't they shoot you outside the warehouse?"

"I'm a deputy director with the GBI. That's a lot of heat."

"They've already kidnapped a decorated police officer. They shot at you inside the warehouse. They killed Castillo. Why didn't they kill you?"

"I don't know, Will." She rubbed her eyes with her fingers. "I think we must be caught in the middle of some kind of war."

Will stared at the Meth Project poster on the wall. A toothless woman with scabby skin stared back. He wondered if that was what the junkie had looked like, the woman who had told Sara that there was a guy laid out by the Dumpster. How long had it taken before Marcellus Estevez was dead and Franklin Heeney was struggling with Sara on the floor, threatening to cut open her face with a scalpel?

Minutes. Maybe ten at the most.

Will couldn't help it. He put his elbows on his knees and dropped his head in his hands. "You should've told me." He could hear a distant voice in his head screaming at him to shut up. But he couldn't. "You had no right to keep that from me."

Amanda gave a heavy sigh. "Maybe I should have. Or maybe I was right to hold it back. If it's the first one, I'm sorry. If it's the second, then you can be mad at me later. I need you to talk this through with me. I need to figure out what is going on. If not for my sake, then for Faith's."

Her voice sounded as desperate as he felt. The day had utterly defeated her.

Will couldn't help it. As much as he hated her right now, he couldn't be cruel.

And somewhere in all of this, the click happened. He hadn't noticed it, but sometime during the last ten minutes, his anger had started to seep out, so that now when he thought about it, when he considered what Amanda had done about Sara, Will felt a festering anger rather than a burning hate.

He took a deep breath and slowly let it go as he sat back up. "Okay. We have to assume that all the dead guys worked in Julia Ling's shop—some of them on the books, some of them off, all of them doing both sides of her business."

"You think Ling-Ling sent Ricardo Ortiz to Sweden to pick up some heroin?"

"No, I think Ricardo got ahead of himself. I think he got all the young guys worked up, thinking they could take over Ling-Ling's business. He took it on himself to go to Sweden." Will looked at his watch. It was almost seven o'clock. "He was tortured, probably by Benny Choo."

"Then why didn't they just cut the drugs out of him and be done with it?"

"Because he told them that he knew where they could get more money."

"Evelyn."

"It's what I said earlier." He turned toward her. "Chuck Finn mentioned in one of his Healing Winds group sessions with Hironobu Kwon that his old boss was sitting on a pile of money. Cut to yesterday morning. Ricardo has a belly full of heroin and Benny Choo beating his ass. His friend Hironobu Kwon says he knows where they can get some cash to buy themselves out of the situation." Will shrugged. "They go to Evelyn's. Benny Choo tags along to keep them from doing a runner. Only, they can't find the money, and Evelyn won't give it up to them."

"Perhaps they weren't expecting to find Hector Ortiz there. Ricardo would recognize his father's cousin."

Will wanted to ask what Hector Ortiz was doing at Evelyn's in the first place, but he didn't want to make Amanda lie to him right now. "Ricardo Ortiz would know that killing Hector would bring some heat. He's already turned his back on his own father by smuggling in the heroin. Ling-Ling is out for his blood because she's found out that Ricardo turned on her, too. Ricardo's gang can't find the money in Evelyn's house. She's not talking. Ricardo has to see at this point that his life isn't worth much. He's packed full of balloons he can't pass. He's been beaten nearly to death. Benny Choo's got a gun to his head." Will ran through Faith's statement about her confrontation with Choo and Ortiz. "Ricardo's last word was 'Almeja.' That's what Julia Ling called Evelyn, right? How would Ricardo know that?"

"I suppose if your theory holds that this all came from Chuck Finn, then that's where he got it."

"Why would Evelyn's name be the last word on Ricardo's lips?"

"It's her street name. I'd be surprised if Ricardo knew her real one." She explained, "It's not just the bangers who give themselves nicknames. You work narcotics long enough, they come up with something street to call you by. Sometimes, that spills over into the squad. 'Hip' and 'Hop' were obviously shortened from their last names. Boyd Spivey was Sledge, as in hammer. Chuck Finn was called Fish, I suppose because they couldn't remember the name for a lemming." She smiled; another private joke. "Roger Ling took credit for coming up with 'Almeja,' which seemed curious at the time until we realized he doesn't

speak a bit of his parents' language. Mandarin, in case you're curious."

"What about you?"

"I don't work narcotics."

"But they know you."

"Wag," she told him. "Short for Wagner."

Will didn't believe her. "Why did Roger Ling ask to speak with me?"

She gave a startled laugh. "You can't really think that you're the only man in this prison right now who despises me."

There was a loud buzz and a clanging of gates opening and closing. Two guards came into the waiting room, followed by a younger man with Harry Potter spectacles and a floppy haircut to match. He was definitely not one of Amanda's old gals. There were velvet patches on the elbows of his corduroy jacket. His tie was made of a knit cotton. His shirt had a stain over the pocket. He smelled of pancakes.

"Jimmy Kagan," he said, shaking their hands. "I'm not sure what strings you pulled, Deputy Director, but this is the first time in my six years as warden here that I've been called back to work this late at night."

Amanda had easily transitioned back to her old self. It was like seeing an actor slip into character. "I appreciate your cooperation, Warden Kagan. We all have to do our part."

"I didn't have much of a choice," Kagan admitted, indicating the guards should open the door into the main prison. He led them down a long hallway at a fast clip. "I'm not going to disrupt my entire system no matter who you get on the phone. Agent Trent, you'll have to go back into the cells. Ling has been in solitary for the last week. You can talk to him through the slot in the door. I'm sure you know the type of person you're dealing with, but I'll tell you straight up I wouldn't be in the same room with Roger Ling if you held a gun to my head. I'm actually terrified that's going to happen to me one day."

Amanda raised an eyebrow at Will. "You make it sound as if the primates are running the zoo."

Kagan gave her a look that said he thought she was either deluded or insane. He told Will, "At any given time in the U.S. penal system, at least half the inmate population have been diagnosed with some kind of mental illness."

Will nodded. He'd heard the statistic before. All the prisons in the country combined bought more Prozac than any other single institution.

Kagan said, "Some of them are worse than others. Ling is worse than the worst. He should be in a mental ward. Locked down. Throw away the key."

Another gate opened and closed.

Kagan listed the rules. "Don't get close to the door. Don't think you're safe just because you're an arm's length away. This man is very resourceful, and he has a lot of time on his hands. The razor blade we found up his ass was wrapped in a hand-tied pouch Ling made from strings he pulled out of his bedsheets. It took him two months. He braided a Yellow Rebel star into it as some kind of joke. Must've dyed it with urine."

Kagan stopped at yet another door and waited for it to open. "I have no idea how he got the razor blade. He's in his cell twenty-three hours a day. His yard time is isolated—he's the only one in the cage. He doesn't have contact visits, and the guards are all terrified of him." The door opened and he continued

walking. "If it was up to me, I'd leave him to rot in the hole. But it's not up to me. He'll be confined another week unless he pulls something awful. And believe me, he is capable of the awful."

The warden stopped at a set of metal doors. The first one clanged open and they went inside. "The last time we locked him in the hole, the guard who sent him there was attacked the next day. We never found the responsible party, but the man lost one of his eyes. It was plucked out by hand."

The door behind them shut and the one in front of them banged open.

Kagan said, "We'll have the cameras on you, Mr. Trent, but I have to warn you that our response time clocks in at sixty-one seconds, just over a minute. We can't get it any tighter than that. I have a full raid team suited up and on standby if anything happens." He patted Will on the back. "Good luck."

There was a guard waiting to take Will through. The man looked filled with the kind of dread you'd see on a death row inmate's face. It was like staring into a mirror.

Will turned to Amanda. He had broken his silence in the waiting room so that she could coach him on what to say to Roger Ling, but he just now realized she hadn't offered any advice. "You want to help me here?"

She said, "Quid pro quo, Clarice. Don't come back without some useful information."

Will remembered again that he hated her.

The guard motioned him through. The door closed behind them. The man said, "Keep close to the walls. If you see something coming at you, cover your eyes and close your mouth. It's probably shit."

Will tried to walk as if his testicles hadn't receded into his body. The lights were out in the cells, but the hall was well lit. The guard kept to the wall, away from the prisoners opposite. Will followed suit. He could feel a new set of eyes tracking him as he passed each cell. There was a skittering noise behind him as kites, tiny pieces of paper with strings attached to them, slid across the concrete floor in his wake. In his mind, Will listed out all the possible contraband in the cells. Shivs made from toothbrushes and combs. Blades fashioned from pieces of metal lifted out of the kitchen. Feces and urine mixed in a cup to create gas bombs. Threads from a sheet braided into a whip with razor blades tied at the ends.

Another set of double gates. The first one opened. They walked through. The first one closed. Seconds ticked by. The second set groaned open.

They came to a solid door with a piece of glass at eye level. The guard took out a heavy ring of keys and found the right one. He stuck it into a lock on the wall. There was a *ka-thunk* as a bolt opened. He turned around and looked at the camera overhead. They both waited until there was a responding click from the guard watching them in a remote viewing room. The door slid open.

Solitary confinement. The hole.

The hallway was about thirty feet deep and ten feet wide. Eight metal doors were on one side. A concrete block wall was on the other. The cells faced inside the prison, not out. There would be no windows. No fresh air. No sunlight. No hope.

As Kagan had pointed out, these men had nothing but time.

Unlike the rest of the prison, all of the overhead lights were on in solitary. The

glow of fluorescent bulbs gave Will an instant headache. The hallway was warm and muggy. There was something like pressure in the air, a weighted, heavy feeling. He had the sensation of being in the middle of a field waiting for a tornado to hit.

"He's in the last one," the guard said. He kept to the wall again, his shoulder rubbing against the concrete block. Will could see the paint had been rubbed off from years of guards sliding their shoulders across. The doors opposite were bolted up tight. Each had a viewing window at the top, narrow, eye level, like at a speakeasy. There was a slit at the bottom for passing meals and tightening handcuffs. All of the doors and panels were secured with heavy bolts and rivets.

The guard stopped at the last door. He put his hand to Will's chest and made sure his back was flat against the wall. "I don't need to tell you to stay there, right, big guy?"

Will shook his head.

The man seemed to gather his courage before walking to the cell door. He wrapped his hand around the slide bolt that kept the viewing panel covered. "Mr. Ling, if I pull back this slat, are you going to give me any trouble?"

There was the muffled sound of laughter behind the door. Roger Ling had the same heavy southern accent as his sister. "I think you're safe for now, Enrique."

The guard was sweating. He gripped the bolt and pulled back, stepping out of the way so quickly that his shoes squeaked across the floor.

Will felt a bead of sweat roll down his neck. Roger Ling was obviously standing with his back pressed against the door. Will could see the side of his neck, the bottom of his ear, a hint of the orange prison garb that covered his shoulder. The lights were on inside, brighter than they were in the hallway. Will saw the rear of the cell, the edge of a mattress on the floor. The space was smaller than a normal cell, less than eight feet deep, probably four feet wide. There would be a toilet but nothing else. No chair. No table. Nothing to make you feel like a human being. The usual smells of a prison—sweat, urine, feces—were more pungent here. Will realized there was no screaming. Normally, a prison was as noisy as an elementary school, especially at night. The kites had done their job. The whole place had ground to a stop because Roger Ling had a visitor.

Will waited. He could hear his heart pumping, the sound of breath going in and out of his lungs.

Ling asked, "How's Arnoldo doing?"

Julia Ling's Chihuahua. Will cleared his throat. "He's fine."

"Is she letting him get fat? I told her not to let him get fat."

"He seems ..." Will struggled for an answer. "She's not letting him starve."

"Naldo's a cool little dude," Ling said. "I always say a Chihuahua is only as high strung as his owner. You agree with that?"

Will hadn't given it much thought, but he said, "I guess that makes sense. Mine's pretty laid back."

"What's her name again?"

There was a point to this after all. Ling was confirming that he was talking to the right man. "Betty."

He had passed the test. "Good to meet you in person, Mr. Trent." Ling shifted, and Will saw most of his neck. A tattoo of a dragon went up his vertebrae. The

wings were spread across his shaved head. The eyes were bright yellow.

Ling said, "My sister's pretty freaked out."

"I can imagine."

"Those little shits tried to kill her." His voice was hard, exactly the kind of tone you'd expect from a man who'd mutilated and killed two women. "They wouldn't be actin' so tough if I wasn't locked up in here. I'd be bringin' them some pains in their brains. You feel me?"

Will looked at the guard. The man was tensed like a bulldog ready to fight. Or flee, which seemed the smarter option. Will thought about the raid team waiting, and wondered what Roger Ling could do in sixty-one seconds. A lot, probably.

Ling said, "You know why I asked to speak with you?"

Will was honest. "I have no idea."

" 'Cause I don't trust nothin' that bitch has to say."

Obviously, he meant Amanda. "That's probably smart."

He laughed. Will listened to the sound echoing through the cell. There was no joy in the noise. It was chilling, almost maniacal. Will wondered if Ling's victims had heard this laughter while they were being strangled to death with Arnoldo's leash.

Ling said, "We gotta end this. Too much blood on the street is bad for business."

"Tell me how to make that happen."

"I got word from Ignatio. He understands Yellow isn't behind this. He wants peace."

Will wasn't exactly a gang expert, but he doubted that the leader of Los Texicanos would turn the other cheek over his son being beaten and killed. He told Ling as much. "I would assume Mr. Ortiz wants vengeance."

"Nah, man. No vengeance. Ricardo dug his own grave. Ignatio knows that. Make sure Faith knows that, too. She did what she had to do. Family is family, am I right?"

Will didn't like this man knowing Faith's name, and he sure as hell didn't trust his assurances. Still, he said, "I'll tell her."

Ling echoed his sister's words. "These young guys are crazy, man. Got no sense of the value of life. You bust your ass to make the world good for them. You give them brand new cars and send them to private schools, and the minute they're on their own, pow, they turn around and pop you one."

Will thought "pow" was a bit of an understatement, but he kept that thought to himself.

"Ricardo was at Westminster," Ling said. "You know that?"

Will was familiar with the private school, which cost upwards of twenty-five thousand dollars a year. He also knew from Hironobu Kwon's file that he'd attended Westminster on a math scholarship. So, another connection.

Ling said, "Ignatio thought he could buy his son a different life, but them spoiled rich kids got him hooked on Oxy."

"Was Ricardo in rehab?"

"Shit, little dude *lived* in rehab." He shifted again. Will could hear the material of his stiff orange shirt rub against the metal door. "You got kids?"

"No."

"Not that you know of, right?" He laughed as if this was funny. "I got three. Two ex-wives always bitchin' at me for money. I give it to 'em, though. They keep my boys in line, don't let my daughter dress like no whore. Keep their noses clean." His shoulder raised in a shrug. "What can you do, though? It's in the blood sometimes. No matter how many times you show them the right way, they get to a certain age and they get ideas into their heads. They think maybe they don't have to work their way up. They see what other people got and think they can just walk in and take it."

Ling seemed to know a lot about Ignacio Ortiz's parenting woes. Odd, especially considering the two were locked down in separate prisons that were almost an entire state away from each other. Boyd Spivey had been wrong. Yellow wasn't making a play for Brown. Yellow was working for Brown.

Will said, "You have a business relationship with Mr. Ortiz."

"That's a fair statement."

"Ignacio asked Julia to give his son a job on the legit side of the business."

"It's good for a young man to have a trade. And Ricardo took to it. He had an eye for the work. Most of 'em, they're just putting together boxes, slapping on doors. Ricky was different. He was smart. Knew how to get the right people on the job. Could've run his own shop one day."

Will started to understand. "Ricardo got a crew together—Hironobu Kwon and the others worked at your sister's shop. Maybe they saw the money coming in from the less legitimate side of the business and thought that they deserved a bigger piece. Ortiz would never approve of some upstart gang taking a piece of the Los Texicanos pie, even if it was his own son."

"Starting a business is harder than it looks, especially with a franchise. You gotta pay the fees."

"You heard about Ricardo's trip to Sweden."

"Hell, everybody heard." He chuckled as if it was funny. "Problem with being that age is you don't know when to keep your mouth shut. Young, dumb, and full of come."

"Your people talked to Ricardo about his trip." Will didn't say that they were probably torturing the young man during the discussion. "Ricardo mentioned that there might be a way to buy himself out of his problem." Will imagined Ricardo would've been willing to trade his own mother by the time they were finished torturing him. "He told you that he could get his hands on some money. A lot of money. Almost a million dollars. Cash."

"That sounds like a deal no businessman can say no to."

Everything was lining up. Ricardo had taken his crew to Evelyn's, where they met with a hell of a lot more resistance than they'd anticipated. They had killed Hector. Even if Amanda was right and Hector Ortiz was just a car salesman, there was no getting around that he was Ignacio Ortiz's cousin. "Ricardo took them to Evelyn's house to get the money. Only, they didn't count on her fighting back. They took too many casualties. They had to regroup. And then Faith rolled up."

Ling asked, "You heard this story before?"

Will kept talking. "They took Evelyn somewhere else to question her."

"Sounds like a plan, man."

"Only, she hasn't given up the money. If she had, I wouldn't be here."

He laughed. "I don't know about that, brother. You seem to be missing something in your story."

"What do you mean?"

"Think about it." Will was still at a loss.

"The only way you can kill a snake is to cut off its head."

"Okay." He still wasn't following.

"Far as I can tell, that ol' snake's still out there twitchin'."

"You mean Evelyn?"

"Shit, you think that old bitch could get a bunch of kids to follow her? Where couldn't even keep her *own* house in order." He tsked his tongue the same way his sister had. "Nah, this is man's work, bro. How do you think they got one over on my sister? Bitches don't got the balls for this kind of work."

Will wasn't going to argue the point. Gangs were the ultimate boys' club—more patriarchal than the Catholic Church. Julia Ling had only been in charge at her brother's pleasure. Generals don't go into battle. They send their pawns to the front lines. Hironobu Kwon was shot within minutes of breaching the house. Ricardo Ortiz had been left behind. Benny Choo had held a gun to his head. The man had been beaten. He was abandoned. He was expendable.

Someone else had tipped them off about Evelyn. Someone else was leading the gang.

Will said, "Chuck Finn."

Ling laughed as if the name surprised him. "Chuckleberry Finn. I thought that brother would be dead by now. Fish sleeping with the fishes."

"Is he behind this?"

Roger didn't answer. "And old Sledge taken down, too. From what I hear, they did the brother a favor. Go out like a man instead of waiting to be put down like a dog. Can't say some good ain't come outta this."

"Who's behind—"

"Yo, this is over." Roger Ling banged on the cell door. "Enrique, close it up."

The guard started to slide back the panel. Will reached out to stop him. Like a snake striking, Ling's hand snared out, clamping around Will's wrist. He pulled so hard that Will's shoulder slammed into the door. The side of his face was pressed against the cold metal surface. He felt hot breath on his ear. "You know why you're here, bro?"

Will pulled back as hard as he could. He pushed with his leg, tried to brace his foot against the bottom of the door.

Ling's grip was tight, but his voice implied effortlessness. "Tell Mandy that Evelyn's gone." His voice got lower. "Tap-tap. Two in the head. Ding-dong, Almeja is dead."

Ling released him. Will fell backward, his shoulders banging into the concrete wall. His heart was going like a metronome. He looked back at the cell door. There was a squeal of metal sliding across metal. The viewing panel closed, but not before Will saw Roger Ling's eyes. They were flat black, soulless. But there was something else there. A flash of triumph mixed in with bloodlust.

"When?" Will yelled. "When did it happen?"

Ling's voice was muffled behind the door. "Tell Mandy to wear something pretty to the funeral. I always did like her in black."

Will brushed himself off. As he walked up the corridor, he wondered which

was worse: feeling Roger Ling's hot breath on his neck or having to tell Amanda and Faith that Evelyn Mitchell was dead.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Faith grabbed a grocery buggy from the line outside the store. She found an old list in her purse and clutched it in her hand as she walked into the building, pretending like this was just another day at the market. The Atlanta police had taken her Glock to process for ballistics, but they didn't know about Zeke's Walther P99 that he kept loaded in his glove compartment. The weight dragged on her purse strap as she hefted it over her shoulder. The Germanmade weapon was well suited for her brother, who'd never seen combat. It was bulky and expensive, the sort of thing you'd carry for show. It could also drop a man at one hundred yards, and, at the end of the day, that was all Faith needed it for.

She started out in the produce section, taking more time than usual to test the freshness of the oranges piled on display. She dropped a few into a plastic bag, then moved toward the bakery.

She should've left the house hours ago, but she wanted to wait until she got the call from Zeke that Jeremy and Emma were safely ensconced in the visiting officers' quarters at Dobbins Air Reserve Base. Just getting them all loaded into Jeremy's Impala had taken forever. Zeke had yelled at the car seat. Jeremy was still pouting about his confiscated iPhone. Emma hadn't cried, because her big brother was there to soothe her, but Faith had bawled like a baby the minute their car had disappeared at the end of the street.

Faith had assumed that the men who took her mother were as skilled as they were brazen. Tactically, they had always had the advantage, whether it was taking Evelyn or breaking into Faith's house. But with two cops sitting in her kitchen and her six-foot-four brother stomping around like a bully spoiling for a fight, there was no way they would try the house again.

They had gone for Jeremy, the weakest link save for Emma. Faith felt her breath catch as she thought about her children. She had been so worried about her mother that she'd let the rest of her family slip. That wasn't going to happen again. She was going to keep all of them safe or die trying.

Faith felt a presence over her shoulder. Someone was watching her. She'd felt eyes on her from the moment she left the house. Casually, Faith turned around. She saw a kid in a Frito-Lay uniform stacking bags onto the shelves. He smiled at her. Faith smiled back, then pushed her cart down the aisle.

When Faith was a little girl, the Charles Chip man would come every Monday to fill their brown metal tins with potato chips. Tuesdays and Thursdays, the Mathis Dairy truck idled in front of their house while Petro, the driver, put fresh milk in the metal rack by the door in the carport. A half-gallon was ninety-two cents. Orange juice was fifty-two cents. Buttermilk, her father's favorite, was forty-seven cents. If Faith was good, her mother would let her count out the change to pay Petro. Sometimes, Evelyn would get chocolate milk, fifty-six cents, for special occasions. Birthdays. Good report cards. Winning games. Dance recitals.

Cosmetics. Vitamins. Shampoo. Greeting cards. Books. Soap. Faith kept piling

things into her buggy, willing whoever was there to make contact. She slowed her pace. The cart was nearly full. She checked Jeremy's iPhone. There were no new messages on his Facebook wall, no emails from GoodKnight92. Faith backtracked through the store, returning the shampoo and the vitamins, perusing the magazines again. She looked at her watch. She'd been here almost an hour and no one had approached her. Ginger would probably start wondering what was taking her so long. The young detective hadn't seemed fazed when she'd told him that she was going to the grocery store by herself. He was still licking his wounds over Faith taking his gun. She wasn't sure how much farther she could push him without getting a hard shove back.

She angled her buggy around an old man who had stopped in the middle of the cereal aisle. Faith knew that they wanted her in the parking lot. They wanted her alone. She should just give in and get it over with. She put her hand on her purse, ready to take it out of the buggy. Logic intervened. They couldn't abduct her in the middle of the grocery store. They might try, but Faith wouldn't go anywhere. They would either have to bargain with her or shoot her. She wasn't leaving this store without a deal that would get her mother back.

Faith stopped outside the restroom and left her buggy by the door. This was her third trip to the toilet since she'd gotten to the grocery store. She wasn't just trying to draw them out. One of the many benefits of her diabetes acting up was that her bladder felt constantly full. She pushed open the ladies' room door and held her breath at the stench. Grime covered the stainless steel walls and tile floor. The air felt greasy. Given a choice, she would've waited until she got home, but Faith didn't have that luxury.

She checked all four stalls, then went into the handicap space because it was still the least filthy. Her thighs ached as she hovered over the seat. It was a balancing act. She had to keep her purse tucked to her stomach because there was nowhere to hang it and she was afraid the fake leather would become glued to the floor.

The door opened. Faith looked under the stall. She saw a pair of women's shoes. Short heels. Fat ankles stuffed into brown support hose. The faucet turned on. The hand towel dispenser cranked. The faucet turned off. The door opened again, then slowly closed.

Faith closed her eyes and mumbled a prayer of relief. She finished going to the bathroom, flushed the toilet, then hiked her purse back onto her shoulder. The stall door didn't exactly lock. The thumb latch was missing. She had to stick her pinky into the square opening and twist the metal spindle to get the door open.

"Hola."

Instantly, Faith catalogued everything she could about the man standing in front of her. Medium build, a few inches taller than Faith, around one hundred eighty pounds. Brown skin. Dark hair. Blue eyes. Band-Aid around his left index finger. Tattoo of a snake on the right side of his neck. Faded blue jeans with holes at the knees. Black warm-up jacket with a bulge at the front that could only be a gun. The brim of his black baseball cap was pulled low. She could still see his face. The smattering of facial hair. The mole on his cheek. He was about Jeremy's age, but as far from her docile, loving son as could be. Hate seemed to radiate off him. Faith knew his type, had dealt with it many times before. Hair-

trigger finger. Full of spite. Too young to be smart, too stupid to grow old.

Faith put her hand in her purse.

He pressed the bulge under his jacket. "Wouldn't do that if I was you."

Faith could feel the cold steel of the Walther. The muzzle was pointing toward the man. Her finger was close to the trigger. She could shoot the gun through her purse before he even thought to lift his jacket. "Where is my mother?"

"My mother," he repeated. "You say that like she only belongs to you."

"Leave my family out of this."

"You ain't the one in the driver's seat here."

"I need to know that she's alive."

He tilted up his chin and clicked his tongue once against the back of his teeth. The gesture was familiar, the same response Faith had gotten from just about every thug she'd ever arrested. "She's safe."

"How do I know that?"

He laughed. "You don't, bitch. You don't know nothin'."

"What do you want?"

He rubbed his fingers against his thumb. "Money."

Faith didn't know if she could pull the bluff again. "Just tell me where she is and we'll end this. No one has to get hurt."

He laughed again. "Yo, you think I'm that stupid?"

"How much do you want?"

"All of it."

A stream of curses came to mind. "She never took any money."

"She done spun me out this story, bitch. We past that. Gimme the fucking money, and I'll give you what's left of her."

"Is she alive?"

"Not for long, you don't do what I say."

Faith felt a bead of sweat roll down her back. "I can have the money tomorrow. By noon."

"What, you waitin' for the bank to open?"

"Safe deposit box." She was making this up as she went along. "Boxes. There are three of them. All over the city. I need time."

He smiled. One of his teeth was capped in a silver-colored metal. Platinum, probably worth more money than Faith had in her checking account. "I knew you'd deal. I told Mommy that little baby girl wouldn't throw her over."

"I need to know she's alive. None of this happens unless I know for sure that she's okay."

"I wouldn't say she's okay, but the bitch is still breathing last time I checked." He took an iPhone out of his pocket, a newer model than she could afford for Jeremy. He held his tongue between his teeth as his thumbs worked across the screen. He found what he was looking for and showed Faith the phone. The screen showed the image of her mother holding a newspaper.

Faith stared at the photo. Her mother's face was swollen, barely recognizable. Her hand had a bloody rag wrapped around it. Faith pressed her lips together. Bile stung the back of her throat. She fought against the tears stinging her eyes. "I can't tell what she's holding."

He used his fingers to enlarge the image. "It's a newspaper."

"I know it's a *USA Today*," she snapped. "That doesn't prove she's alive right

now. It just proves that sometime after the papers were delivered this morning, you made her hold one up."

He looked at the screen. She could tell he was worried. He bit his bottom lip the same way Jeremy did when she'd caught him doing something wrong.

The man said, "This is proof of life. You need to deal with me if you wanna keep it that way."

Faith noticed that his grammar had improved. His voice had gone up an octave, too. There was something familiar about his tone, but she couldn't place it. She just needed to keep him talking. "You think I'm stupid?" she demanded. "This doesn't prove anything. My mother could already be dead. I'm not going to just hand you a pile of money because you have some stupid picture. You could've Photoshopped that. I don't even know if it's really her."

He stepped closer, puffing out his chest. His eyes were almond shaped, deep blue with speckles of green. Again, she had the sensation of knowing him.

"I've arrested you before."

"Shit," he snorted. "You don't know me, bitch. You don't know a goddamn thing about me."

"I need proof that my mother's alive."

"She won't be for long if you keep this shit up."

Faith felt that familiar snap inside of her. All the anger and frustration of the last few days came rushing out. "Have you ever even done this before? Are you some kind of amateur? You don't show up like this without real proof. I've been a fucking cop for sixteen years. You think I'm going to buy this cheap trick?" She pushed him back hard enough to let him know she meant it. "I'm leaving."

He slammed her face into the door. Faith was stunned by the blow. He jerked her around. His left arm pressed into her throat. His right hand gripped her face, fingers pressing into her skull. Spit flew from his mouth. "You want me to leave another present under your pillow? Maybe her eyes?" He pressed his thumb harder against her eye socket. "Maybe her tits?"

The door pushed against Faith's back. Someone was trying to get into the restroom.

"Excuse me?" a woman said. "Hello? Is this open?"

The man stared at Faith, a hyena studying its prey. His hand shook from the effort of gripping her face. Her teeth cut into the inside of her cheek. Her nose started to bleed. He could break her skull if he wanted to.

"Tomorrow morning," he said. "I'll send you instructions." He leaned in so close that Faith's eyes blurred on his features. "You don't tell anybody about this. You don't tell your boss. You don't tell that freak you work with. You don't tell your brother, or anyone else in your precious *family*. Nobody. You hear me?"

"Yes," she whispered. "Yes."

Impossibly, his grip tightened. "I won't kill you first," he warned her. "I'll cut off your eyelids. Are you listening to me?" Faith nodded. "I'll make you watch while I skin your son. Piece by piece, I'll cut away his flesh until all you see is his muscles and bones and all you hear is him crying like the bitch little spoiled baby that he is. And then I'll go to work on your daughter. Her skin'll be easier, like wet paper peeling back. Do you understand me? You get what I'm saying?" She nodded again. "Don't push me, bitch. You have no idea how little I've got left to lose."

He let go of her as quickly as he'd grabbed her. Faith fell to the floor. She coughed, tasting blood in her throat. He kicked her out of the way so that he could open the door. She reached out to her purse. Her fingers felt the impression of the gun. She should get up. She had to get up.

"Ma'am?" a woman said. She peered around the door, looking down at Faith. "Do you want me to call a doctor?"

"No," Faith whispered. She swallowed the blood in her mouth. The inside of her jaw was ripped open. More blood trickled from her nose.

"Are you sure? I could call—"

"No," Faith repeated. There was no one to call.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Will pulled into his driveway and waited for the garage door to open. All the lights were off in his house. Betty was probably floating on her full bladder like a balloon in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade. At least he hoped she was. Will was in no mood to clean up a mess.

He felt like he had killed Amanda. Not literally, not with his bare hands like he'd dreamed of doing for most of the day. Telling her what Roger Ling said, that Evelyn Mitchell was dead, was just as good as shooting her in the chest. She had deflated in front of him. All of her bravado was gone. All the arrogance and meanness and pettiness had rushed out of her, and the woman in front of him had been nothing but a shell.

Will had had the sense to wait until they were outside the prison building to relay the news. She hadn't cried. Instead, to his horror, her knees had buckled. That was when he put his arm around her. She was surprisingly bony. Her hip was sharp under his hand. Her shoulders were frail. She seemed ten, twenty years older by the time he fastened her seatbelt around her lap and closed the car door.

The trip back had been excruciating. Will's silence on the way down paled in comparison. He had offered to pull over but she'd told him not to stop. Just outside of Atlanta, he'd seen her hand grip the door. Will had never been to her house before. She lived in a condo in the middle of Buckhead. It was a gated community. The buildings were all regal looking with keyed corners and large, heavily trimmed windows. She had directed him to a unit in the back.

Will had idled the car, but she didn't get out. He was debating whether or not to help her again when she said, "Don't tell Faith."

He'd stared at her front door. She had a flag hanging from the front post. Spring flowers. A seasonal motif. Amanda had never struck him as a flag person. He couldn't imagine her standing on the porch in her heels and suit, leaning on tippy-toe to clip the appropriate flag onto the pole.

"We have to verify this," she'd said, though what Roger Ling had told Will was merely a confirmation of a truth Will realized he had been sensing for most of the day.

Amanda must've known it, too. That was the only explanation for her earlier capitulation inside the prison waiting room. She had admitted that Evelyn was tainted because she'd known there was no reason to protect her anymore. The twenty-four-hour mark had come and gone. There had been no contact from the kidnappers. There was blood all over Evelyn's kitchen floor, a lot of it—maybe most of it—from Evelyn. The young men they were dealing with had proven themselves to be remorseless killers, nothing more than assassins, even when it was against members of their own crew.

The odds that Evelyn Mitchell had even made it through the night were close to nil.

Will had told her, "Faith has to know."

"I'll tell her when I know for sure." Her voice sounded flat, lifeless. "We meet at seven tomorrow morning. The whole team. If you're a minute late, then don't bother coming."

"I'll be there."

"We're going to find her. I have to see her with my own eyes."

"Okay."

"And if what Roger said is true, we'll find the boys who did this, and we will rain down hell on them. Every last one. We will hound them into the ground."

"Yes, ma'am."

Her voice was so low and tired he could barely hear her. "I will not rest until every single one of them is put to death. I want to watch them slip the needle in and see their feet twitch and their eyes roll and their chests freeze. And if the state won't kill them, then I'll do it myself." Amanda had pushed open the door and gotten out of the car. Will could see the effort it took her to keep her back straight as she walked up the stairs. If it were up to Amanda, if there was a way for her to will her friend to be alive, then there would be no question of Evelyn's survival.

But that just wasn't the case.

The garage door finally finished opening. Will pulled in and pressed the button to close the door. The garage had not been an original part of the house. Will had added on the structure in the neighborhood's more transitional days, back when junkies knocked on his door wondering if this was still a crack den. The entrance was awkward and led into the spare bedroom. Betty raised her head from the pillow when she saw Will. There was a puddle in the corner that neither one of them was ready to talk about.

Will turned on the lights as he walked through the house. There was a chill in the air. He cracked open the kitchen door so Betty could go outside. She hesitated.

"It's all right," he told her, using as soothing a tone as he could muster. Her injuries were healing, but the dog still remembered last week when a hawk had swooped into the yard and tried to pick her up. And Will could still remember the groomer's uncontrollable laughter when he'd told the man that a hawk had mistaken his dog for a rat.

Betty finally went outside, but not without a wary glance over her shoulder. Will put his car key on the hook and placed his wallet and gun on the kitchen table. The pizza from yesterday was still in the refrigerator. Will took out the box but couldn't do anything more than stare at the gelatinous slices.

He wanted to call Sara, but this time his motivations were purely selfish. He wanted to tell her what had happened today. He wanted to ask her if it was right to wait to tell Faith that her mother was dead. He wanted to describe to her the way it felt to see Amanda brought so low. That it scared him to see her fallen so far from her pedestal.

Instead, he returned the pizza box to the fridge, made sure the back door was still cracked open, and went to take a shower. It was almost midnight. He'd been up since five this morning, having slept only a few hours the night before. Will stood under the stream of hot water, trying to wash away his day. The grime of Valdosta State Prison. The warehouse where he'd been shot at. Grady, where he'd felt dizzy with fear. Coastal, where he'd sweated so much that rings were

still under the arms of his shirt.

Will thought about Betty while he dried his hair. She'd been stuck in the house all day. The puddle was a responsibility they both shared. As late as it was, he couldn't see himself sleeping. He should take her for a walk. They could both do with stretching their legs.

He pulled on a pair of jeans and a dress shirt that was too worn to wear to work anymore. The collar was frayed. One of the buttons was broken, dangling by a thread.

He walked into the kitchen to get Betty's leash.

Angie was sitting at the table. "Welcome home, baby. How was your day?"

Will would've rather driven to Coastal and faced Roger Ling again than have to talk to his wife right now.

She stood. Her arms went around his shoulders. She put her mouth close to his. "Aren't you going to tell me hello?"

Her hands stroking his neck felt nothing like Sara's. "Stop."

She pulled away, feigning a pout. "Is that any kind of welcome for your wife?"

"Where have you been?"

"Since when do you care?"

He thought about it. She had posed a legitimate question. "I don't, really. I just—" The words came out easier than he'd thought. "I don't want you here."

"Hmm." She tucked her chin down, crossed her arms. "Well, I suppose this was inevitable. I can't leave you alone after all."

She had closed the back door. He opened it. Betty ran in. She saw Angie and growled.

Angie said, "Looks like none of the women in your life are happy to see me."

He felt the hair on the back of his neck go up. "What are you talking about?"

"Sara didn't tell you?" Angie paused, but he couldn't answer her. "It's Sara, right? That's her name?" She gave a breathy laugh. "I have to say, Will, but she's a little plain for you. I mean she's all right up top, but she's got no ass to speak of and she's almost taller than you are. I thought you liked your women more womanly."

Will still couldn't talk. His blood had frozen in his veins.

"She was here when I got home yesterday. Lingered in the bedroom. Didn't she tell you?"

Sara hadn't told him. Why hadn't she told him?

"She colors her hair. You know that, right? Those highlights aren't natural."

"What did you ...?"

"I'm just letting you know she's not the perfect little angel you think she is."

Will forced the words out of his mouth. "What did you say to her?"

"I asked her why she was fucking my husband."

His heart stopped. This was the reason Sara had been crying yesterday afternoon. This explained her initial coldness when he showed up at her house last night. Will's heart clenched like a vise was around it. "You are not allowed to talk to her ever again."

"You're trying to protect her?" She laughed. "Jesus, Will. That's hilarious considering I'm trying to protect you."

"You don't—"

"She's got a thing for cops. You know that, right?" She shook her head at his

stupidity. "I looked into her husband. He was quite a catch. Fucked anything that moved."

"Like you."

"Oh, come on. Try harder than that, baby."

"I don't want to try." He finally said the words that he'd been thinking for the last year. "I just want it over. I want you out of my life."

She laughed in his face. "I *am* your life."

Will stared at her. She was smiling. Her eyes practically glowed. Why was it that she only ever seemed happy when she was trying to hurt him? "I can't do this anymore."

"His name was Jeffrey. Did you know that?" Will didn't answer. Of course he knew Sara's husband's name. "He was smart. Went to college—a real one, not some correspondence school where they charge extra to mail your diploma. He ran a whole police department. They were so fucking in love that she looks cross-eyed in the pictures." Angie grabbed her purse out of the chair. "You wanna see them? They were in the newspaper in that shithole town every other week. They did a fucking collage on the front page when he died."

"Please, just go."

Angie dropped her purse. "Does she know you're stupid?"

He held his tongue between his front teeth.

"Oh, of course she does." She almost sounded relieved. "That explains it. She feels sorry for you. Poor little Willy can't read."

He shook his head.

"Let me tell you something, Wilbur. You're not a great catch. You're not handsome. You're not smart. You're not even average. And you're sure as hell not good in the sack."

She had said this so many times before that the words no longer had meaning. "Is there a point to this?"

"I'm trying to keep you from getting hurt. That's the point."

He looked down at the floor. "Don't do this, Angie. Just this one time—don't do it."

"Do what? Tell you the truth? Because you've obviously got your head so far up your ass that you can't see what's going on here." She put her face inches from his. "Don't you know that every time she kisses you, every time she touches you or fucks you, or holds you, she's thinking about him?" She paused as if she expected an answer. "You're just a replacement, Will. You're just there until somebody better comes along. Another doctor. A lawyer. Someone who can read a newspaper without his lips getting tired."

Will felt his throat tighten. "You don't know anything."

"I know people. I know women. I know them a hell of a lot better than you."

"I'm sure you do."

"Damn right I do. And I know you best of all." She paused to survey the damage. Obviously, it wasn't enough. "You're forgetting I was there, baby. Every visiting day, every adoption rally, there you were standing in front of that mirror combing your hair, checking your clothes, primping yourself up so that some mommy and daddy might see you and take you home with them." She started shaking her head. "But they never did, did they? No one ever took you home. No one ever wanted you. And you know why?"

He couldn't breathe in. His lungs started to ache.

"Because there's something about you, Will. Something wrong. Something off. It makes people's skin crawl. It makes them want to get as far away from you as they can."

"Just stop. All right? Stop it."

"Stop what? Pointing out the obvious? What do you see happening with her? You're gonna get married and have babies and live some kind of normal life?" She laughed as if this was the most ludicrous thing she'd ever heard. "You ever consider the fact that you like what we have?"

He tasted blood on the tip of his tongue. He imagined a wall between them. A thick concrete wall.

"There's a reason you wait for me. There's a reason you don't go on dates and you don't go to bars or pay for pussy like every other man in the world."

The wall got higher, stronger.

"You like what we have. You know you can't be with somebody else. Not really be with them. You can't walk out on that ledge. You can't open yourself up to someone like that, because you know at the end of the day they will *always* leave you. And that's what your precious Sara is going to do, baby. She's an adult. She's been married before. She had a real life with somebody else. Someone who was worthy of being loved and knew how to love her back. And she's gonna see real fast that you're not capable of that. And then she's gonna drop you on your ass and be gone."

The taste of blood got stronger in his mouth.

"You're just so fucking desperate for somebody to give you a little attention. You've always been that way. Clingy. Pathetic. Needy."

He couldn't stand her being this close to him. He walked over to the sink and filled a glass with water. "You don't know anything about me."

"Have you told her what happened to you? She's a doctor. She knows what a cigarette burn looks like. She knows what happens when somebody holds two live wires to your skin." Will drank the water in one gulp. "Look at me." He didn't look up, but she kept talking anyway. "You're a project for her. She feels sorry for you. Poor little orphan Will. You're Helen Keller and she's whoever the fuck that bitch is who taught her how to read." She grabbed his chin and made him face her. Will still looked away. "She just wants to cure you. And when she gets tired of trying to fix you, when she realizes that there's no magic pill that'll take away the stupid, she's going to drop you back into the trash where she found you."

Something broke inside of him. His resolve. His strength. His flimsy walls. "And then what?" he yelled. "I'll come crawling back to you?"

"You always do."

"I'd rather be alone. I'd rather rot alone in a hole than be stuck with you."

She turned her back to him. Will put the glass in the sink, used the back of his hand to wipe his mouth. Angie didn't cry much, at least not for real. Every kid Will grew up with had a different survival tactic. Boys used their fists. Girls turned bulimic. Some, like Angie, used sex, and when sex didn't work, they used tears, and then when tears didn't work, they found something else to cut into your heart.

When Angie turned around, she had Will's gun in her mouth.

“No—”

She pulled the trigger. He closed his eyes, held up his hands to block his face from the pieces of brain and skull.

But nothing happened.

Slowly, Will dropped his arms, opened his eyes.

The gun was still in her mouth. Dry fire. The echo of the hammer clicking was like a needle piercing his eardrum. He saw the magazine on the table. The bullet he kept in the chamber was beside it.

Will's voice trembled. “Don't you ever—”

“Does she know about your father, Will? Have you told her what happened?”

His whole body was shaking. “Don't ever do that again.”

She dropped the gun back on the table. Her hands cupped his face. “You love me, Will. You know you love me. You felt it when I pulled that trigger. You know you can't live without me.”

Tears came into his eyes.

“We're not whole people unless we're together.” She stroked his cheek, his eyebrow. “Don't you know that? Don't you remember what you did for me, baby? You were willing to give up your life for me. You'd never do that for her. You'd never cut yourself for anybody but me.”

He pulled away from her grasp. The gun was still on the table. The magazine felt cold in his hand. He shoved it home. He pulled back the slide to chamber a round. He held out the gun to her, muzzle pointing to his chest. “Go ahead and shoot me.” She didn't move. He tried to take her hand. “Shoot me.”

“Stop.” She held up her hands. “Stop it.”

“Shoot me,” he repeated. “Either shoot me or let me go.”

She took the gun and dismantled it, throwing the pieces onto the counter. When her hands were free, she slapped him hard across the face. Then again. Then her fists started to fly. Will grabbed her arms. She twisted around, turning her back to him. Angie hated being held down. He pressed his body into hers, forcing her against the sink. She fought furiously, screaming, scratching with her fingernails.

“Let me go!” She kicked back at him, grinding her heel into his foot. “Stop it!”

Will tightened his grip. She leaned into him. All the anger and frustration of the last two days pooled into one place. He could feel his body responding to her, yearning to release. She managed to turn back around. Her hand went behind his neck, pulling him closer. She put her lips to his. Her mouth opened.

Will stepped back. She moved to put her arms around him again but he took another step away. He was breathing too hard to speak. This was their dance. Anger. Fear. Violence. Never compassion. Never kindness.

He took Betty's leash off the hook. The dog pranced at his feet. Will's hands were shaking so badly he could barely clip the leash to her collar. He took his keys off the hook and tucked his wallet into his back pocket. “I don't want you here when I get back.”

“You can't leave me.”

He reassembled the gun and clipped the paddle holster to his jeans.

“I need you.”

He turned around to face Angie. Her hair was wild. She looked desperate, ready to do anything. He was so tired of this. So tired. “Don't you understand? I

don't want to be needed. I want to be wanted."

She didn't have a good answer to that, so she went with a threat. "I swear I'll kill myself if you walk out that door."

Will left the room.

She followed him down the hallway. "I'll take pills. I'll slit my wrists. That's one of your favorites, isn't it? I'll slit my wrists, and you'll come home and find me. How's that gonna make you feel, Wilbur? How're you gonna feel if you come home from fucking your precious little doctor and I'm dead in the bathroom?"

He picked up Betty from the floor. "Annie Sullivan."

"What?"

"That's the woman who taught Helen Keller."

Will went into the garage and closed the door behind him. The last thing he saw was Angie standing in the hallway, fists clenched in front of her. He got into his car. He waited for the garage door to open. He backed the car into the driveway and waited for the door to close.

Betty settled down into the seat beside him as he drove away. He cracked the window so she could enjoy the night air. Will didn't think about where he was going until he pulled into the parking lot in front of Sara's building. He grabbed the dog and carried her to the front entrance. Sara was on the top floor. He pressed the buzzer. He didn't have to say anything. There was a responding buzz, and the lock clicked open.

Betty squirmed as they got into the elevator. He put her down at his feet. When they reached the top floor, she ran out into the hall. Sara's door was open. She was standing in the middle of the room. Her hair was loose and down around her shoulders. She was wearing jeans and a thin white T-shirt that didn't do much to conceal what was underneath.

Will closed the door. There were so many things he wanted to tell her, but when he finally managed to speak, none of it came out. "Why didn't you tell me you saw Angie?"

She didn't answer. She just stood there looking at him. Will couldn't stop himself from looking back. Her shirt was tight. He could see the swell of her breasts, her nipples pressing into the thin material.

He said, "I'm sorry." His voice broke. He would never forgive himself for bringing Angie into Sara's life. It was the most awful thing he had ever done to anyone. "What she said to you. I never wanted ..."

Sara walked toward him.

"I'm so sorry."

She took his hand and turned it so that the palm was facing up. Her fingers moved nimbly over the buttons on his sleeve.

Will wanted to pull away. He needed to pull away. But he couldn't move. He couldn't make his muscles work. He couldn't stop her hands or her fingers or her mouth.

She pressed her lips to his bare wrist. It was the gentlest kiss he had ever known. Her tongue flicked lightly along the skin, tracing the scar up his arm. Will felt like a current was going through his body, so that by the time she kissed his mouth, he was already on fire. Her body curved into his. The kiss deepened. Her hand wrapped around the back of his head, nails scraping

through his hair. Will was dizzy. He was in free fall. He couldn't stop touching her—her narrow hips, the curve at the small of her back, her perfect breasts.

His breath caught when her hand slipped inside his shirt. Her fingers brushed over his chest, down his belly. She didn't flinch. She didn't falter. Instead, she put her forehead to his, looked him in the eye, and told him, "Breathe."

Will let out a breath he felt like he'd been holding his entire life.



MONDAY

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Sara woke to hear the shower running. She turned over in bed. Her hand traced along the indentation left in the pillow. The sheets were twisted around her body. Her hair was a mess. She could still smell Will in the room, taste him in her mouth, remember what his arms felt like when they'd wrapped around her.

She could not recall the last time good reasons had made her not want to get out of bed in the morning. Obviously, it had happened when Jeffrey was alive, but for the first time in four and a half years, Jeffrey was the last thing on Sara's mind. She wasn't making comparisons. She wasn't weighing differences. Her worst fear had always been that her husband's ghost would follow her into the bedroom. But that hadn't been the case. There was only Will, and the absolute joy she felt when she was with him.

Sara had a vague recollection that her clothes were somewhere between the kitchen and the dining room. She pulled a black silk robe out of the closet and made her way down the hall. The dogs gave her a lazy look from the couch as she walked into the living room. Betty was sleeping on a pillow. Billy and Bob were piled into a crescent shape around her. Will had to be at work in an hour or Sara would've joined him in the shower. Yesterday, she had told the hospital staff that she didn't need time off after her ordeal, but this morning, she was glad they had insisted. She needed to process what had happened. And she wanted to be home when Will got off work.

Her clothes were neatly folded on the counter. Sara smiled, thinking she'd at last found a good use for her dining room table. She turned on the coffeemaker. There was a yellow Post-it note on the wall above the dog bowls. Will had drawn a smiley face in the center. She saw another note with the same graphic above the leashes. There was something to be said for a man who fed and walked the dogs while Sara was sleeping. She stared at the blue ink, the arc of a smile and two dots for eyes.

Sara had never pursued a man before. She had always been on the receiving end of the wooing. But she'd realized last night that nothing would ever happen if she didn't make the first move. And she had wanted something to happen. She had wanted Will more than anything she'd wanted in a long while.

He'd been tentative at first. He was obviously self-conscious about his body, which was laughable considering how beautiful it was. His legs were strong and lean. His shoulders were roped with muscle. His abs would be perfectly at home on an underwear billboard in the middle of Times Square. It wasn't just that, though. His hands knew exactly where to touch her. His mouth felt wonderful. His tongue felt wonderful. Everything about him was wonderful. Being with him felt like a key sliding into a lock. Sara had never dreamed that she would ever again be so open with another man.

If there was any comparison to be made, it was between Sara and her old self. Something was altered inside of her, and not just her moral compass. She felt different with Will. She didn't have to immediately know everything about this

man she'd shared her bed with. She didn't feel the need to demand answers about the obvious abuse he had suffered. For the first time in her life, Sara felt patient. The girl who had gotten kicked out of Sunday school for arguing with the teacher and driven her parents, her sister, and eventually her husband crazy with her unyielding desire to understand every last detail about everything on earth was finally learning how to relax.

Maybe seeing the Polaroid of Will's sutured mouth had taught her a lesson about prying. Or maybe it was just the nature of life that you learned from past mistakes. For now, Sara was content to just be with Will. The rest would come in time. Or it wouldn't. Either way, she felt remarkably content.

There was an insistent knock at the door, probably Abel Conford from across the hall. The lawyer had anointed himself czar of the parking lot. Every board meeting Sara attended started with Abel complaining about visitors parking in the wrong spaces.

Sara pulled her robe tight as she opened the door. Instead of her neighbor, she found Faith Mitchell.

"I'm sorry to barge in on you." Faith pushed her way into the apartment. She was wearing a bulky navy blue jacket with the hood pulled over her head. Dark sunglasses obscured half her face. Her jeans and Chuck Taylors completed the ensemble. She looked like a PTA mom's idea of a cat burglar.

Sara could only ask, "How did you get in?"

"I told your neighbor I was a cop and he let me in."

"Great," Sara mumbled, wondering how long it would take for everyone in the building to think she was being arrested. "What's going on?"

Faith took off the sunglasses. There were five tiny bruises circling her face. "I need you to call Will for me." She went to the window and looked down at the parking lot. "I thought about this all night. I can't do it alone. I don't think I'm capable." She shielded her eyes with her hand, though the sun had yet to come up. "They don't know I'm here. Ginger fell asleep. Taylor left last night. I sneaked out. Through the back yard. I took Roz Levy's car. I know they've tapped my phones. They're watching me. They can't know that I'm doing this. They can't know that I talked to anybody."

She was a poster child for hypoglycemia. Sara suggested, "Why don't you sit down?"

Faith kept her perch over the parking lot. "I sent my children away. They're with my brother. He's never even changed a diaper. This is too much responsibility for Jeremy."

"Okay. Let's talk about it. Come over here and sit down with me."

"I have to get her back, Sara. I don't care what it takes. What I have to do."

Her mother. Will had told Sara about his trip to Coastal State Prison, his conversation with Roger Ling. "Faith, sit down."

"I can't sit or I'll never get up again. I need Will. Can you please just call him?"

"I'll get him for you. I promise, but you have to sit down." Sara guided her over to the stool by the kitchen counter. "Did you eat breakfast?"

She shook her head. "My stomach's too upset."

"How's your blood sugar?"

She stopped shaking her head. Her guilty expression was answer enough.

Sara made her voice firm. "Faith, I'm not going to do anything until we get your numbers in order. Do you understand me?"

Faith didn't argue, perhaps because part of her knew that she needed help. She felt around in her jacket pockets and pulled out a handful of hard candy that she dropped on the counter. Next came a large gun, then her wallet, a set of keys with a gold cursive *L* on the chain, and finally, her blood-testing kit.

Sara scrolled through the tester's memory, checking the stats. Faith had obviously been playing candy roulette for the last two days. It was a common trick among diabetics, using candy to fight the lows, gritting out the highs. It was a good way to get through a difficult period, but it was an even better way to end up in a coma. "I should take you to the hospital right now." Sara gripped the monitor in her hand. "Do you have your insulin?"

Faith dug into her pockets again and put four disposable insulin pens on the counter. She started babbling. "I got them from the pharmacy this morning. I didn't know how much to take. They showed me, but I've never used them before and they're so expensive I didn't want to mess up. My ketones are okay. I used a strip last night and this morning. I should probably get a pump."

"An insulin pump wouldn't be a bad idea." Sara slid a testing strip into the monitor. "Did you eat supper last night?"

"Sort of."

"I'll take that as a no," Sara mumbled. "What about snacks? Anything?"

Faith leaned her head in her hand. "I can't think straight with Jeremy and Emma gone. Zeke called this morning. He says they're settled in but I can tell he's annoyed. He's never been good around kids."

Sara took Faith's finger and lined up the lancet. "We are going to have a long talk when this is over about your noncompliance. I know that saying right now is stressful for you is an incredible understatement, but your diabetes isn't something you can magically put on hold. Your vision, your circulation, your motor skills ..." Sara didn't finish the sentence. She'd lectured so many diabetics about this same issue that she felt like she was reading from a script. "You have to take care of yourself or you're going to end up blind or in a wheelchair or worse."

Faith said, "You look different."

Sara patted down her hair, which was sticking straight up in the back.

"You're practically glowing. Are you pregnant?"

Sara laughed, surprised by the question. An ectopic pregnancy in her twenties had led to a partial hysterectomy. Will wasn't that much of a miracle worker. "You're one-thirty?"

"One thirty-five."

Sara dialed out the correct dosage on the pen. "You're going to inject this, then I'm going to cook breakfast for you, and you're not doing anything else until you've eaten every bite."

"That stove cost more than my house." Faith leaned over the counter for a better look. Sara pushed her back down. "How much money do you make?"

She took Faith's hand and wrapped her fingers around the insulin pen. "You do this, and I'll go get Will."

"You can call him from here. I know what you're going to say."

Sara didn't stop to explain herself, especially since Faith was obviously having

trouble processing information. She grabbed her clothes off the counter and went into the bedroom. Will was standing in front of the dresser putting on his shirt. She saw his broad chest reflected in the mirror, the dark stain of electrical burns traveling down the flat of his belly and disappearing into his jeans. Sara had put her mouth on every inch of him last night, but standing here in the light of day, she felt awkward around him.

He looked at her reflection. Sara pulled her robe tighter around her waist. He had made the bed. The pillows were stacked neatly against the headboard. This wasn't how she'd envisioned her morning.

He asked, "What's wrong?"

She put her folded clothes on the bed. "Faith is here."

"Here?" He turned around. He sounded almost panicked. "Why? How did she know?"

"She doesn't know. She asked me to call you. She's terrified her phone's being tapped."

"Does she know about her mother?"

"I don't think so." Sara put her hand to her chest, cinching the robe again, feeling every bit of her nakedness underneath. "She said that people are watching her. She's acting paranoid. Her blood sugar is off the charts. She's taking her insulin now. She should settle once we get some food into her."

"Do I need to get breakfast?"

"I can make her something."

"I can—" He stopped, looking extremely uncomfortable. "Maybe I should do that. For Faith, I mean. You could cook me something after."

So much for the honeymoon period. At least she knew now why Bob had smelled like scrambled eggs the other night. "I'll stay in here to give you some privacy."

"Could you ...?" He hesitated. "It might be better if you were there. I'm going to have to tell her about her mother."

"I thought Amanda said to wait."

"Amanda says a lot of things I don't agree with." He indicated that she should leave the room ahead of him. Sara walked down the hall. She could feel Will close behind her. Despite what had happened the night before—some of it in this very hallway—he felt like a stranger to her. Sara gripped her robe tighter, wishing she had stopped to change into some real clothes.

Faith was still sitting at the kitchen bar. Some of her nervous energy had dissipated. She saw Will and said, "Oh."

He looked embarrassed. Sara felt the same. Maybe that explained his standoffish mood. It seemed wrong for them to be together given what had happened to Evelyn Mitchell.

Still, Faith said, "It's all right. I'm happy for you."

Will didn't acknowledge the comment. "Dr. Linton says you need to eat."

"I need to talk to you first."

Will looked at Sara. She shook her head.

"You need breakfast first." Will opened the dishwasher and took out the frying pan. He found the eggs and bread in their proper place. Faith watched him make breakfast. She didn't speak. Sara didn't know if she was crashing or if she just didn't know what to say. Probably a little of both. For her part, Sara had never

felt so uncomfortable in her own home. She watched Will break the eggs and butter the toast. His jaw was rigid. He didn't look up at her. She might as well have stayed in the bedroom.

Will took three plates out of the cabinet and loaded them up with food. Sara and Faith sat at the bar. Though there was a third chair, Will stood, leaning against the counter. Sara picked at her food. Faith ate half her eggs and a slice of toast. Will cleaned his plate, then finished Faith's toast as well as Sara's, before scraping the rest into the trash and stacking the plates in the sink. He rinsed the bowl that had held the eggs, ran some water in the frying pan, then washed his hands.

Finally, he said, "Faith, I have to tell you something."

She shook her head. She must've known what was coming.

He stood with his back against the counter. He didn't lean over and take her hands. He didn't come around and sit beside her. He just told her the news straight out. "Last night, I was at Coastal State Prison. I talked to a man who's pretty high up in the drug trade. Roger Ling." He kept his eyes focused on hers. "There's no other way to say this. He told me that your mother was killed. Shot in the head."

She didn't respond at first. She sat there with her elbows on the counter, hands hanging down, mouth open. Eventually, she said, "No, she's not."

"Faith—"

"Did you find the body?"

"No, but—"

"When was this? When did he tell you?"

"Late, around nine o'clock."

"It's not true."

"Faith, it's true. This guy knows what he's talking about. Amanda says—"

"I don't care what Amanda says." She dug around in her pockets again.

"Mandy doesn't know what she's talking about. Whoever this guy is who you talked to was lying."

Will glanced at Sara.

"Look," Faith said. She had an iPhone in her hands. "Do you see this? It's Jeremy's Facebook page. They've been sending messages."

Will pushed away from the counter. "What?"

"I met one of them last night. At the grocery store. He did this." She indicated the bruises on her face. "I told him I had to have proof of life. He emailed me through Jeremy's Facebook account this morning."

"What?" Will repeated. The color had drained from his face. "You met him alone? Why didn't you call me? He could've—"

"Look at this." She showed him the phone. Sara couldn't see the image, but she heard the sound.

A woman's voice said, "It's Monday morning. Five thirty-eight." She paused. There was background noise. "Faith, listen to me. Don't do anything they say. Don't trust them. Just walk away from this. You and your brother and the kids are my family. My only family ..." Suddenly, the voice grew stronger. "Faith, this is important. I need you to remember our time together before Jeremy—"

Faith said, "It stops right there."

Will asked, "What's she talking about? The time before Jeremy?"

"When I was pregnant." Her cheeks colored, though almost twenty years had passed. "Mom stayed with me. She was ..." Faith shook her head. "I wouldn't have made it through without her. She just kept telling me to be strong, that it would be over eventually and then everything would be all right."

Sara put her hand on Faith's shoulder. She could not imagine the pain that the other woman was going through.

Will stared at the iPhone. "What's on the television set behind her?"

"*Good Day Atlanta*. I checked with the station. This is the weather segment they aired half an hour ago. You can see the time over the station logo. I got the file two minutes later."

He handed Sara the phone, but still would not look her in the eye.

Curiosity had always been her weakness. Sara's reading glasses were on the counter. She slipped them on so she could see the small details. The screen showed Evelyn Mitchell sitting beside a large plasma-screen TV. The sound was off, but Sara saw the weather woman pointing to the five-day forecast. Evelyn was looking off-camera, probably at the man filming her. Her face was a bloody mess. She moved stiffly, as if in a great deal of pain. Her words slurred as she began, "It's Monday morning."

Sara let the video play out, then put the phone down.

Faith was watching Sara closely. "How does she look?"

Sara took off her glasses. She could hardly render a medical opinion based on a grainy video, but it was obvious to anyone that Evelyn Mitchell had been very badly beaten. Still, she said, "She looks like she's holding up."

"That's what I thought." Faith turned to Will. "I told them I'd meet them at noon, but the email says twelve-thirty. Mom's house."

"Your mother's house?" he repeated. "It's still an active crime scene."

"Maybe it's been released. APD isn't telling me anything. Let me find the email." Faith moved her thumbs across the screen again and handed the phone to Will. "Oh," she said, reaching for the device. "I forgot—"

"I've got it." Will took Sara's glasses off the counter and slipped them on. He stared at the phone for a few seconds. Sara couldn't tell if he'd read the email or was just making a lucky guess when he said, "They want the money."

Faith took the phone away from him. "There is no money."

Will just stared at her.

"It's not true," Faith said. "It was never true. You couldn't prove anything. She wasn't dirty. Boyd and the rest of them were on the take, but Mom never took anything."

"Faith," Will said. "Your mother had a bank account."

"So what? Everyone has a bank account."

"An out-of-state bank account. It's in your father's name. She still has it. There's been about sixty grand in and out of it as far as I can tell. There might be other accounts in other states, other names. I don't know."

Faith shook her head. "No. You're lying."

"Why would I lie about that?"

"Because you can't admit that you were wrong about her. She wasn't dirty." Tears filled her eyes. She had the look of someone who knew the truth but could not accept it. "She wasn't."

There was another knock at the door. Sara guessed that Abel Conford had

finally noticed the extra cars in the parking lot. Wrong again.

“Good morning, Dr. Linton.” Amanda Wagner did not look pleased to be standing in the hallway. Her eyes were red. The makeup had been wiped off her nose. Her skin was darker where foundation and blush covered her cheeks.

Sara opened the door wider. She tightened her robe again, wondering where the nervous tic had come from. Perhaps it was because she was completely naked underneath and the black silk was as thin as crepe paper. She hadn’t planned on hosting a party this morning.

Faith seemed incensed to see Amanda. “What are you doing here?”

“Roz Levy called. She said you stole her car.”

“I left a note.”

“Which she strangely did not interpret as the proper way to ask for permission. Fortunately, I was able to talk her out of calling the police.” She smiled at Will. “Good morning, Dr. Trent.”

Will feigned a sudden fascination with the tiles on Sara’s kitchen floor.

“Wait a minute,” Faith said. “How did you know where I was?”

“Roz LoJacked the car. I called in a few favors at dispatch.”

“LoJack? It’s a nine-hundred-year-old Corvair. It’s worth five dollars.”

Amanda took off her coat and handed it to Sara. “I’m sorry to intrude on your morning, Dr. Linton. I love what you’ve done to your hair.”

Sara forced a smile onto her face as she hung the coat in the closet. “Would you like some coffee?”

“Yes, thank you.” She turned to Will and Faith. “Should I be hurt that I wasn’t invited to this party?”

No one seemed up to answering her. Sara took three mugs down from the cabinet and poured coffee into each of them. She heard Evelyn Mitchell’s voice on the iPhone as Faith played the video for their new guest.

Amanda asked her to play it again, then a third time, before asking, “When did this come in?”

“A little over half an hour ago.”

“Read me the message that came with it.”

Faith read, “ ‘Twelve-thirty at 339 Little John. Bring the cash in a black duffel bag. Do not alert anyone. We are watching you. If you deviate from these instructions, she will be dead and so will you and your family. Remember what I said.’ ”

“Roger Ling.” Amanda’s voice was one of restrained fury. “I knew that bastard was lying. You can’t trust a goddamn word any of them say.” She seemed to realize the greater meaning of her words. Her mouth opened in surprise. “She’s alive.” She laughed. “Oh, God, I knew the old girl wouldn’t give up without a fight.” She put her hand to her chest. “How could I think for a minute that ...” She shook her head. The smile on her face was so wide that she finally covered it with her hand.

Will asked the more important question. “Why would they want to meet at your mother’s house? It’s not secure. They won’t have the advantage. It doesn’t make sense.”

Faith answered, “It’s familiar. It’s easy to keep an eye on.”

Will said, “But there’s no way that the crime scene’s been released. It’ll take days to process everything.”

Amanda supplied, "The kidnappers must know something we don't."

"It could be a test," Will countered. "If we clear out the forensic team, it'll be obvious that Faith called the police. Or us." He told Faith, "You pull up to the house and you're out in the open. You go inside and you're walking right into their hands. What's to stop them from shooting you and taking the money? Especially if we can't put in a tactical team to secure the area."

"We can make do," Amanda insisted. "There are only three routes in and out of that neighborhood. They make a move in either direction and we'll have pistols at the ready."

Will ignored the bravado. He opened the drawer by the refrigerator and took out a pen and pad of paper. He held the pen awkwardly in his left hand, resting the barrel between his middle and fourth finger. Sara watched as he covered the page with a large T, then drew two irregularly shaped squares—one on the arm of the T, one at the base. His spatial recollection was better than Sara would have guessed, but then, he'd probably been to Faith's house several times.

He explained, "Faith's house is on the corner here. Evelyn is here on Little John." He traced an L-shaped line between the two houses. "We've got all this open space. They could block the intersection here and take her. They could park a van at the same spot and shoot her from a distance. She could pull into the driveway here, and up comes their black van. Two in the head, just like Castillo at the warehouse, or they could grab her and be on the interstate or Peachtree Road within five minutes. Or they could make it easy and set up here —" He drew an oblong square beside Evelyn's house. "Roz Levy's carport. She's got a knee wall here where they could set up with a rifle. The bathroom window to Evelyn's house faces Mrs. Levy's. It's down an incline. You can see straight through to the kitchen door from Mrs. Levy's without anyone knowing. Faith comes in the door with the bag of cash and they drop her."

Amanda took the pen and turned the base of the T into a circle. "Little John loops around. The whole neighborhood folds back on itself." She drew more arcs. "This is Nottingham. Friar Tuck. Robin Hood. Beverly. Lionel." She drew large X's at the end points. "Beverly dumps out onto Peachtree here, where every car in the world eventually passes; the other end throws you back into the infinite loop of Ansley Park. Lionel does the same. They're bottlenecks. Most of the houses along these routes have on-street parking. We could have ten cars at each point and no one would notice."

Will said, "I'm not worried about their exit routes. I'm worried about Faith going into that house alone. If they really are watching the place, they'll know the minute someone shows up who shouldn't be there. They've had almost three full days to get the lay of the neighborhood, possibly more. Even if the CSU guys leave, they'll be counting the number who go in and the number who go out."

Amanda turned over the paper. She drew a rough diagram of a house, pointing out the rooms. "Faith comes in through the kitchen. The foyer is here, looking into the living room. Here's the bookcase on the left—my left. Takes up the entire wall. Sofa backs up to here. The wingback chair is here on the right. A couple of other chairs are here and here. Stereo console here. Sliding glass doors opposite the foyer." She tapped the pen to what must've been the master bedroom. "They'll keep Ev in here until Faith comes with the money, then they'll bring her into the living room. It's the obvious area for the exchange."

"Nothing is obvious here." He grabbed the pen. "We can't cover the front windows because we don't know who's watching the house. We can't cover the back because the yard is wide open to the neighbors' and they'll see movement at any window. We still don't know how many kids are left on this team. There could be one, there could be a hundred." He threw down the pen. His tone was firm. "I don't like it, Faith. You can't go in there. Not on their terms. We'll find another way to do this. We'll suggest another location that we can secure ahead of time so that we can make sure you're safe."

Amanda's tone betrayed her irritation. "Don't be so fatalistic, Will. We've got six hours. All of us know the layout of the house, so that's our advantage as well as theirs. I know every old broad in that neighborhood. It's a residential street. We've got joggers, delivery-men, cable trucks, meter readers, postal carriers, and afternoon strollers we can tap into. I can dribble in four teams over the next few hours and no one will be the wiser. We're not a bunch of Keystone Kops. We can figure out a way to do this."

"I'll do it," Will offered, and Sara felt her heart jump into her throat.

"You can hardly pass for Faith."

"We'll send them an email to let them know I'm going to make the exchange. Roger Ling knows what I look like. Even if he's not involved in this, he's obviously enjoying the show. He knows who these guys are. He can tell them to trust me."

Sara felt a wave of relief to see Amanda start shaking her head even before he'd finished talking.

He insisted, "It's safer this way. Safer for Faith."

As usual, Amanda didn't hold back. "That's one of the most idiotic things I've ever heard come from your mouth. Think about what we've seen over the last couple of days. This is amateur hour. Julia Ling practically laid it out for us. We're dealing with a bunch of young, stupid boys who think they know how to play cops and robbers. We'll either have them on the ground or in it before they know what hit them."

Will wasn't swayed. "They may be young, but they're fearless. They've killed a lot of people. They've taken a lot of stupid risks."

"None more stupid than sending you in instead of Faith. *That's* the way to get people killed." Amanda decided, "We'll do it my way. We'll figure out how to strategically place our people. We'll have eyes on Faith at all times. We'll wait until the kidnappers show up with Evelyn. Faith will do the swap, and then we'll nab them when they try to make their escape."

Will wouldn't give in. He was adamant. "She can't do this. She can't go in there alone. Either let me do it or we'll find another way."

Faith said, "If I'm not alone, then my mother is dead."

Will looked down at the floor. He obviously thought that there was still the real possibility that Evelyn Mitchell was dead. Sara found herself silently agreeing with him. This didn't sound like a plan to get Evelyn back. It sounded like a plan to get Faith killed. Amanda was so hellbent on saving her friend that she couldn't see the collateral damage.

Sara had forgotten about the coffee. She kept one for herself, then passed the other mugs to Amanda, then Will.

"Thank you." Will awkwardly took his. It was as if he was making sure that

their hands didn't touch.

Faith said, "He doesn't drink coffee. I'll take it."

Sara felt her cheeks start to burn. "You probably shouldn't be drinking caffeine right now."

Will cleared his throat. "That's okay. I like it sometimes." He took a sip from the mug. He practically grimaced as he swallowed.

Sara couldn't take much more of this. The only way she could be more out of place would be if she pulled out an accordion and started singing polka tunes. "I should give y'all some privacy."

Amanda stopped her. "If you don't mind, Dr. Linton, I'd like a fresh ear on this."

They were all looking at her. Impossibly, Sara felt even more naked than before. She looked at Will for help, but his blank expression was probably the same one he gave to the woman at the bank or the guy who picked up his recyclables.

There was nothing to be done about it. She sat down beside Faith.

Amanda took the other seat. "All right, let's go over what we know so we're all on the same page. Will, run it down for us."

He put down the coffee mug and started talking. He told Faith about everything that had happened since Evelyn had been taken, detailing the crime scene, their visit with Boyd Spivey at the D&C and his silent ex-colleagues at Valdosta State Prison. Faith's lips parted in surprise when he told her about Roz Levy's photographs of Evelyn's gentleman friend. Still, she kept silent as he detailed Sara's ordeal at the hospital and the shootout at Julia Ling's warehouse. Sara felt that familiar tightness in her chest when he got to this last part. The cut on his ear. A bullet had whizzed by, less than an inch from his skull.

Will said, "Ricardo Ortiz and Hironobu Kwon knew each other from school. They both went to Westminster. They were most likely working in Ling-Ling's cabinet shop together. They got it into their heads to start their own business. They obviously pulled together a crew from the other guys working in the shop. Ricardo went to Sweden and picked up some heroin for them to sell. According to Roger Ling, the boys were all bragging about it. Benny Choo, strongarm for the Yellow Rebels, picked up Ricardo and basically beat the crap out of him. He was about to pull the plug, but Ricardo, or maybe Hironobu, told him where they could get some serious money."

Faith had been quietly taking all this in, but now she mumbled, "Mom."

"Right," Will confirmed. "Chuck Finn and Hironobu Kwon were in the same rehab facility for at least a month. Chuck must've told Hironobu about the money. Ricardo was about to die, so Hironobu says, 'I know where I can get almost a million in cash.' Benny Choo takes him up on the offer."

Amanda picked up the story. "That's what they were looking for at Evelyn's. They thought she had money at the house. When she didn't give it up, they took her."

Sara thought it was convenient that Amanda had skipped over the fact that Hector Ortiz, the cousin of one of the most powerful drug lords in Atlanta, was dead in Evelyn's trunk. She should've kept her mouth shut, but this was her house, they had barged in without notice, and Sara was tired of being polite. "That doesn't explain why Hector Ortiz was there."

Amanda raised one eyebrow. "No, it doesn't, does it?"

Sara didn't work for this woman. She wasn't going to walk on eggshells. "You're not going to answer the question?"

There was a crocodile smile on Amanda's lips. "The more important issue here is that they did all of this because they want money. We can negotiate with people who want money."

Will said, "It's not about money."

"We don't have time for your woman's intuition," Amanda snapped.

His voice sounded tired, but he didn't back down. "They're trying to get Faith trapped in that house for a reason. If we go in without knowing that reason, then it's not going to end well. Not for any of us." What he said sounded perfectly reasonable, but Sara could tell Amanda wasn't buying it. Still, he kept trying. "Look, if it was just about money, they would've made a ransom demand the first day. They wouldn't be doing this back-and-forth through Facebook. They wouldn't risk meeting Faith face-to-face in the grocery store. It would be a simple transaction. Make the call. Pick up the money. Leave the hostage somewhere, and you're home free."

Again, a reasonable assumption. Again, Amanda ignored it.

She said, "There is no secret endgame here. They want cash. We'll give them cash. We'll shove it so far down their throats they'll be shitting paper all the way to prison."

"He's right." Faith had been staring blankly ahead for most of this exchange, but with her hypoglycemia finally leveled out, she was back to thinking like a detective. "What about the bank account?"

Amanda stood up to get more coffee. "The account doesn't matter."

Will seemed ready to disagree, but for his own reasons, he kept silent.

Amanda told Faith, "Your father was a gambler."

Faith shook her head. "That's not true."

"He played poker every weekend."

"For quarters." She kept shaking her head. "Dad was an insurance salesman. He hated risk."

"He wasn't risking anything. He was very careful." Amanda went back around the kitchen island and sat down by Faith. "How many times did he and Kenny go to Vegas when you were little?"

Faith was still unconvinced. "That was for work conventions."

"Bill was methodical about it. He was methodical about everything. You know that. He knew how to bluff and he knew when to walk away. Kenny wasn't as smart, but that's a story for another time." She looked at Will. "Bill didn't pay taxes on the money. That's why the bank account was a secret."

Sara could see her own confusion reflected in Will's face. Past a certain amount, you couldn't just walk out of a Vegas casino, or any legal casino in America, for that matter, without paying taxes.

Faith didn't pick up on this. "I can't see Dad taking that kind of risk. He hated gambling. He was all over Kenny about it."

"Because Kenny was an idiot with his money," Amanda countered. The bitter edge to her voice reminded Sara that the two had dated for many years. "For Bill, it was just fun, blowing off steam, and sometimes he won a lot of money, and sometimes he lost a little, but he always knew when to walk away. It wasn't

an addiction for him. It was sport.”

Will finally spoke up. “Why didn’t Evelyn tell me that when I was investigating her?”

Amanda smiled. “She didn’t tell you a hell of a lot about anything when you were investigating her.”

“No,” he agreed. “But she could’ve easily gotten rid of the suspicion if—”

“There was no suspicion,” Amanda interrupted. She directed her words toward Faith. “Your mother was the one who turned in the team. That’s why they called her Almeja. She was a snitch.”

“What?” Faith’s confusion was almost palpable. She looked at Will as if he had the answers. “Why didn’t she tell me?”

Amanda said, “Because she wanted to protect you. The less you knew, the safer you were.”

Will said, “Then why are you telling her now?”

Amanda was obviously annoyed. “Because you won’t get off that stupid account, even though I’ve told you time and again that it doesn’t matter.”

Will had put his coffee mug on the counter. He slowly turned the handle so that it was parallel to the backplash.

Faith asked what Sara was thinking. “How did she find out they were taking money?”

Amanda shrugged. “Does it matter?”

“Yes,” Will answered. He obviously wanted to hear the story so that he could find the holes.

Amanda took a deep breath before starting, “There was a bust on the southside, one of the projects in East Point. Evelyn led the raid team into the apartment. Early morning. The bad guys were still asleep, hungover from the night before, with a pile of money sitting on the coffee table and enough coke to take down an elephant.” Amanda started to smile, clearly enjoying the story. “They rounded them up and perp walked them into the street. They had their hands behind their backs, sitting on their knees, staring at the doors on the squad cars to remind them who was in charge. In comes the media, which Boyd could never resist. He lines up the team for photos, with the bad guys in the background. Charlie’s Angels territory. Your mother always hated that part. She usually left—went back to the office to do the paperwork—when the press came. This time, the street was blocked, so she went back into the apartment and looked around for herself.” Amanda pursed her lips. “First thing she notices is that the cash pile doesn’t look like it did before. She said it was stacked into a pyramid when they busted down the door. You know your mom was always the first one in.” Faith nodded. “She said she noticed the pyramid right off, because Zeke used to—”

“Pyramid everything.” Faith explained, “When he was ten or eleven, he started stacking stuff—books, Legos, Matchbox cars—into pyramids.”

“Your mother thought he was autistic. Maybe she was right.” Amanda continued, “Anyway, she noticed the pile, is the point here. That the pyramid was a square when she went back into the apartment. She started watching the team more closely after that, keeping her ear to the ground, tracking which cases made it and which fell apart because evidence was lost or witnesses went missing. And then when she was sure, she came to me.”

Will said, "You told me the tip was anonymous."

"Evelyn had to be investigated just like everyone else. These weren't choirboys we were dealing with. Boyd and the crew were raking in tons of cash. They were also being paid to look the other way. You don't cut into that kind of business without risking your life. Ev had to be protected. So we decided that we'd call it an anonymous tip and put her through the ringer just like everyone else."

Faith said, "But they must've suspected the tip came from Mom. She was the only one who wasn't in on it."

"There's a big leap between suspecting and knowing." Her tone became strained. "And Boyd Spivey protected her. He let it be known that she was off limits. He stood up for her at every turn. I suppose that's why they took him out. They could take the GBI and the APD on their tails, but someone with Boyd's juice could get to them in ways we can't."

Faith was quiet, probably thinking about the dead man who had protected her mother. For her part, Sara was thinking about the time and money that went into putting a hit on a man who lived on death row. The whole thing had been carefully planned and executed by people who knew Evelyn Mitchell's weak points: Boyd Spivey, her muscle; Faith, her daughter; Amanda, her best friend. This was sounding more and more like a revenge attack and less like a money grab. Sara could tell that Will had made the same connections. But as usual, when he finally spoke, he didn't make mention of the obvious.

Instead, he asked Amanda, "Did you redact the bank account out of my report?"

"We're not the IRS." She shrugged. "No reason to punish someone for doing the right thing."

Sara could tell Will was angry, but he still said nothing. He didn't even seethe. He just tucked his hands into his pockets and leaned his back against the counter. She had never had an argument with him. At this point, she wasn't sure she ever would, but Sara could imagine that it would be a grand exercise in futility.

For her part, Faith seemed oblivious to the holes in Amanda's story. Considering her blood sugar had been spiking and plummeting like a Ping-Pong ball for the last few days, it was surprising she could even sit up straight. That was why Sara was sure she'd heard wrong when Faith finally spoke.

"They left her finger under my pillow."

Amanda didn't blink an eye. "Where is the finger?"

"In my medicine cabinet." Faith put her hand to her mouth. She looked as if she was going to be sick. Sara jumped up and grabbed the trashcan, but Faith waved her away. "I'm all right." She took a few deep breaths. Sara got a glass out of the cabinet and filled it with water.

Faith drank greedily, her throat making gulping sounds.

Sara refilled the glass and put it in front of her. She leaned back against the counter and kept an eye on Faith. Will was leaning a few feet down from her. His hands were still in his pockets. She felt the distance between them like a cold rush of air.

Faith took a sip of water before telling them, "They tried to get Jeremy. I sent him away with my brother. Emma, too. And then I went to the grocery store and the guy cornered me in the bathroom."

Amanda asked, "What did he look like?"

Faith gave them a very detailed description of his height, weight, clothing, grammar. "I think he was Hispanic. He had blue eyes." She looked at Sara. "Is that normal?"

"It's not common, but it's not rare." Sara explained, "Mexico was settled by Spaniards. Some of them married Native Americans. Not all Mexicans have brown skin and dark hair. Some have blond hair and lighter skin. Some have blue or green eyes. It's a recessive gene, but it shows up."

Amanda asked, "But this guy had blue eyes?"

Faith nodded.

"No tattoos?"

"A snake on his neck."

It was Amanda's turn to nod. "We can put that on the wire. At the very least, we can get a list of Hispanic men eighteen to twenty who have blue eyes." She seemed to remember something. "No luck on the search for tattoo parlors. Whoever did Marcellus Estevez's tattoo of the archangel Gabriel is either out of state, off the books, or isn't talking."

"There was something familiar about him," Faith said. "I thought maybe I'd arrested him, but he told me no."

"I'm sure he was telling the truth." Amanda pulled out her BlackBerry and started typing as she talked. "I'll have records look through your reports. I know someone in the APD who can sneak in the back door for your cases before you started working with us."

"I doubt you'll find anything." Faith rubbed her temples. "He's Jeremy's age. Maybe he knows him. Maybe they went to school together. I don't know."

Amanda finished her email. "Did you ask Jeremy?"

Faith nodded her head. "I gave him a rough description last night. He doesn't know anybody who fits the bill. At least no one he can recall."

Will asked, "Is there anything else you can remember?"

Obviously, there was something. Faith looked reticent. "It's something really stupid. Maybe ..." She looked at Sara. "My blood sugar has been crazy. It's making me hallucinate."

Sara asked, "In what way?"

"I just—" She shook her head. "It's stupid. The silverware drawer was wrong." She laughed at herself. "It's really stupid. Never mind."

"Go on," Sara told her. "What was wrong with it?"

"The forks were turned the wrong way. And the spoons. And my pens were in the wrong drawer. I always put them in the same place, and ... And then I went into the living room and the snow globes were all turned toward the wall. They usually face out. I'm really careful with them. They belonged to my father. I dust them every week. Jeremy isn't allowed to touch them. Zeke wouldn't go near them. I just ..." She shook her head. "I don't know. Maybe I did it last night and I don't remember. Maybe I just thought they were turned around. But I remember turning them back around, so ..." She put her head in her hands. "My mind has been off-kilter since all of this happened. I'm not sure what's real and what's not. Maybe I'm just going crazy. Could I be hallucinating?"

Sara told her, "Your numbers are erratic, but they don't point to metabolic derangement. You're not that dehydrated, but you're certainly under a lot of

stress. Do you feel like you have a cold or infection?" Faith shook her head. "I'd expect confusion, which you've shown, and paranoia, which is understandable, but not full-on hallucinations." She felt the need to add, "Turning the snow globes around sounds more like something a kid would do for attention. You're sure your son didn't do it?"

"I haven't asked him. It's embarrassing even to talk about. I'm sure it's nothing."

Amanda was shaking her head. "Jeremy wouldn't do something like that, especially with what's been going on. He wouldn't want to cause you more stress. And he's almost twenty years old. He's too mature for that sort of thing."

"Maybe I just imagined it," Faith said. "Why would these guys turn around all the snow globes?" She seemed to remember something else. "And unscrew the light bulbs."

Amanda sighed. "It doesn't matter, Faith. What matters is that we've got to get a plan together." She checked her watch. "It's almost seven o'clock. We need to put our thinking caps on."

Faith said, "Will's right. They're watching Mom's house. I know they're watching mine. If we bring in the APD—"

"I have no intention of doing something so stupid," Amanda interrupted. "We still don't know if Chuck Finn is involved in this or not." Faith opened her mouth to protest, but Amanda held up her hand to stop her. "I know you think that Chuck was pushed into a life of crime while the others willingly jumped in, but guilty doesn't come in shades. He took the money. He spent it. He confessed to his crimes and he's out on the street somewhere with a very serious habit that costs a great deal of money. You also need to remember that Chuck still has friends on the Atlanta force, and where he doesn't have friends, he might have the money to buy them. I know you don't want to hear this, but there's no getting around that he either gave Hironobu Kwon the tip-off or he's pulling the strings on this new group of young guns."

Faith countered, "That doesn't sound like Chuck."

"Skimming money off busts didn't sound like Chuck, either, but here we are." She told Will, "You mentioned the vantage point from Roz Levy's house. There's no way they could set up there. She'd shoot them the second they set foot in the driveway."

"It's true," Faith agreed. "Mrs. Levy watches the street like a hawk."

Will countered, "Unless someone's getting shot or kidnapped next door."

Amanda ignored the observation. "The point, Will, is that we can exploit the position just as easily as the kidnappers can. Short of shipping you in the world's largest box, we need to figure out how we're going to get you and your rifle into Roz Levy's carport without being seen." She looked at Faith. "Are you sure you weren't followed here?"

Faith shook her head. "I was careful. I wasn't followed."

"Good girl," Amanda told her. She was back in her element, almost giddy with the task at hand. "I need to make some phone calls to find out what's going on at Evelyn's house. Our bad guys wouldn't have suggested a meeting there if they thought the Atlanta Crime Scene Unit was going to be steady at work. We'll see if Charlie can make some inquiries, too. Failing that, I think I've got a few more favors in my pocket with some old gals in Zone Six who would love nothing

more than to show the kids how it's done. Dr. Linton?"

Sara was surprised to hear her name. "Yes?"

"Thank you for your time. I trust you'll keep this little party to yourself?"

"Of course."

Faith stood behind Amanda. "Thank you," she said. "Again."

Sara hugged her. "Be careful."

Will was next. He held out his hand. "Dr. Linton."

Sara looked down, wondering if she was having one of Faith's hallucinations. He was actually shaking her hand goodbye.

He said, "Thank you for your help. I'm sorry we imposed on you this morning."

Faith mumbled something Sara couldn't hear.

Amanda opened the closet. Sara guessed the smile on her face wasn't there because she was happy to see her coat. "I know a lot of Evelyn's neighbors. They're mostly retired and I think that with the exception of that old battle-ax across the street, they'll be okay with us using their places. I'll need to get my hands on some cash. I think I can make that happen, but we'll be tight for time." She slipped on her coat. "Faith, you'll need to go home and wait until you hear from us. I imagine at some point we'll need you to run to a bank or two. Will, go home and change that shirt. The collar's frayed and you're missing a button. And while you're at it, you'd better start building a Trojan horse or come up with a plan to romance Roz Levy. She was ready to have Faith arrested an hour ago. God knows what bee is up her wrinkled old butt this morning."

"Yes, ma'am."

Sara opened the front door for them. Amanda started toward the elevator. Will, ever the gentleman, stepped aside so that Faith could leave first.

Sara shut the door after Faith.

"What—" Will began, but she put her finger to his lips.

"Sweetheart, I know you've got work to do and I know it's going to be dangerous, but whatever you get into today will not be nearly as life-threatening as what'll happen if you ever do to me what you did to me last night and then think you can get off with a handshake the next morning. Okay?"

He swallowed.

"Call me later." She kissed him goodbye, then opened the door so that he could leave.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Will subscribed to a lot of car magazines. Mostly, he bought them for the pictures, but sometimes he felt compelled to read the articles. That's how he knew that Roz Levy's avocado green 1960 Chevrolet Corvair 700 sedan was worth considerably more than Faith's five-dollar appraisal.

The car was a beauty, the sort of classic American carmakers used to be known for. The rear-mounted, air-cooled, horizontally opposed, aluminum flat-six engine had been engineered to directly take on the increasingly more popular compact-sized European models coming onto the market. The design was renowned for its innovative swing-axle rear suspension, which received its own chapter in Ralph Nader's *Unsafe at Any Speed*. The spare tire was mounted in the forward luggage compartment, where the engine was normally located in other cars, nestled right next to a gasoline heater for the passenger area. Though winter was over, the tank was still filled with gas, which Will knew because his face had been pressed against the metal canister while Faith drove him to Mrs. Levy's house. The sloshing of gasoline had been like ocean waves crashing against the shore. Or, a highly volatile accelerant churning less than a rusty millimeter from his face.

The car had been built well before the 2001 National Highway Traffic Safety Administration deadline that required all manufacturers to install a glow-in-the-dark emergency release strap in case someone got trapped in the trunk of the car. Will wasn't sure whether he would be able to reach a handle even if one existed. The trunk was deep but not wide, more like a pelican's mouth. He was folded into a space meant to hold a spare tire and maybe a couple of suitcases—1960s suitcases, not the modern wheelie kinds that people nowadays used to pack their entire houses in for a weekend trip to the mountains.

In short, there existed the very real possibility that he might die in here before Roz Levy remembered that she was supposed to let him out.

There was a thin sliver of light coming through the cracked rubber seal around the hinge. Will lifted up his cell phone to check the time. He'd been in the trunk for almost two hours and had at least another half hour to go. His rifle was jammed between his legs in a way that was no longer pleasant. His paddle holster was turned so that his Glock dug into his side like an insistent finger. The bottle of water Faith had given him had long been recycled back into the plastic bottle. It was approximately six thousand degrees inside the metal tomb. He had lost feeling in his hands and feet. He was beginning to think that this was a very bad idea.

It was the words "Trojan horse" that had gotten him thinking. One call to Roz Levy proved that she wasn't going to make this easy for them. She was still pissed about Faith taking her car. She'd refused to let any of them inside of her house. Unusually, Will was the person who suggested the idiotic thing for him to do. Faith would return the Corvair to the carport. He would hide in the trunk until a few minutes before the appointed time. Mrs. Levy would take out her

trash, releasing the trunk lid along the way. Will would then crawl out and give Faith cover.

The fact that Roz Levy agreed to this alternate plan so easily made him suspect that she wasn't going to play along, but by then another hour had passed and they didn't really have a choice in the matter.

There were other Trojan horses, too—most of them more clever than Will's. The good thing about Amanda's old gals was that they were old and they were women, which went against type in this particular situation. Whoever was watching the neighborhood would be expecting testosterone-pumped young guns with trigger fingers and short haircuts. Amanda had sent in six of her friends to various houses around the block. They'd had bakeware and cake stands in their hands, their purses dangling from their arms. Some of them carried Bibles. They would look like visitors to anyone who was paying attention.

The outside perimeter was covered by a cable truck, a mobile pet groomer's van, and a bright yellow Prius that no self-respecting cop would ever drive. Between the three vehicles, they could monitor all traffic coming in and out of the two roads that led to the Mitchell section of the neighborhood.

Even with all of this, Will still was not happy with the plan. It was the lesser of two evils, the greater evil being no police presence at all. He didn't like the idea of Faith being so vulnerable, even though she was armed and had proven to anyone who was paying attention that she would not hesitate to shoot somebody. He felt in his gut that Amanda was wrong. This wasn't about money. Maybe on the surface it was. Maybe even the kidnappers themselves thought it was about cold, hard cash. But at the end of the day, their behavior belied that motivation. This was personal. Someone was working out a grudge. Chuck Finn seemed like the most likely culprit. His underlings wanted the cash. Chuck wanted revenge. It was a win-win for everyone but Faith.

And for the idiot trapped in a 1960 Corvair.

Will winced as he tried to shift his position. His back ached. His nose itched. His ass felt like he had been pressing his full weight against a piece of hardened steel for two hours. In retrospect, shoving Will into a trunk sounded more like the kind of idea Amanda would have. Painful. Humiliating. Bound to end badly for Will. He must've had some sort of death wish. Or maybe he just wanted to spend a couple of hours simmering in the heat because it was the only way he'd have time to think about what he'd gotten himself into. And he didn't mean the car.

Will had never smoked a cigarette. He'd never done an illegal drug of any kind. He hated the taste of alcohol. As a kid, he'd seen how addictions could ruin lives, and as a cop, he saw how it could end them. He'd never been tempted to imbibe. He'd never understood how people could be so desperate for the next high that they were willing to trade away their lives and everything that mattered for another hit. They stole. They prostituted themselves. They abandoned or sold their children. They murdered people. They would do anything to avoid getting dopesick, that point at which the body craved the drug so badly that it turned on itself. Muscle cramps. Stabbing pains in the gut. Blinding headaches. Cotton mouth. Heart palpitations. Sweaty palms.

Will's physical discomfort wasn't solely caused by the tight quarters in Mrs.

Levy's Corvair.

He was dopesick for Sara.

To his credit, he realized that his response to her was completely disproportionate to what a normal human being should be feeling right now. He was going to make a fool of himself. More so than he already had. He didn't know how to be around her. At least not when they weren't having sex. And they'd had a lot of sex, so it had taken Sara some time before she finally got the full-on view of Will's astounding stupidity. And what a show he had put on for her. Shaking her hand like a realtor at an open house. He was surprised that she hadn't slapped him. Even Amanda and Faith had been at a loss for words as they'd all waited for the elevator in the hall. His idiocy had actually rendered them speechless.

Will was beginning to wonder if there was something physically wrong with him. Maybe he was diabetic like Faith. She was always yelling at him about his afternoon sticky bun, his second breakfast, his love of cheesy nachos from the downstairs vending machine. He went through his symptoms. He was sweating profusely. His thoughts were racing. He was confused. He was thirsty and he really, really needed to urinate.

Sara hadn't seemed mad at him when she'd told him goodbye. She had called him sweetheart, which he'd only been called once before, and that time was by her, too. She had kissed him. It wasn't a passionate kiss—more like a peck. The sort of thing you saw on 1950s television shows right before the husband put on his hat and went off to work. She had told him to call her later. Did she really want him to call her or had she just been making a point? Will was used to the women in his life making points at his expense. But what defined later? Did that mean later tonight or later tomorrow? Or later in the week?

Will groaned. He was a thirty-four-year-old man with a job and a dog to take care of. He had to get himself back under control. There was no way he was going to call Sara. Not later tonight or even later next week. He was too unsophisticated for her. Too socially awkward. Too desperate to be with her. Will had learned the hard way that the best thing to do when you really wanted something was to put it out of your mind, because you were never going to get it. He had to do that now with Sara. He had to do that before he got himself shot or he ended up getting Faith killed because he was acting like a lovesick schoolgirl.

The worst part was that Angie had been right about everything.

Well, maybe not everything.

Sara didn't color her hair.

His phone vibrated. Will struggled not to castrate himself with his rifle while he pressed the Bluetooth piece into his ear. The trunk was well insulated, but he still kept his voice to a whisper. "Yeah?"

"Will?" That's all he needed—Amanda's voice in his head. "What are you doing?"

"Sweating," he whispered back, wondering if she could've asked a more pointless question. He'd had this idea of springing out of the trunk like a superhero. After all this time, he realized he'd probably do well not to roll out onto the ground like a tongue.

"We're set up at Ida Johnson's." Evelyn's backyard neighbor. Will wasn't sure

how Amanda had sweet-talked the woman into letting a bunch of cops sit in her house. Maybe she'd promised that Faith wouldn't shoot any more drug dealers in her yard again. "I just heard a call on the scanner. There was a drive-by shooting in East Atlanta. Two dead. Ahbidi Mittal and his team just left Evelyn's house so they can process the car. High profile. A woman and her kid. White, blonde, middle class, pretty."

So, now they knew how the kidnappers planned to get Evelyn's house cleared out. Amanda had made some discreet calls earlier and found out that the CSU team had at least another three days on the house. They knew that Evelyn's abductors had some drive-by experience. Obviously, these particular bad guys weren't afraid of killing innocent bystanders, and they knew exactly the right victim profile to make sure every news station in Atlanta halted programming to cover the events live at the scene.

The most troubling part to Will was that this proved they had no problem murdering a mother and her child.

Amanda said, "Evelyn's backyard is dug up."

Maybe it was the heat. Will had the image of a dog looking for a bone.

"She must've told them the money was in the backyard. Holes are everywhere."

That had been one of Will's early guesses. He saw how stupid it was now. People didn't hide money like that anymore. Even Evelyn had a bank account. Everything was on a file in a computer these days.

He kept his tone low. "Did Mrs. Levy see them digging?"

Amanda was uncharacteristically silent.

"Amanda?"

"She's not answering her phone right now, but I'm sure she's just taking a nap."

He couldn't swallow. It wasn't funny anymore now that it might actually happen.

"She'll have her alarm set to wake her."

Will wondered how the old woman was going to hear her alarm if she couldn't hear a phone. And then he stopped worrying, because he was going to pass out from heat stroke long before that happened.

Amanda said, "I've got two friends with me and another old gal in the street. She'll keep an eye on Faith while she's on route to the house. Bev's with the Secret Service. She requisitioned a mail truck."

Will wished that he were more surprised by this information. If Amanda told him that she called an old gal at the White House and borrowed the nuclear codes, he would just nod.

"Everything's lining up." Amanda always got chatty right before a case was about to break, and now was no exception. "Faith is waiting at her house. She went to three different banks this morning to support her safe deposit box story. We had one of the managers hand her the cash at the last drop. All the bills are registered. There's a tracker in the lining of the duffel." She was silent for a moment. "I think she'll be okay. Sara got her evened out for now. I'm worried that she's not taking care of herself."

Will was worried about that, too. He'd always thought of Faith as indestructible. She seemed capable of handling any crisis. Maybe that had come

from being thrust into motherhood before she was ready. Mrs. Levy's words about the pregnancy scandal rocking the neighborhood kept coming back to him. Faith obviously still carried some shame. She had blushed when she explained her mother's words to Sara, though Evelyn was obviously just using what might be her last words to her daughter to lift away some of that guilt. Faith's entire life had been shattered by her pregnancy. Somehow, she had managed to pick up the pieces. Evelyn had been there to offer her support, but Faith had done all the heavy lifting. Getting her GED. Joining the Academy. Going back to college. Raising her kid. She was one of the strongest women Will had ever met. In some ways, she was even stronger than Amanda.

And she deserved the truth.

Will whispered, "Why did you lie to Faith about her father being a gambler?"

Amanda didn't answer.

He started to ask her again. "Why did you—"

"Because he was," Amanda said. "I would think after this morning, you would recognize that there are other things a man can gamble with besides money."

Will swallowed the last bit of saliva in his mouth. He wasn't up to Amanda's riddles right now. "Evelyn was on the take."

"She made a big mistake a long time ago, and she's been paying for it ever since."

He struggled to keep his voice quiet. "She took money—"

"I'll make you a promise, Will. If we get Evelyn out of this, then she'll tell you the whole truth about everything. You can have a whole hour with her. She'll answer any question you have."

He glanced around the trunk, the slit of light coming through the cracked rubber seal. "And if we don't?"

"Then it won't matter, will it?" He heard talking in the background. "I need to go. I'll call you when I have news."

Will shifted the rifle again so that he could end the call. He closed his eyes and tried to clear his mind. A bead of sweat glided down his back. There was a stinging sensation near the base of his spine where Sara had scratched him.

He shook his head, trying to clear the image from his mind so that his rifle didn't file a complaint for sexual assault. Will thought about the rifle sitting in the witness stand, using its trigger to wipe a tear from its scope.

He shook his head again. The heat was really getting to him. He started going over the case to focus his mind. Amanda always wanted him to talk it out from the beginning. It was the best way to see what they had missed. In the heat of the moment, it was hard to put together the pieces. Now, Will went through the last few days step-by-step, examining all the angles, reviewing all the lies and half-truths the bad guys had told them as well as the lies and half-truths Amanda had spun.

As before, Will's mind kept coming back to Chuck Finn. It was a process of elimination. Chuck was the only man from Evelyn's former team who was not accounted for. He had been at Healing Winds with Hironobu Kwon. He obviously knew Roger Ling, who called him Chuckleberry Finn.

Roger had also talked about cutting off the head of the snake. There had to be one person in charge. Chuck could very well be that person. He ticked a lot of boxes: He had a personal vendetta against Evelyn Mitchell for turning him in.

His life in prison wasn't a cakewalk. He'd gone from being a well-respected police officer to having to watch his back in the shower room.

The man had probably developed his habit inside the joint, then reveled in it the minute he'd been paroled. Heroin and crack added up to an expensive habit. Even if Chuck was clean now, his money would be long gone. Of all the detectives Will investigated, Chuck was the one who had the least to show for his crimes. He'd shot his wad on luxury travel, seeing every corner of the world in the style of a multimillionaire. The trip to Africa alone had cost around a hundred thousand dollars. The only person Will interviewed who seemed to really be upset about the charges against Chuck Finn was his travel agent.

Will guessed he would find out soon enough whether or not Chuck was really behind all of this. He heard the carport door open, the shuffle of bedroom slippers across the concrete. The trunk cracked open, daylight pouring in like water. He saw Mrs. Levy pad by with a white garbage bag in her hand. There was the clatter of a plastic Herbie Curbie garbage can as she threw away the trash.

Will clutched the rifle in one hand and held down the trunk lid with the other. His movement was as predicted—more like a lazy tongue flopping onto the concrete than Superman leaping into action. Roz Levy passed right by him. She looked straight ahead, cool as a cucumber. Her hand reached out, effortlessly making the small movement to close the trunk. Without a glance down at Will, she was back inside the house, door closed, and he was left thinking that it was entirely possible this old woman had been calm enough not just to kill her husband but to lie to Amanda's face about it for the last decade.

Will lay on the concrete for a few seconds, relishing the feel of cold on his skin, gulping in the crisp, fresh air tinged with the odor of leaking oil from the Corvair's back end. He got up on his elbows. His memory of the carport, while accurate, was next to useless. It was a wide-open space front to back, like the underpass of a bridge, only more dangerous. Roz Levy's house was on one side of the structure. On the other was the brick knee wall, about four feet high, with an ornate metal column at each end to support the roof. Will could see into the street from under the car, but there was no vantage point from which to tell whether or not he was being watched.

He looked to his side. The Herbie Curbie was equidistant between the half wall and the car. Will guessed the blur of movement would be obvious to anyone watching, but he didn't really have a choice. He got up into a low squat. He held his breath, thinking there was no time to waste, and darted behind the large trashcan.

No bullets. No shouts. Nothing but his heart pounding in his chest.

There were at least three more feet to go to the knee wall. Will braced himself to move, then stopped because there was probably a better way to do this than sit against the wall with a neon sign pointing to his head. Slowly, he pushed the trash container, duckwalking behind it, and closing the gap between the car and the wall. At least he had some visual cover, if not protection, from anyone out in the street. Across the yard was another matter. The brick wall might protect him from shots fired from Evelyn's house, but he was basically an easy target to anyone who walked up on him from the backyard.

Will couldn't squat like this forever. He bent down on one knee and chanced a

look over the wall. The space was clear. Evelyn's house was on a lower elevation. He could not have lined up the bathroom window any better if he'd planned it. It was high in the wall, probably inside the shower. The opening was narrow enough to fit a small child through, though unfortunately not a grown man. Especially an overgrown man. The shade was pulled up. Will could see clear down the hallway. With the rifle scope to his eye, he could make out the wood grain in the door that led to Evelyn's carport. It was closed. Black powder dusted the white where the CSU techs had taken fingerprints.

They had already talked this out. When Faith came into the house, she was supposed to enter through that door.

Will's phone vibrated. He pressed the Bluetooth piece. "I'm in position."

"The black van was just spotted on Beverly. They came from the Peachtree side."

Will tightened his hand on the grip. "Where's Faith?"

"She just left her house. She's on foot."

He didn't have to say anything. They both knew this was not part of the plan. Faith was supposed to drive, not go for a stroll.

He heard the rattling of an engine in the street. The black van pulled close to the curb. They weren't exactly incognito. Bullet holes pocked the side panels. Will slid the lever on the side of the rifle to fire. He aimed down on the middle section of the van as the side door slid open. He scanned the inside, surprised by what he found.

Will whispered to Amanda, "There are only two of them. They have Evelyn."

"You're authorized to take your shot."

He didn't see how that was going to happen. The two young men on either side of Evelyn Mitchell each had their weapons aimed at her head. It looked impressive, but if one of them pulled the trigger, it wouldn't just take out Evelyn—the bullet would go straight through her skull and into his buddy's head. Amanda would've called this doing the Lord's work if her best friend in the world weren't in the middle of these two Einsteins.

They jerked Evelyn down from the van, making sure that her body gave them cover. She screamed in pain, the sound piercing the quiet afternoon. She wasn't tied up, but Evelyn Mitchell could hardly run off to safety. One of her legs was crudely splinted with two broken-off broom handles. Duct tape kept them in place. She was obviously severely wounded. Her abductors obviously did not care.

Both boys were wearing black jackets and black baseball hats. Their heads swiveled around as they looked for possible threats. They walked single file, with Evelyn sandwiched between them. The one in back kept a Glock jammed into her ribs, spurring her on the way you would a horse. She obviously couldn't walk on her own. Glock's arm was wrapped around her waist. She leaned back into him with every step, her face a mask of pain. The one in front kept his knees bent as he walked. Evelyn's hand dug into his shoulder for balance. The man didn't falter. He kept sweeping a Tec-9 back and forth across the front of the house. His finger was on the notoriously sensitive trigger. Will hadn't seen a Tec-9 since the now-expired federal assault-weapons ban had forced the manufacturer out of business. The gun had been used during the Columbine massacre. It was a semiautomatic, but that hardly mattered when you had fifty

rounds in the magazine.

For just a second, Will took his eye away from the scope and checked the street. It was empty. No Chuck Finn. No more young guns in black jackets and black baseball hats. He looked back through the scope. His stomach dropped. There couldn't just be two of them.

Amanda's voice was terse. "Do you have the shot?"

Will's sights were lined up on Tec-9's chest. Maybe the two kids weren't complete amateurs after all. Tec-9 was directly in front of Evelyn, guaranteeing that any bullet that went through him would go through Evelyn, too. The same held true for Glock, who was pressed behind her. A head shot was out of the question. Even if there was a way to take down Tec-9, Glock would have a round in Evelyn before Will could realign his sights. Will may as well kill the prisoner as kill one of her captives. "No shot," he whispered to Amanda. "It's too risky."

She didn't argue with him. "Keep the line open. I'll let you know when Faith reaches the house."

Will tracked the three figures until they disappeared inside the carport. He pivoted, lining up the rifle to the kitchen door, holding his breath as he waited. The door was kicked open. Will kept his finger resting on the trigger guard as Evelyn Mitchell stumbled into the kitchen. Glock was still behind her. He lifted and carried her, the strain showing on his face. Tec-9 was still in front, still walking low. The top of his hat showed at Evelyn's chest level. Will studied her face. One of her eyes was swollen shut. The skin on her cheek was ripped open.

They were in the foyer. Evelyn winced when Glock loosened his grip around her waist to set her down. She was a thin woman, but she was practically dead weight. The kid behind her was breathing heavy. He pressed his head into her back. Like Tec-9, he was still more teenager than man.

The light in the foyer changed. The space darkened. They must have pulled down the blinds covering the front windows. They were vinyl, meant to filter the light, not completely block it. Will could still clearly see all three figures. Evelyn was half carried, half pushed again, this time into the living room. He saw the black hat, the Tec-9 waving in the air. Then they were gone. His line of sight cleared straight through to the kitchen.

"They're in the living room," he told Amanda. "All of them." He didn't point out that her obvious plan was already off the rails. Evelyn wasn't being kept in the back bedroom. They wanted her front and center when Faith entered the house.

Amanda said, "They're using Ev as a shield while they close the curtains in the back. I can't get a shot." She muttered a curse. "I can't see anything."

"Where's Faith?"

"She should be here soon."

Will tried to relax his body so his shoulders didn't ache. No Chuck Finn. No stashing Evelyn. The two boys had not checked the house for lurking cops. They hadn't secured the scene. They hadn't barricaded the front door or taken any precautions to make sure their escape was just as easy as their entry.

Every item they failed to check off the list was like a noose tightening around Faith's neck.

All Will could do now was wait.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Before she left the house, Faith used Jeremy's iPhone to make a video for her children. She told them that she loved them, that they were everything to her, and that no matter what happened today, they should always know that she cherished every hair on their precious heads. She told Jeremy that keeping him was the best decision she had made in her life. That he was her life. She told Emma the same, and added that Victor Martinez was a good man, and that she was glad that her daughter would get to know her father.

Dramatic, Zeke would've called it. She had made a video for him, too. Her words to her brother had surprised her, mostly because the phrase "you asshole" hadn't come up once. She told him that she loved him. She told him that she was sorry for what she'd put him through.

And then she'd tried to leave a video for her mother. Faith had stopped and started the recording at least a dozen times. There was so much to say. That she was sorry. That she hoped Evelyn wasn't disappointed with the choices that Faith had made. That every small bit of good inside of Faith had come from her parents. That her only goal in life ever had been to be as good a cop, as good a mother, as good a woman, as her own mother.

In the end, she had given up, because the likelihood that Evelyn Mitchell would ever see the recording was very slim.

Faith was not completely delusional. She knew that she was walking into a trap. Earlier, in Sara's kitchen, Amanda hadn't been listening to Will but Faith had. She saw the logic in what he was saying, that there was more to this than just a money grab. Amanda was infused with the thrill of the chase, the opportunity to tell these upstart bastards who'd had the gall to take her best friend that they weren't going to get away with it. Will, as usual, was more clearheaded about the situation. He knew how to ask the right questions, but, just as importantly, he knew how to listen to the answers.

He was a logical man, not given to emotion—at least Faith didn't think he was. There was no telling what went on in that head of his. God help Sara Linton and the Herculean task in front of her. The handshake this morning wouldn't be the worst of it. Even if Sara managed to get Angie Trent out of the picture, which Faith doubted was possible, there was still Will's immutable stubbornness. The last time Faith had seen a man shut down so quickly was when she'd told Jeremy's father that she was pregnant.

Or maybe Faith was wrong about Will. She was about as good at reading her partner as he was at reading a book. The only thing Faith could swear by was Will's uncanny ability to understand emotional behavior in others. Faith supposed this came from being raised in care, having to quickly discern whether the person in front of him was friend or foe. He was a maestro at massaging facts out of the subtle clues that normal people tended to ignore. She knew it was just a matter of time before Will figured out what had happened with Evelyn all those years ago. Faith had only figured it out herself this morning

when, for what might be the last time, she went through Jeremy's things.

Of course, she couldn't completely leave it to Will's investigative telepathy. Faith, ever the control freak, had written a letter outlining everything that had happened and why. She'd mailed it to Will's house from the last bank she visited. The Atlanta police would look at the videos on Jeremy's iPhone, but Will would never tell them what Faith had written in the letter.

This much she trusted to her core: Will Trent knew how to keep a secret.

Faith blocked the letter from her mind as she walked out her front door. She stopped thinking about her mother, Jeremy, Emma, Zeke—anyone who might cloud her mind. She was armed to the teeth. There was a kitchen knife inside the duffel bag, hidden below the cash. Zeke's Walther was stuck down the front of her pants. She was wearing an ankle holster with one of Amanda's backup S&Ws pressed firmly against her skin. The metal chafed. It felt obvious and bulky in a way that made her have to concentrate so she didn't limp.

Faith walked past the Mini. She refused to drive her car to her mother's house. It was too much like every other normal day when she loaded up Emma and her things and drove the block and a half to her mother's home. Faith had been stubborn her entire life and she wasn't going to stop that now. She wanted to at least do one thing today on her own terms.

She took a left at the bottom of her driveway, then a right toward her mother's house. She scanned the long stretch of street. Cars were pulled into carports and garages. No one was out on their front porch, though that was hardly unusual. This was a back porch neighborhood. For the most part, people minded their own business.

At least they did now.

There was a parked mail delivery truck on her right. The carrier got out as Faith passed. Faith didn't recognize the woman—an older, hippie-looking type with a salt-and-pepper Crystal Gayle ponytail down her back. The hair swung as she walked to Mr. Cable's mailbox and shoved in a bunch of lingerie catalogues.

Faith shifted the duffel to her other hand as she took a left onto her mother's street. The canvas bag and the cash inside it were heavy, almost fifteen pounds all together. The money was in six bricks, each approximately four inches high. They had settled on \$580,000, all in hundred-dollar bills, mostly because that was the amount of cash Amanda could sign out of evidence. It seemed like a credible amount of money if Evelyn had been mixed up in the corruption that had taken down her squad.

But she hadn't been involved in the corruption. Faith had never doubted her mother's innocence, so the confirmation from Amanda had not brought her much peace. Part of Faith must have sensed there was more to the story. There were other things her mother had been mixed up in that were equally as damning, yet Faith, ever the spoiled child, had squeezed her eyes shut for so long that part of her couldn't believe the truth anymore.

Evelyn had called this kind of denial "voluntary blindness." Normally, she was describing a particular type of idiot—a mother who insisted her son deserved another chance even though he'd been twice convicted of rape. A man who kept insisting that prostitution was a victimless crime. Cops who thought it was their right to take dirty money. Daughters who were so wrapped up in their own problems that they didn't bother to look around and see that other people were

suffering, too.

Faith felt a breeze in her hair as she reached her mother's driveway. There was a black van on the street, directly in front of the mailbox. The cab was empty, at least as far as she could tell. There were no windows in the back. Bullet holes pierced the metal on one side. The tag was nondescript. There was a faded Obama/Biden sticker on the chrome bumper.

She lifted up the yellow crime scene tape blocking off the driveway. Evelyn's Impala was still parked under the carport. Faith had played hopscotch in this driveway. She had taught Jeremy how to throw a basketball at the rusty old hoop Bill Mitchell had bolted to the eaves. She had dropped off Emma here almost every day for the last few months, giving her mother and daughter a kiss on the cheek before driving off to work.

Faith tightened her grip around the duffel as she walked into the carport. She was sweating, and the cool breeze in the covered area brought a chill. She looked around. The shed door was still open. It was hard to believe that only two days had passed since Faith had first seen Emma locked in the small building.

She turned toward the house. The door to the kitchen had been kicked open. It hung at an angle from the hinges. She saw the bloody handprint her mother had left, the space where her ring finger should've pressed against the wood. Faith held her breath as she pushed open the door, expecting to be shot in the face. She even closed her eyes. Nothing came. Just the empty space of the kitchen, and blood everywhere.

When she'd entered the house two days ago, Faith had been so focused on finding her mother that she hadn't really processed what she was seeing. Now, she understood the violent battle that had taken place. She'd worked her share of crime scenes. She knew what a struggle looked like. Even with the body long removed from the laundry room, Faith could still recall the placement, what he'd been wearing, the way his hand fanned out against the floor.

Will had told her the kid's name, but she couldn't remember it. She couldn't remember any of them—not the man she had shot in the bedroom or the man she had killed in Mrs. Johnson's backyard.

After what they had done, they didn't deserve for her to know their names.

Faith turned her attention back to the kitchen. The pass-through was empty. She could see straight down the hallway. It was the middle of the afternoon, but the house appeared to be in dusk. The bedroom doors were closed. The blinds covering the large windows on either side of the front door were drawn. The only unfiltered light came from the bathroom window. The shade was pulled up. Faith walked past the dining room and into the front foyer. She stood with the hallway on her right and the kitchen on her left. The living room was in front of her. She should take out her gun, but she didn't think they were going to shoot her. At least not yet.

The room was dim. The curtains had been pulled closed, but they were more sheer than opaque. A gentle breeze stirred the material where the glass door had been broken. The room was still turned upside down. Faith couldn't recall what it had looked like before, though she'd lived here eighteen years of her life. The packed bookshelves that lined the left-hand wall. The framed family photos. The console stereo with the scratchy speakers. The overstuffed couch. The wingback

chair her father sat in while he read. Evelyn was sitting there now. Her left hand was wrapped in a blood-soaked towel. Her right was so swollen it could've belonged to a mannequin. Two broom handles were duct-taped around her leg, keeping it straight out in front of her. Her white blouse was stained with blood. Her hair was matted to the side of her head. A piece of duct tape covered her mouth. Her eyes widened when she saw Faith.

"Mama," Faith whispered. The word echoed in her brain, conjuring all the memories Faith had from the last thirty-four years. She had loved her mother. She had fought with her. Screamed at her. Lied to her. Cried in her arms. Run from her. Returned to her. And now, there was this.

The young man from the grocery store was on the other side of the room, leaning against the bookcases. His vantage point was ideal, the top of a triangle. Evelyn was down and to his left. Faith was fifteen feet away from her mother, forming the second base angle. He was in shadow, but the gun in his hand was easy to see. The barrel of a Tec-9 was pointed in Evelyn's direction. The fifty-round magazine jutted out at least twelve inches from the bottom. More clips hung out of his jacket pocket.

Faith dropped the duffel bag onto the floor. Her hand wanted to go to the Walther. She wanted to shoot the entire clip into his chest. She wouldn't aim for the head. She wanted to see his eyes, hear his screams, as the bullets ripped him apart.

"I know what you're thinking." He smiled, his platinum tooth catching a bit of what light was in the room. "'Can I pull my gun before he pulls the trigger?'"

She told him, "No." Faith was a quick draw, but the Tec-9 was already pointed at her mother's head. The math was against her.

"Get her gun."

She felt the cold metal of a muzzle pressed to her head. Someone was behind her. Another man. He wrenched the Walther from the waist of her jeans, then grabbed the duffel bag. The zip ripped open. His laughter was like a child's on Christmas morning. "Shit, man, look at all this green!" He bounced on the balls of his feet as he walked toward his friend. "Goddamn, bro! We're rich!" He threw the Walther into the bag. He had his Glock tucked in the back of his pants. "Goddamn!" he repeated, showing the bag to Evelyn. "See this, bitch? How you like that? We got it anyway."

Faith kept her eyes on the kid from the grocery store. He wasn't happy like his partner, but that was to be expected. This was never about the money. Will had called it hours ago.

The man asked Faith, "How much is in there?"

She told him, "A little over half a million."

He gave a low whistle. "You hear that, Ev? That's a lot of money you stole."

"Damn right." The partner fanned out a stack of bills. "You coulda stopped all this two days ago, bitch. I guess they call you Almeja for a reason."

Faith couldn't look at her mother. "Take it," she told the man. "That was the deal. Take the money and leave."

His friend was ready to do just that. He dropped the bag beside Evelyn's chair and picked up a roll of duct tape from the floor. "Yo, man, let's go straight up to Buckhead. I'm'a get me a Jag and—"

Two shots rang out in rapid succession. The duct tape dropped to the floor. It

rolled under the chair where Evelyn sat, then the boy's body collapsed in a heap beside her. The back of his head looked like someone had taken a hammer to it. Blood gushed onto the floor, pooling around the legs of the chair, her mother's feet.

The young man said, "He talked too much. Don't you think?"

Faith's heart was pounding so loudly she could barely hear her own voice. The concealed revolver in her ankle holster felt hot, like it was burning her skin. "Do you really think you're going to make it out of here alive?"

He kept the Tec-9 aimed at her mother's head. "What makes you think I want to get out of here?"

Faith allowed herself to look at her mother. Sweat dripped from Evelyn's face. The edge of the duct tape was pulling away from her cheek. They hadn't bound her. The broken leg ensured she wasn't going anywhere. Still, she was sitting up straight in the chair. Shoulders back. Hands clasped in her lap. Her mother never slumped. She never gave away anything—except for now. There was fear in her eyes. Not fear of the man with the gun, but fear of what her daughter would be told.

"I know," Faith told her mother. "It's all right. I already know."

The man turned the gun to the side, squinting his eye as he aimed down on her mother. "What do you know, bitch?"

"You," Faith told him. "I know who you are."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Will had his eye pressed to the rifle scope when the Tec-9 went off. He saw the flashes first, two bright strobes. A millisecond later, he registered the sound. He flinched away; he couldn't help it. When he looked back in the scope, he saw Faith. She was still standing in the front entrance hall, facing the family room. Her body swayed. He waited, counting the seconds, making sure she didn't fall. She didn't.

"What the hell happened?"

Roz Levy was on the other side of the Corvair. He looked under the car and found himself staring at the business end of a bright nickel Colt Python. Will didn't know how she managed to keep the thing steady. The gun's barrel was at least six inches long. The .357 magnum load could produce hydrostatic shock, meaning the impact from a chest wound was great enough to cause brain hemorrhaging.

He tried to keep his voice calm. "Could you please point that somewhere else?"

She drew back the gun and uncocked the hammer. "Motherfuck," she mumbled, pushing herself up. "Here comes Mandy."

Will saw Amanda running through the backyard. Her shoes were off. She had her walkie-talkie in one hand and her Glock in the other.

"Faith's okay," he told her. "She's still in the house. I don't know who—"

"Move," Amanda ordered, darting past the Corvair and into Roz Levy's house.

Will didn't follow orders. Instead, he used the scope to check Evelyn's hallway again. Faith was still standing there. She had her hands out in front of her, palms down, as if she was trying to reason with somebody. Had the flashes been warning shots or kill shots? The drive-by shooter favored two hits, one right after the other. If they'd killed Evelyn, Faith wouldn't be standing there with her hands out. Will knew in his gut that she'd either be on the floor or on top of the killers if anything happened to her mother.

"Will!" Amanda snarled.

He kept the rifle close to his body as he ran past the car and into the house. The two women were standing in what must've been a screened porch at one time but was now a laundry room. Before he could close the door, Roz Levy started yelling at Amanda.

"Give me back that!" the old woman demanded.

Amanda had the Python. "You could've killed all of us." She opened the chamber and ejected the load of .38 Specials onto the dryer. "I should arrest you right now."

"I'd like to see you try."

Roz Levy wasn't the only one who was pissed. Will felt his throat clench around the effort to keep from yelling. "You said this would be an easy exchange. You said they'd take the money and give Evelyn—"

"Shut up, Will." Amanda spun the empty cylinder back into the revolver and

tossed it onto the washer.

She must've taken Will's silence as following orders, but the truth was that he was so furious that he didn't trust himself to speak. Arguing wouldn't change the fact that Faith was stuck in that house without a clear exit plan. There was nothing they could do now except wait for SWAT to show up and pretend this was a hostage negotiation instead of a suicide mission.

Unless Will went in himself. He gripped his rifle. He should go in there. He should do exactly what Faith had done two days before and bust down the door and start shooting.

Amanda's hand clamped around his wrist. "Don't you dare leave this room," she warned him. "I'll shoot you myself if I have to."

Will's teeth started to ache from grinding together. He pulled away from her, banging into a metal lawn chair in the middle of the room. He couldn't help but take in his surroundings. A high-speed camera was mounted on a tripod, pointing out the window in the door. Roz Levy had covered the glass with black construction paper, leaving a small hole for the lens to peer through. A shotgun was beside the door. No wonder she hadn't allowed Will into the house. She didn't want him obstructing her view.

Will looked into the camera viewfinder. The lens was sharper than his scope. He could see sweat dripping down the side of Faith's face. She was still talking. She was trying to reason with the shooter.

One shooter. One man left standing.

Two bad guys had gone into that house. Both were dressed in black jackets and hats. One had been shot. Will was certain of that, at least. He had watched both kids forcing Evelyn across the lawn and into the house. The one in back had done all of the heavy lifting. He was expendable, just like Ricardo, just like Hironobu Kwon, just like every other man who'd tried to get his hands on Evelyn Mitchell's money.

But it had never been about the money. Chuck Finn wasn't pulling the strings. There was no wizard behind the curtain. Here was the head of Roger Ling's snake: an angry kid with blue eyes and a Tec-9 and some kind of grudge he was intent on carrying out.

Will spoke through clenched teeth. "It's just him now. This is what he wanted all along."

"He'll never spend a dime of that money."

He struggled to keep his voice down. "He doesn't care about the money."

"Then what does he care about?" She grabbed his shoulder and jerked him away from the camera. "Come on, genius. Tell me what he wants."

Mrs. Levy mumbled, "You know what he wants." She was loading the cartridges back into her revolver.

"Zip it, Roz. I've had enough of you for one day." Amanda glared at Will. "Enlighten me, Dr. Trent. I'm all ears."

"He wants to kill her. He wants to kill both of them." Will finally dropped the biggest I-told-you-so of his life. "And if you had deigned for once to listen to me, none of this would be happening."

Anger flared in Amanda's eyes, but she told him, "Go on. Get it all out."

In the end, it was her acquiescence that sent him over the edge. "I told you we should slow this down. I told you we should figure out what they really wanted

before we sent Faith in there with a target on her back.” He closed the space between them, backing her against the washer. “You were so hell-bent on proving your dick is bigger than mine that you didn’t stop to think that I might be right about something.” Will leaned in close enough to feel her breath on his face. “Any blood spilled is on your hands, Amanda. *You* did this to Faith. You did this to all of us.”

Amanda turned her head away from him. She didn’t answer Will, but he could see the truth in her eyes. She knew that he was right.

Her silent acceptance was no consolation, but Will backed off anyway. He had been looming over her like a bully, clutching his rifle so hard that his hands were shaking. Shame crowded out his anger. He made his grip loosen, his jaw relax.

“Ha,” Mrs. Levy laughed. “You gonna take that tone from him, Wag?” She had re-loaded the Python. She snapped the cylinder home, telling Will, “That’s what we used to call her—Wag, because she shut up and wagged her tail like a dog every time a man was around.”

Will was shocked by her words, mostly because he couldn’t imagine anything that could be further from the truth.

Mrs. Levy hefted the Python in her hands. She told Amanda, “Talk about swinging your dick around. You could’ve stopped this twenty years ago if you’d’a had the balls to force Ev to—”

Amanda hissed, “Spare me your sanctimonious bullshit, Roz. If it wasn’t for me standing between you and your cookie recipe, you’d be on death row right now.”

“I warned you when it happened. You don’t mix pigeons and bluebirds.”

“You don’t know what the hell you’re talking about. You never have.” Amanda barked more orders into the walkie-talkie. Her voice shook, which worried Will as much as anything that had happened in the last ten minutes. “Take out that black van. I want all four tires down. Clear out this block as quickly as you can. Call in APD to gumshoe it and give me an ETA on SWAT within the next five minutes or don’t bother showing up for work tomorrow.”

Will put his eye back to the camera. Faith was still talking. At least, her mouth was moving. Her arms were crossed over her chest. Will found his mind working through Roz Levy’s mildly racist choice of words: pigeons and bluebirds. Mrs. Levy was full of old adages, like the one she’d told him two days ago: A woman can run faster with her skirt up than a man can with his pants down. It was a strange thing to say about a pregnant fourteen-year-old girl who’d had a baby by the age of fifteen.

Will asked the old woman, “Why didn’t you take that Python over to Evelyn’s when you heard the shots the other day?”

She looked down at the gun. There was a bit of petulance in her tone. “Ev told me not to come over no matter what.”

Will hadn’t pegged her as an order-follower, but maybe her bark was worse than her bite. Poisoning was a coward’s choice, coldblooded murder without the inconvenience of getting your hands dirty. He tried to push her toward the truth. “But you heard gunshots.”

“I assumed Evelyn was taking care of some old business.” She jabbed her thumb Amanda’s way. “Notice she didn’t call *her* for help.”

Amanda rested her chin on the walkie-talkie. She was watching Will like she was waiting for a pot to boil. She was always ten steps ahead of him. She knew where his brain was going even before he did.

She told Mrs. Levy, "I knew Evelyn was seeing Hector again. She told me months ago."

"Like hell she did. You were as shocked to see that picture as I was when I took it."

"Does it matter, Roz? After all this time, does it really matter?"

The old woman seemed to think that it did. "It's not my fault she was willing to gamble away her life for ten seconds of pleasure."

Amanda laughed, incredulous. "Ten seconds? No wonder you murdered your husband. Is that all the old bastard could give you—ten seconds?" Her tone was cutting, rueful, the same one she'd used on the phone half an hour ago.

There are other things a man can gamble with besides money.

She was talking about Will and Sara. She was talking about the inherent risks that came with love.

Will turned back to the camera. Faith was still talking. Had Roz Levy set up the camera today, or had it been there all along? The view into the house was clear. What would she have seen two days ago? Evelyn making sandwiches. Hector Ortiz carrying in groceries. They were comfortable around each other. They had a history. A history that Evelyn was trying to hide from her family.

Pigeons and bluebirds.

Will looked up from the camera. "He's Evelyn's son." Both women stopped talking.

Will said, "Hector's the father, right? That's the mistake Evelyn made twenty years ago. She had a son by Hector Ortiz. Was the bank account used to help support him?"

Amanda sighed. "I told you, the account doesn't matter."

Roz made a disgusted sound. "Well, I'm not going to keep it a secret anymore." She gleefully told Will, "She couldn't very well raise a brown baby, could she? I always said just switch it with Faith's. That girl was wild. No one would've been surprised to hear she was running around with some wetback." She cackled at Will's stunned expression. "Fast-forward twenty years and she did it anyway."

"Nineteen years," Amanda corrected. "Jeremy's nineteen." She looked around the room, finally realizing what Roz Levy had been up to. "Christ," she mumbled. "We should've charged you for a front-row seat."

Will asked, "What happened?"

Amanda pressed her eye to the camera. "Evelyn gave the baby to a girl we worked with. Sandra Espisito. She was married to another cop. They couldn't have children of their own."

"Can we get them here? Maybe they could talk to him."

She shook her head. "Paul was shot in the line of duty ten years ago. Sandra died last year. Leukemia. She needed a bone marrow transplant. She had to explain to her son why he couldn't be a donor." She turned back to Will. "He looked into his father's side of the family first. I suppose Sandra thought it might be easier. Hector invited him to a get-together. That's how he met Ricardo. That's how he got mixed up in Los Texicanos. He started using drugs. Pot at first,

then heroin, then there was no looking back. Evelyn and Hector had him in and out of rehab.”

Will felt a burning in his gut. “Healing Winds?”

She nodded her head. “This last time, at least.”

“He met Chuck Finn there.”

“I don’t know the details, but I imagine so.”

If Will had known this earlier, there was no way he would’ve let Faith go into that house alone. He would’ve tied her up. He would’ve shoved Amanda inside Mrs. Levy’s trunk. He would’ve called in SWAT from every police force in the country.

Amanda said, “Go ahead and get it out. I deserve it.”

Will had already wasted enough time yelling at her. “What does the back of the house look like?”

She couldn’t process the question. “What?”

“The back of the house. Faith is standing in the foyer. She’s looking into the family room. The whole back wall is windows and a sliding glass door. You said the curtains were pulled closed. They’re thin cotton. Can you see anything like a shadow or movement?”

“No. It’s too bright outside and the lights are off inside.”

“When is SWAT supposed to be here?”

“What are you thinking?”

“We need to get the helicopter.”

For once, she didn’t ask questions. She got on the walkie-talkie and patched directly into the SWAT commander.

Will pressed his eye to the camera as Amanda negotiated the request. Faith was still standing in the foyer. She wasn’t talking anymore. “Is there some reason you didn’t tell me that Evelyn had a love child with Hector Ortiz?”

“Because it would kill Faith,” Amanda told him, seemingly unaware of the irony. Her next words were more directed toward Roz. “And Evelyn didn’t want anyone to know, because it’s nobody’s damn business.”

Will took out his cell phone.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m calling Faith.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

Faith's cell phone vibrated in her pocket. She didn't move. She just stared at her mother. Tears were streaming down Evelyn's face.

"It's all right," Faith told her. "It doesn't matter."

"Doesn't matter?" the man echoed. "Thanks a lot, sis."

Faith flinched at the word. How blind she'd been. How selfish. It all made so much sense now. The extended leave her mother had taken from work. Her father's sudden business trips and angry silences. Evelyn's expanding waistline when she'd never been overweight before or since. The vacation she had taken with Amanda the month before Jeremy was born. Faith had been furious when, after nearly eight months of shared imprisonment, Evelyn had announced that she was going to drive to the beach for a week of fun with Aunt Mandy. Faith had felt betrayed. She had felt abandoned. And now, she felt so stupid.

Remember our time together before Jeremy—

That's what Evelyn had said in the video. She was giving Faith a clue, not strolling down memory lane. *Remember that time. Try to recall what was really going on—not just with you, but with me.*

Back then, Faith had been so wrapped up in herself that all she cared about was her own misery, her own shattered life, her own lost opportunities. Looking back now, she saw the obvious signs. Evelyn wouldn't go outside during the daytime. She wouldn't answer the door. She woke at the crack of dawn to shop at a grocery store on the other side of town. The phone rang plenty of times, but Evelyn refused to answer it. She isolated herself. She cut herself off from the world. She slept on the couch instead of in her marital bed. Except for Amanda, she talked to no one, saw no one, reached out to no one. And all the while, she had given Faith the one thing every child secretly longs for: every ounce of her attention.

And then everything had changed when Evelyn returned from her vacation with Amanda. She called it "my time away," like she'd gone down to the springs to take the cure. She was different, happier, as if a burden had been lifted from her shoulders. Faith had seethed with jealousy to find her mother so altered, so seemingly carefree. Before the trip, they had luxuriated in their shared misery, and Faith could not understand how her mother could so easily let it go.

Faith was weeks from delivering Jeremy, but Evelyn's life went back to normal—or as normal as could be expected with a sulky, spoiled, extremely pregnant teenager in the house. She started going back to their regular grocery store. She had lost a few pounds during her time away, and she set about taking off the rest with strict diet and exercise. She forced Faith to take long walks after lunch and eventually started calling old friends, her tone of voice indicating that she'd survived the worst of it and, now that the end was near, was ready to jump back into the fray. Her pillow was no longer on the couch, but back on the bed she shared with her husband. She let the city know she'd be returning after Jeremy was born. She had her hair cut in a new, short style. In general, she

started acting like her old self. Or at least a new version of her old self.

There had been cracks in the happy façade, something Faith only now realized.

For the first few weeks of Jeremy's life, Evelyn cried every time she held him. Faith could remember finding her mother sobbing in the rocking chair, holding Jeremy so close that she was afraid the baby couldn't breathe. As with everything, Faith was jealous of the bond between them. She had sought ways to punish her mother, keeping Jeremy away from her. Staying out late with him. Taking him to the mall or the movies or any number of places a baby didn't belong—just to be spiteful. Just to be mean.

And all the while Evelyn had been aching not just for a child, but for *her* child. This angry, soulless young man who now pointed a gun at her head.

Faith felt the phone stop ringing. Almost immediately, it started back again. She told her mother, "I'm so sorry I wasn't there for you."

Evelyn shook her head. It didn't matter. But it did.

"I'm so sorry, Mama."

Evelyn glanced down, then back at Faith. She was sitting on the edge of the chair, her injured leg straight out in front of her. The dead man lay on the floor less than two feet away. The Glock was still stuck in the back of his pants. It might as well be miles away. Evelyn could hardly jump up and grab the gun. Still, she could've reached up and taken off the tape covering her mouth. The adhesive was already detaching. The corners of the silver tape were folding back. Why was she pretending to be silenced? Why was she being so passive?

Faith stared at her mother. What did she want her to do? What *could* she do?

A heavy *thunk* got their attention. They both looked at the man.

One by one, he pushed the remaining books off the shelves. "What was it like growing up here?"

Faith was silent. She wasn't going to have this conversation.

"Mommy and Daddy sittin' around the hearth." He kicked the Bible on the floor. Pages fluttered as it flew across the room. "Musta been real nice coming home every day to milk and cookies." He kept the gun at his side as he walked toward Evelyn. Halfway there, he turned back, pacing in a tight line. His street slang slipped again. "Sandra had to work every day. She didn't have time to come home and make sure I was doing my homework."

Neither had Evelyn. Bill worked from home. It was her father who'd made sure they had snacks and did their book reports.

"You kept all his shit in your closet. What's up with that?"

He meant Jeremy. Faith still didn't answer. Evelyn had made her keep everything because she had known that one day, Faith would cherish it more than anything else save for Emma's things.

She looked at her mother. "I'm so sorry."

Evelyn glanced back down at the dead man again, the Glock. Faith didn't know what her mother wanted her to do. He was at least fifteen feet away.

"I asked you a question." He'd stopped pacing. He stood in the middle of the floor, directly across from Faith. The Tec-9 was pointed straight at Evelyn's head. "Answer me."

She wasn't going to tell him the truth, so she gave him the last clue that had clicked it all into place. "You changed out the lock of hair."

His smile turned her blood cold. Faith had realized this morning that the strand of Jeremy's hair hadn't darkened with time. The baby blue bow holding the lock of hair together was different from the one that held Jeremy's. The edges were crisp, not frayed, where Faith had rubbed them like a talisman the last few months of her pregnancy with Emma.

The silverware. The pens. The snow globes. Sara was right. It was something a kid would do for attention. When Faith first met the man in the bathroom, she had been so concerned with remembering his description that she hadn't processed what she was seeing. He was Jeremy's age. He was around Faith's height. He had chewed his lip the way Jeremy did. He had Zeke's bully bluster. And he had Evelyn's blue eyes.

The same almond shape. The same deep blue with specks of green.

Faith said, "Your mother obviously loved you. She kept a lock of your hair."

"Which mother?" he asked, and Faith was startled by the question.

Had Evelyn kept a lock of his hair for all of these years? Faith had an image of her mother at the hospital, holding her baby for what she knew would be the last time. Was it Amanda who had thought to find a pair of scissors? Had she helped Evelyn clip a piece of hair and tie it in a blue bow? Had Evelyn kept it with her for the last twenty years, taking it out every now and then to feel the soft, baby-fine strands between her fingers?

Of course she had.

You didn't give up a child and not think about him every day, every moment, for the rest of your life. It wasn't possible.

He asked, "Don't you even want to know my name?"

Faith's knees were shaking. She wanted to sit down, but she knew that she couldn't move. She was standing in the front foyer. The kitchen door was on her left. The front door was behind her. The hall was to her right. At the end of the hall was the bathroom. Beyond that bathroom was Will and his Colt AR-15A2 and his excellent shot, if she could just get this bastard to make a move toward her.

He turned the gun on its side, gangster-style, as he lined up the sights. "Ask me my name."

"What's your name?"

"What's your name, *little brother*?"

She tasted bile on her tongue. "What's your name, little brother?"

"Caleb," he said. "Caleb. Ezekiel. Faith. I guess Mommy likes her Bible names."

She did, which was why Jeremy's middle name was Abraham and Faith's first name was Hannah. Why had Faith chosen Emma's name because it was pretty instead of honoring her mother's tradition? Evelyn had suggested Elizabeth or Esther or Abigail, and Faith had been stubborn just because she didn't know any other way.

"This is where he grew up, too, right?" Caleb waved the gun, indicating the house. "Your precious Jeremy?"

Faith hated the sound of her child's name in his mouth. She wanted to punch it back down his throat with her fist.

"Watched TV. Read some books. Played some games." The bottom cabinet of the bookcase was open. He kept one eye on Faith as he pulled out the board

games and tossed them on the floor. "Monopoly. Clue. Life." He laughed. "Sorry!"

"What do you want from us?"

"Damn, you sound just like her." He turned back to Evelyn. "Ain't that what you said to me, Mommy? 'What do you want from me, Caleb?' Like you can pay me off." He stared back at Faith. "She offered me money. What do you think about that? Ten thousand bucks to go away."

Faith didn't believe him.

"All she cared about was protecting you and your spoiled bitch kid." The platinum tooth glimmered in the low light. "You got two kids now, right? Mommy can't keep her little brown baby, but you got no problem keeping yours."

"It's different now," she told him. Evelyn's condition may have been a secret, but Faith had brought down enough shame on her family to last a lifetime. Her father had lost longtime clients. Her brother had been forced into exile. What would they have made of Evelyn Mitchell raising a child who was obviously not her husband's? There had been no good choice. Faith could not begin to imagine how her mother had suffered. "You have no idea what it was like back then."

"Two for two. Mom said the same thing." He pointed to her pocket. "Are you going to get that?"

Her phone had started vibrating again. "Do you want me to?"

"SOP," he said. Standard operating procedure. "They wanna know my demands."

"What are your demands?"

"Answer the phone and we'll find out."

She rubbed her hand on her leg to wipe off the sweat, then pulled out the phone. "Hello?"

Will said, "Faith, this guy is—"

"I know who he is." She stared at Caleb, hoping he could see every ounce of hate she had for him. "He has demands." She held out the phone to Caleb, praying that he would come get it.

He stood rooted to the floor. "I want milk and cookies." He paused as if giving it some more thought. "I want my mom to be there every day when I get home from school. I want one day to go by where my ass isn't dragged to mass at the crack of dawn and my knees aren't sore from having to pray every night." His hand swept in an arc toward the bookshelf. "I want my mom to read books to me about happy goats and moons. You did that with ol' Jaybird, right?"

Faith could barely speak. "Don't say his name."

"You took little Jay to the park and to Six Flags and to Disney World and to the beach."

He must have memorized every picture in Jeremy's keepsake box. How much time had he spent in her home? How many hours had he spent pawing through Jeremy's things? "Stop saying my son's name."

"Or what?" He laughed. "Tell 'em that's what I want. I want y'all to take me to Disney World."

Faith's arm was shaking from holding out the phone. "What do you want me to tell him?"

He snorted in disgust. "Hell, I don't need nothin' right now. I got my family

around me. My mom and my big sister. What else do I need?" He went back to the bookcase and leaned against the shelves. "Life is good."

Faith cleared her throat. She put the phone back to her ear. "He has no demands."

Will asked, "Are you okay?"

"I—"

"Speakerphone," Caleb said.

Faith looked down at the phone so she could find the right button. She told Will, "He can hear you."

He hesitated. "Is your mom comfortable? Can she sit down?"

He was asking for clues. "She's in Dad's chair, but I'm worried about her." Faith took a deep breath. She kept her eyes on her mother's. "I might need insulin if this drags on." Caleb had been in Faith's refrigerator. He would know she was diabetic. "My blood sugar was at eighteen hundred this morning. Mom only has enough for fifteen hundred. I had my last dose at noon. I'm going to need the next one by ten at the latest or my blood sugar will start swinging back and forth."

"All right," he agreed, and she prayed that he really understood the message and wasn't just giving a quick answer.

She said, "Your phone—" Her mind wasn't quick enough. "Do we call you on your phone if we need something? Your cell phone?"

"Yes," he paused. "We can have your insulin there in five minutes. Just let us know. Let me know."

Caleb's eyes narrowed. She was talking too much, and neither Will nor Faith was good at this.

"Be careful." Faith didn't have to pretend to be scared. Her voice shook without any effort on her part. "He's already killed his partner. He has a—"

"End it," Caleb said.

Faith tried to find the button.

"End it!" he yelled.

The phone slipped out of her hand. Faith scrambled to get it off the floor. She remembered the revolver on her ankle. The S&W felt cold under her fingers.

"No!" her mother screamed. Her mouth had opened so wide that the tape finally pulled loose. Caleb had the gun jammed into her ribs. His free hand pressed against her broken leg.

"No!" Evelyn screeched. Faith had never heard another human being make that kind of noise. That it was coming from her mother was like a hand reaching straight into her chest and wrenching out her heart.

"Stop!" Faith begged, standing up, holding out her hands. "Please, stop! Please, just—please!"

Caleb released the pressure, but he kept his hand hovering over the broken leg. "Kick the gun over here. Slow, or I might kill the bitch anyway."

"It's okay." She knelt down. A tremor rushed through her entire body like a seizure. "I'm doing what you said. I'm doing exactly what you said." She lifted her pant leg, then pinched the gun between her thumb and forefinger. "Don't hurt her anymore. Look."

"Easy," he warned.

She slid the gun across the floor at an angle, praying that Caleb would go back

to where he'd been standing. He let the gun sail by, staying at Evelyn's side instead.

He said, "Try something like that again, bitch."

"I won't," Faith told him. "I promise."

He rested the Tec-9 on the back of the chair, angling the muzzle down toward Evelyn's head. The tape was dangling from her mouth. He ripped it away.

She gulped in air. The breath wheezed in and out of her broken nose.

He warned her, "Don't get too used to breathing that clean air."

"Let her go." Evelyn's voice was raw. "You don't want her. She had no idea. She was just a child."

"I was a child, too."

Evelyn coughed out a spray of blood. "Just let her go, Caleb. It's me you want to punish."

"Did you even think about me?" He kept the gun to her head as he knelt down beside her. "All them times with her bastard little baby, did you even think about me?"

"I never stopped thinking about you. Not a day went by without—"

"Bullshit." He stood back up.

"Sandra and Paul loved you like their own flesh and blood. They worshipped you."

He looked away from her. "They lied to me."

"All they ever wanted was for you to be happy."

"Do I look happy now?" He indicated the dead man on the floor. "All my friends are gone now. Ricky, Hiro, Dave. All of them. I'm the last one standing." He seemed to be forgetting his part in the carnage. "My fake father is dead. My fake mother is dead."

Evelyn said, "I know you cried at her funeral. I know you loved Paul and—"

He smacked the back of her head with his open palm. Faith moved without thinking. He waved the gun in her direction and she froze.

She looked back at her mother. Evelyn's head had dropped down. Blood dripped from her mouth. "I never forgot about you, Caleb. You know that somewhere in your heart."

He slapped her harder this time.

"Stop," Faith begged. She didn't know if she was talking to her mother or to Caleb. "Please just stop."

Evelyn whispered, "I always loved you, Caleb."

He raised the rifle and slammed the butt against the side of her head. The impact knocked over the chair. Evelyn fell hard to the floor. She screamed in pain as her leg twisted around. The broom handle splint broke in two. Bone stuck out of her thigh.

"Mama!" Faith started for her.

There was a pinging sound. Wood kicked up from the floor.

Faith froze. She couldn't tell if she'd been shot. All she could see was her mother on the floor, Caleb standing above her with his fist clenched. He kicked Evelyn. Hard.

"Please stop," Faith pleaded. "I promise—"

"Shut up." He looked up at the ceiling. At first, Faith didn't recognize the sound. It was a helicopter. The blades chopped through the air, shaking her

eardrums.

Caleb had the Tec-9 pointed at Faith now. He had to raise his voice to be heard. "That was a warning shot," he told her. "Next one goes right between your eyes."

She looked down at the floor. There was a hole in the wood. She took a step back, swallowed the cry that wanted to come out of her throat. The chopping sound receded as the helicopter pulled up. Faith could barely speak. "Please don't hurt her. You can do anything to me, but please ..."

"Oh, I'm gonna hurt you soon enough, sister girl. I'm gonna hurt you real bad." He held up his arms as if he was on stage. "That's what this is all about, yo. I'm gonna show your precious baby boy what it's like to grow up without his mama." He kept the gun on Faith. "You were good yesterday running after him in the street. A little closer and I'd'a had him dead on the ground."

Vomit came into her mouth.

He pushed Evelyn with his sneaker. "Ask her why she gave me up."

Faith didn't trust her mouth to open.

"Ask her why she gave me up," Caleb repeated. He raised his foot, ready to kick her mother's shattered leg.

"Okay!" Faith yelled. "Why did you give him up?"

Caleb said, "Why did you give him up, Mom?"

"Why did you give him up, Mom?"

Evelyn didn't move. Her eyes were closed. Just as the panic started to well up inside Faith, her mother's mouth opened. "I didn't have a choice."

"Yo, ain't that what you've been saying to me for the last year, Mom? Everybody's got choices?"

"It was a different time." Her good eye opened. The lashes stuck together. She stared at Faith. "I'm so sorry, baby."

Faith shook her head. "You have nothing to apologize for."

"Ain't this nice. A little mother-daughter reunion here." He shoved the chair so hard against the wall that the back leg broke. "She was ashamed of me, that's why." He paced over to the bookcase and back. "She couldn't explain some little brown baby squirting outta her. Not like you, right? Different times." He started pacing again. "And you think your daddy was so good growing up. Tell her what he said, Mom. Tell her what he made you do."

Evelyn lay on her side, eyes closed, arms out in front of her. The shallow in-and-out of her chest was the only thing that indicated she was still alive.

"Your good ol' daddy told her it was me or him. What do you think about that? Mr. Galveston Insurance Agent of the Year for six years running and he told your mama that she couldn't keep her baby boy, because if she did, she'd never see her other kids again."

Faith struggled not to show that he'd finally managed to hit the mark. She had adored her father, worshipped him like only a spoiled daddy's girl can, but as an adult, she could easily see Bill Mitchell giving her mother this ultimatum.

Caleb had moved back to his original spot near the bookcase. The gun was down at his side, but she knew he could swing it up at any moment. His back was to the sliding glass doors. Evelyn was to his left. Faith was at a diagonal, about twelve feet away from him and waiting for all hell to break loose.

She prayed Will had understood her message. The room was a clock. Faith

was at eighteen hundred, or six o'clock. Evelyn was at fifteen hundred, three o'clock. Caleb was swinging back and forth between ten and twelve.

Faith had offered at least twenty times over the last month to take Will's cell phone off military time. He kept refusing because he was stubborn and full of an odd mixture of shame and pride where his disability was concerned. He was also watching her through the bathroom window right now. He had told her to give him a sign. She ran her fingers through her hair, pulling her thumb and index finger into an okay sign.

Faith looked down at her mother lying on the floor. Evelyn was staring at her with her one good eye. Had she seen Faith give Will the signal? Was she capable of understanding what was going to happen? Her breaths were labored. Her lips were blistered. She had obviously been choked. Dark bruises circled her neck. There was a cut on the side of her head. Blood seeped from an angry gash in her cheek. Faith felt a rush of love wash through her, straight to where her mother lay. It was like a light shining out from her body. How many times had Faith gone to this woman for help? How many times had she cried on her shoulder?

So many times that Faith had lost count.

Evelyn raised her hand. Her fingers trembled. She covered her face. Faith turned around. A blinding bright light came through the front windows. It pierced the flimsy blinds, shining a spotlight inside the house.

Faith ducked down. Maybe muscle memory recalled some training exercise from years past. Maybe it was human nature to make yourself as small as possible when you sensed something bad was about to happen.

Nothing happened in the immediate. Seconds went by. Faith found herself counting, "... two ... three ... four ..."

She looked up at Caleb.

Glass shattered. He jerked as if someone had punched him in the shoulder. His expression was a mixture of shock and pain. Faith pushed herself off the floor. She lunged toward Caleb. He pointed the gun at her face. She looked straight into the threaded muzzle, the dark eye of the snubbed barrel, staring back. Rage took hold, burning inside of her, urging her forward. She wanted to kill this man. She wanted to rip open his throat with her teeth. She wanted to cut his heart out of his chest. She wanted to watch the pain in his eyes as she did everything to him that he had done to her mother, her family, their lives.

But she would never get the chance.

The side of Caleb's head exploded. His arms jerked up. Bullets fired from the Tec-9 brought down a rain of white chalk from the ceiling. Muscle memory. Two pops, close together, one after the other.

Slowly, he collapsed to the ground. The only thing Faith could hear was the sound of his body slamming into the floor. First his hip, then his shoulder, then his head popping against the hard wood. His eyes stayed open. Dark blue. So familiar. So lifeless.

So long.

Faith looked at her mother. Evelyn had managed to prop herself up against the wall. She still held the Glock in her right hand. The muzzle started to tilt down. The weight was too much. She dropped her arm. The gun clattered to the floor.

"Mama ..." Faith could barely stand. She half walked, half crawled to her

mother. She didn't know where to touch her, which part of her body wasn't bruised or broken.

"Come here," Evelyn whispered. She pulled Faith into her arms. She stroked her back. Faith couldn't help it. She started to weep like a child. "It's all right, baby." Evelyn pressed her lips to the top of Faith's head. "Everything's going to be all right."



THURSDAY

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Will tucked his hands into his pockets as he walked down the hallway to Evelyn Mitchell's hospital room. He was almost giddy with exhaustion. His vision was so sharp that the world was his Blu-ray. There was a high-pitched whine in his ear. He could feel every pore in his skin. This was why he never drank coffee. Will felt wired enough to power a small city. He had spent the last three nights with Sara. His feet barely touched the ground.

He stopped outside Evelyn's room, wondering if he should've brought flowers. Will had cash in his wallet. He turned around, heading back toward the elevators. He could at least get her a balloon from the gift shop. Everybody liked balloons.

"Hey." Faith pushed open her mother's door. "Where are you going?"

"Does your mom like balloons?"

"I'm sure she did when she was seven."

Will smiled. The last time he'd seen Faith, she was crying in her mother's arms. She looked a little better now, but not by much. "How's she doing?"

"Okay. Last night was slightly better than the one before, but the pain is still bad."

Will could only imagine. Evelyn had been rushed to Grady with a full police escort. She'd been in surgery over sixteen hours. They'd put enough metal in her leg to fill a deluxe erector set.

He asked, "What about you?"

"It's a lot to take in." Faith shook her head, as if she still couldn't make sense of it. "I always wanted another brother, but that was only because I thought he might beat up Zeke."

"Seems like you can take care of yourself."

"It's a lot more work than you'd think." She leaned her shoulder against the wall. "It must've been so hard for her. What she went through. I can't imagine giving up one of my children. I'd just as soon rip out my heart."

Will looked over her shoulder at the empty hallway.

"I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking about—"

"It's okay," he told her. "You know, a surprising number of orphans end up in the penal system." He gave her some of the better examples. "Albert DeSalvo. Ted Bundy. Joel Rifkin. Son of Sam."

"I think Aileen Wuornos was given up by her parents, too."

"I'll let the others know. It's good to have a woman on the list."

She laughed, but obviously her heart wasn't into it. Will looked over her shoulder again. There was a large nurse with a bouquet of flowers walking down the hall.

Faith said, "I was sure that we weren't going to make it out of that house."

There was something in her voice that told him she still wasn't past what had happened to her family. Maybe she never would be. Some things never left you, no matter how hard you tried.

Will said, "We should really get better codes in case this happens again."

"I was terrified you wouldn't understand. Thank God we had all those arguments about changing your phone off military time."

"Actually, I didn't understand." He grinned at her shocked expression. Will had kept his cell on speakerphone while he talked to Faith. Roz Levy had rendered her opinion as soon as the call ended, telling them the room was a clock and that she'd be more than happy to run over there with her Python and take out the punk standing at noon.

Will told Faith, "I'd like to think that I would've figured it out eventually."

"You realize that a blood sugar of eighteen hundred would probably mean I was either dead or in an irreversible coma?"

"Sure, I knew that."

"Jesus Christ," she whispered. "So much for our well-oiled machine."

He felt the need to tell her, "The helicopter was all me. The infrared camera told us where you were, confirmed that his partner was dead." She didn't seem impressed, so Will added, "And the lights were my idea." They'd lined up two squad cars and blasted their xenon lights at the front windows. Caleb's shadow against the curtains had given them something to aim for.

"Well, thanks anyway for shooting him." She could obviously read his expression. "Oh, Will, it wasn't you?"

He let out a long breath. "Amanda promised me she'd give me one of my testicles back if I let her take the shot."

"I hope you got that in writing. She didn't exactly hit a bull's-eye."

"She blames my rifle. Something about me being left-handed."

The grip was universal, but Faith didn't argue. "Well, I'm glad you were there. It made me feel safer."

He smiled, though he was fairly certain all of this could've happened without his presence. Amanda was resourceful, and Will had basically hidden behind a wall while Faith risked her life.

She said, "I'm glad you're with Sara."

He fought the silly grin that wanted to come. "I'm just hanging in there until she decides she can do better."

"I wish I thought you were joking."

So did Will. He didn't understand Sara. He didn't know what made her tick or why she was with him. And yet, she was. And not just that—she seemed to be happy about it. Sara had been smiling so much this morning that she could barely purse her lips to kiss him goodbye. Will had thought maybe some toilet paper was stuck to his face where he'd cut himself shaving, but she'd told him that she was smiling because he made her happy.

He didn't know what to do with that. It didn't make sense.

Faith knew how to stop the grin on his face. "What about Angie?"

He shrugged, as if Angie hadn't left so many messages on his home and cell phone that both voicemail boxes had run out of space. Each message got nastier and nastier. Each threat more severe. Will had listened to every message. He couldn't help himself. He could still see Angie with that gun in her mouth. He could still feel his heart rattle at the thought of pushing open his bathroom door and finding her bleeding out in his bathtub.

Thankfully, Faith didn't dwell for long on the negative. "Have you told Sara

you're terrified of chimpanzees?"

"It hasn't really come up."

"It will eventually. That's what happens in relationships. Everything comes up whether you like it or not."

Will nodded, hoping his quick acquiescence would shut her up. He wasn't that lucky.

"Look." She put on her mom voice, the one she used when he wasn't standing up straight or wore the wrong tie. "The only way you're going to screw this up is if you keep worrying about screwing it up."

Will would rather be stuck in Mrs. Levy's trunk again than have this conversation. "It's Betty I'm worried about."

"Really."

"She's become quite attached." That much was true. The dog had refused to leave Sara's apartment this morning.

"Just promise me that you'll wait at least a month before you tell her that you're in love with her."

He let out a stream of breath, longing for the isolation of the Corvair. "Did you know that Bayer used to own the trademark for heroin?"

She shook her head at the subterfuge. "The aspirin company?"

"They lost the trademark after World War I. It's in the Treaty of Versailles."

"You learn something new every day."

"Sears used to sell preloaded syringes of heroin in their catalogue. A buck fifty for two."

She put her hand on his arm. "Thank you, Will."

He patted the back of her hand once, then again, because just once was probably not enough. "It's Roz Levy you should thank. She's the one who figured it out."

"She's not quite the sweet little old lady, is she?"

There was an understatement. The old biddy had made sport of watching Evelyn's worst nightmare play out. "She's a bit of a devil."

"Did she give you her 'pigeons and bluebirds' lecture?" Faith turned around when she heard talking. The door to her mother's room opened. Jeremy came out, followed by a tall man with a military haircut and a square jaw that instantly brought to mind the word *jarhead*. He held Emma on one of his broad shoulders. The baby looked like a sack of frozen peas hanging off a skyscraper. Her body gave a slight jerk as she hiccupped.

"This should be fun." Faith pushed away from the wall with a groan. "Will, this is my brother Zeke. Zeke, this is—"

"I know who this douche is."

Will extended his hand. "I've heard a lot about you."

Emma hiccupped. Zeke glowered. He didn't shake Will's hand.

Will tried for light conversation. "I'm glad that your mother's okay."

He kept glowering. Emma hiccupped again. Will felt bad for the man. As the owner of a Chihuahua, he knew the difficulties of acting tough while holding something impossibly tiny in your hand.

Jeremy saved them from their staring contest. "Hey, Will. Thanks for coming."

Will shook his hand. He was a scrawny-looking kid, but he had a strong grip. "I hear your grandma's doing better."

"She's tough." He draped his arm around Faith's shoulders. "Just like my mom."

Emma hiccupped.

"Let's go, Uncle Zeke." Jeremy grabbed him by the elbow. "I told Grandma we'd move my bed downstairs so Mom can take care of her when she gets out of the hospital."

Zeke took his time breaking eye contact. Emma's continued hiccups probably had something to do with his decision to follow his nephew down the hall.

"Sorry," Faith apologized. "He can be a bit of an asshole. I don't know how it happened, but Emma loves him."

Probably because she couldn't understand a word he said.

Faith asked, "Do you want to go ahead and talk to Mom?"

"I was just here to check on you."

"She's already asked for you a couple of times. I think she wants to talk about it."

"She can't talk about it with you?"

"I've got the gist. There's no reason for me to know the gory details." She forced a smile onto her face. "Amanda told her that she promised you an hour."

"I didn't think that'd actually happen."

"They've been best friends for forty years. They keep each other's promises." She patted his arm again and started to leave. "Thanks for coming."

"Wait." Will reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out the envelope that had come in the mail this morning. "I've never gotten a letter before. I mean, other than bills."

She studied the sealed envelope. "You didn't open it."

Will didn't need to. She would never know how much it meant to him that she'd known that he could read the letter. "Do you want me to open it?"

"Hell no." She snatched it out of his hand. "It's bad enough Zeke and Jeremy saw those videos I made. I had no idea I was such an ugly crier."

Will couldn't disagree.

"Anyway." She looked down at her watch. "I need to take my insulin and eat something. I'll be in the cafeteria if you need me."

Will watched Faith walk down the hallway. She stopped in front of the elevator and looked back at him. While he was watching, she tore the letter in two, then tore it again. Will saluted her, then pushed open the door to Evelyn's room. Almost every surface was covered with flowers of all kinds. Will felt his nose start to itch from the heavy perfume smell.

Evelyn Mitchell turned her head toward him. She was lying in bed. Her broken leg was elevated, Frankenstein bolts jutting out of a hard cast. Her hand rested on a foam wedge. Gauze was packed where her ring finger should've been. Tubes ran in and out of her body. The gash on her cheek was held together with white butterfly tape. She looked smaller than he remembered, but then, what she had been through was the sort of thing that could reduce a person.

Her lips were chapped and raw. She held her jaw still, talking with as little movement as possible. Her voice was stronger than he'd imagined it would be. "Agent Trent."

"Captain Mitchell."

She showed him the trigger for the morphine pump. "I've held off on this because I wanted to talk to you."

"You don't have to. I don't want to cause you any more pain."

"Then please sit down. It hurts my neck to look up at you."

There was already a chair pulled up beside her bed. Will sat down. "I'm glad that you're well."

Her lips barely moved. "Well is a bit down the road. Let's just say I'm hanging in there."

"Beats the alternative."

She said, "Mandy told me about your part in all of this." Will assumed that had been a very short conversation. "Thank you for looking out for my daughter."

"I think you get more credit for that than I do."

Her eyes watered. He wasn't sure whether it was from pain or the thought of losing Faith.

And then he remembered that she had lost another child, too. "I'm sorry for your loss."

She swallowed with obvious difficulty. The skin on her neck was nearly black with bruises. Evelyn Mitchell had been forced twice now to choose between her family with Bill Mitchell and the son she'd had with Hector Ortiz. Both times, she had made the same decision. Though Caleb had made it pretty easy for her the last time.

She said, "He was a very troubled young man. I didn't know how to make it better. He was so angry."

"You don't have to talk about it."

A gravelly chuckle came from her throat. "No one wants me to talk about him. I think they'd rather he just disappear." She indicated the cup of water on the table. "Could you—"

Will picked up the cup and angled the straw so that she could drink. She couldn't lift her head. Gently, Will reached around and supported her.

She drank for almost a full minute before releasing the straw. "Thank you."

Will sat back down. He stared at the bouquet of flowers on the table across from him. There was a business card attached to the white bow. He recognized the logo from the Atlanta Police Department.

Evelyn said, "Hector was a CI." Confidential informant. "He snitched on his cousin. They were in this gang, and it had started as something small, a reason to break into cars and snatch purses so they could play video games, and then it got really mean really fast."

"Los Mexicanos."

She nodded slowly. "Hector wanted out. He kept talking and I kept listening because it was good for my career." She waved her good hand in the air. "And then one thing led to another." Her eyes closed. "I was married to an insurance salesman. He was a very kind man and a very good father, but ..." Breath stuttered through her lips as she sighed. "You know how it is when you're out there in the street chasing down bad guys and your heart is pounding and you feel like you've got the whole world bucking between your legs, and then you go home and—what?—cook dinner? Iron shirts and give the kids a bath?"

"Were you in love with Hector?"

"No." She was firm in her answer. "Never. And the strange thing is, I didn't realize how much I was in love with Bill until I had hurt him so badly that I was going to lose him."

"But he stayed with you."

"On his terms," she told him. "I was out of the negotiations by then. He met with Hector. They came to a gentleman's agreement."

"The bank account."

She turned her gaze toward the ceiling. Slowly, her eyes closed. He thought she had fallen asleep until she started talking again. "Sandra and Paul had a lot of debt from helping her family back home. They couldn't afford a child, even if they could've had one of their own. Part of the money in the account was from Hector. Part of it was from me. Ten percent of every paycheck I got went to Caleb. It was like tithing, only not for the church—but still for penance." The corner of her mouth went up slightly in something like a smile. "Though I suppose that Sandra gave a lot of that money to the church every week. They were very religious. Catholic, but that didn't bother me like it bothered Bill. I thought they would give him a strong moral foundation." The sound of laughter came from her mouth. "So much for that."

"Caleb found out about you when Sandra got sick?"

She looked at Will. "I got a call from her. She sounded like she was warning me, which didn't make sense at the time, so I ignored it. The first time I saw him as a grown man was at her funeral." She shook her head at the memory. "God, he looked just like Zeke at that age. More handsome, if you want to know the truth. More angry, which was the problem." Her head kept moving side to side. "I didn't see how angry he was until it was too late. I had no idea."

"Did you talk to Caleb at the funeral?"

"I tried to start a conversation, but he just walked away. A few weeks later I was cleaning the house and I noticed things were out of place. My office had been searched. He did a very good job. I wouldn't have noticed if not for the fact that I was looking for a particular thing." She explained, "I kept a lock of his baby hair hidden somewhere the children didn't know about. I went to look for it, and it was gone. I should've known then. I should've realized how obsessed he was with me. How much he hated me."

Evelyn stopped to catch her breath. Will could see that she was tired. But still, she continued. "I called Hector to meet. We'd been in touch since Sandra got sick. There wasn't much time to catch up. We'd go to a Starbucks down by the airport so nobody would see us. It was the same as before—all that hiding. All that sneaking around so that my family wouldn't find out." She closed her eyes again. "Caleb was constantly in trouble. I tried everything with him—even offered to give him money so that he could go to college. Faith's struggling to help Jeremy with his tuition, and here I was offering this boy a full ride. He just laughed in my face." Her tone turned sharp, angry. "The next day, I got a call from an old friend in narcotics. They'd picked up Caleb with some serious weight on him. I had to get Mandy to pull some strings. She didn't want to. She said he'd been given too many chances already. But I begged her."

"Heroin?"

"Coke," she corrected. "Heroin would've been beyond my reach, but the coke we could work with. They knocked it down because we agreed to send him to

rehab.”

“You sent him to Healing Winds.”

“Hector lives a few miles from there. His cousin’s boy had been at the facility, Ricardo. And Chuck was there. Poor Chuck.” She stopped, swallowing to clear her throat. “He called me at the beginning of this year to make amends. He’s been sober for eight months now. I knew that he was doing some counseling work at Healing Winds, and I thought Caleb would be safe there.”

“Chuck shared his story with them.”

“Apparently, that’s one of the steps. He told them about the money. And of course, even though Chuck assured them that I had nothing to do with it, they didn’t believe him.”

“It was Chuck in the hospital that day. He was the cop who asked Sara whether or not the kid was going to make it.”

She nodded. “He saw what happened to me on the news and came down to see if he could help. He didn’t stop to realize that with his record, no one would want his help. I’ve asked Mandy to try to smooth things over with his parole officer. It was really me who got him into trouble. My guys have always stood up for me, even when it wasn’t in their best interest.”

“Do you think Caleb thought you were on the take like the rest of them?”

She was obviously surprised by the question. “No, Agent Trent. I really don’t think he did. He had this preconceived notion of me as cold and uncaring, the mother who never loved him. He said that the only thing he’d inherited from me was my black heart.”

Will remembered the song that had been playing when Faith pulled up to her mother’s house. “ ‘Back in Black.’ ”

“It was his theme song. He kept insisting I listen to the words, though who the hell knows what all that screeching is?”

“It’s about taking revenge on the people who’ve given up on you.”

“Ah.” She seemed relieved to finally understand. “He played it over and over again on my kitchen radio. And then Faith came and the music stopped. I was terrified. I don’t think I’ve ever held my breath for that long. But they didn’t want Faith. Not Caleb’s crew, at any rate. Benny Choo told them that he would handle everything. He kept Ricardo back with him. The H inside him was much too valuable, but he told the other boys to take me and leave, so they did.”

Will wanted to be sure about the sequence. “Caleb was there at the same time as Faith?”

“He looked at her out the window.” Evelyn’s voice trembled. “I have never been so frightened in my life. Not before that, anyway.”

Will was more than familiar with that kind of fear. “What happened before Faith came? You were making sandwiches, right?”

“I knew Faith would be late. Those sessions usually run long. There’s always some jackass in the first row who wants to show off.” She was silent for a moment, collecting her thoughts. “Hector came to get me at the grocery store. He knew my routines. That’s the sort of man he was. He paid attention when you told him something.” She was silent a moment, perhaps in honor of her former lover. “He’d gone to visit Caleb at rehab and been told that he’d checked himself out. They don’t lock them down. Caleb just walked out. We shouldn’t’ve been surprised. I had already made some calls and figured out that Ricardo was

getting himself mixed up in things that were not going to be good for any of them.”

“Heroin.”

She let out a slow breath. “Hector and I put it together as I drove him back to the house. We knew that Ricardo was working at Julia’s shop, just like we knew that nothing good was going to come out of any of these boys getting together. *Folie à plusieurs*.”

Will had heard the phrase before. It referred to a psychological syndrome where a group of seemingly normal people developed a shared psychosis when they were together. The Manson Family. The Branch Davidians. There was always an unstable leader at the center of the sickness. Roger Ling had called it the head of the snake. A man like Roger Ling should know.

Evelyn said, “Part of me wanted Faith to come home early. I wanted her to meet Hector, so I would be forced into explaining.”

“Did Caleb kill Hector?”

“I think it must’ve been him. It was sneaky, and cowardly. I heard the gun—you don’t forget the sound a silencer makes once you’ve heard it before—and I looked out into the carport. The trunk was closed and there was no one there. I didn’t think twice. Maybe I had thought this was going to happen all along. I scooped up Emma and took her into the shed. I came back with my gun and there was a man in the laundry room. I shot him before he could open his mouth. And then I turned around and there was Caleb.”

“You struggled with him?”

“I couldn’t shoot him. He was unarmed. He was my son. But I got the better of him.” She looked down at her wounded hand. “I don’t think he was expecting me to be so aggressively opposed to his trying to cut off my finger.”

“He cut it off right then?” Will had assumed it was part of a later negotiation.

“One of the other boys sat on my back while Caleb cut it off. He used the bread knife. He sawed it back and forth like you’d do with a tree. I think he enjoyed hearing me scream.”

“How did you get the knife away from him?”

“I don’t really know. It’s one of those things that happens without your thinking about it. Actually, I don’t remember much of what came next, but I do recall that other boy falling on top of me, and the feel of that knife going into his stomach.” She exhaled sharply. “I ran into the carport to get Emma and get the hell out of there. And then I heard Caleb screaming. ‘Mama, Mama.’” She paused for another moment. “He sounded like he was hurt. I don’t know what made me go back inside. It was instinctual, like with the knife, but that was self-preservation, and this was self-destruction.” She obviously still struggled with the memory. “I was aware of it—how wrong it was. I remember thinking quite clearly as I ran past my car and back into the house that this was one of the stupidest things I would ever do in my life. And I was right. But I couldn’t stop myself. I heard him crying for me, and I just ran back inside.”

She paused again for breath. Will could see that the angle of the sun had changed so that it was shining into her eyes. He got up and tilted down the blinds.

She breathed out an exhausted-sounding “Thank you.”

“Do you want to rest?”

"I want to finish this, and then I never want to talk about it again."

That sounded exactly like the kind of thing Faith would say. Will knew better than to argue. He sat down in the chair, waiting for her to continue.

Evelyn didn't start back immediately. For a full minute, she just lay there, her chest rising and falling as she breathed.

Finally, she said, "For about three years after he was born, around once a month, I'd tell Bill and the kids I had to go do paperwork at the office. Usually it was a Sunday while they were at church, because it was easier." She coughed. Her voice was getting raspier. "But I'd really go to the park up the street, and I would sit on that bench by myself, or if it was raining, I would sit in my car, and I would just cry and cry. Not even Mandy knew about it. I've shared everything in my life with her, but not this." She gave Will a meaningful look. "You don't know how hard it was for her with Kenny. She couldn't give him children, and he wanted a family. His own blood. He was very insistent about that. Telling her about how I longed for Caleb would've been cruel."

Will felt a little squeamish hearing something so personal about his boss. He tried to get Evelyn back to the day she'd been abducted. "Caleb tricked you to get you back into the house. That's why you didn't take Emma and leave?"

She was silent long enough to let him know that she was aware he was changing the subject. "You can't fool someone who doesn't want to be fooled."

Will wasn't so sure about that, but he nodded anyway.

"I ran into the kitchen. There was Benny Choo. Of course it was Benny Choo. Carnage everywhere. He was in his element. We had a bit of a struggle, which he won, mostly because he had help. He wanted the money. Everybody wanted the money. The place was filled with angry men demanding money."

"Except Caleb," Will guessed.

"Except Caleb," she confirmed. "He just sat on the couch eating sandwich meat right out of the bag, watching them run around and tear apart my house. I think he loved it. I think it was the most fun he had ever had in his life—watching me sitting there, scared to death, while his friends ran around like chickens with their heads cut off looking for something that he knew wasn't there."

"What about the A on the bottom of the chair?"

She gave a stuttered laugh. "That was an arrow. I assumed that the crime scene techs would find it. I wanted them to know that the main culprit was sitting on the couch. Caleb must've left hair, fiber, fingerprints."

Will wondered if Ahbidi Mittal's team would've figured out the message. Will had certainly botched the job.

She asked, "Tell me, did they really dig up my backyard?"

Will realized she meant Caleb's crew, not Ahbidi Mittal's. "You told them the money was there?"

She chuckled, probably thinking about the boys running around in the dark with shovels. "I thought it seemed plausible, inasmuch as it's happened in the movies."

Will didn't confess that he'd seen too many of those movies himself.

Abruptly, Evelyn's demeanor changed. She looked back at the ceiling. The tiles were stained brown. It wasn't much of a view. Will recognized an avoidance technique when he saw one.

She whispered, "I keep struggling with the fact that I killed my son."

"He was going to kill you. And Faith. He killed countless more people."

She kept staring at the tiles. "Mandy told me not to talk to you about the shooting."

Will knew that Caleb Espisito's death was being reviewed by the police, but he assumed Evelyn would be cleared in a few days, just as Faith had been. "It was self-defense."

She let out a slow breath. "I think he wanted me to make a choice between the two of them. Between him and Faith."

Will didn't confirm that he shared this opinion.

"He could forgive his father. Hector had a nice life, but he never married and he never had another child. But when Caleb saw what *I* had—what *I* had struggled to build back with Bill and the children—he resented the hell out of it. He hated me so much." Her eyes glistened with tears. "I remember one of the last things I told him before all of this happened was that holding on to that kind of grudge was like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die."

Will guessed this was the kind of advice mothers gave their sons. Unfortunately, he'd had to learn that lesson the hard way. "Do you remember anything about where they kept you?"

"It was a warehouse. Abandoned, I'm sure. I yelled enough to wake the dead."

"How many men were there?"

"At the house? I think eight. There were only three at the warehouse, counting Caleb. Juan and David were their names. They tried not to use them, but they weren't very sophisticated, if you get my meaning."

Juan Castillo had been shot outside of Julia Ling's warehouse. David Herrera had been shot in cold blood right in front of Evelyn and Faith. Benny Choo, Hironobu Kwon, Hector Ortiz, Ricardo Ortiz. In all, eight people were dead now because of one man's twenty-year grudge.

Evelyn must have been thinking the same thing. Her voice took on a desperate tone. "Do you think I could've stopped him?"

Short of killing Caleb before it happened, Will didn't see how. "Hate like that doesn't burn out."

She didn't seem comforted. "Bill thought what happened with Faith was my fault. He said that because I was with Hector, I took my eye off my children. Maybe he was right."

"Faith is pretty determined to do her own thing."

"You think she takes after me." She waved away Will's protest. "No, she is exactly like me. God help her."

"There are worse things."

"Hm." Evelyn's eyes closed again. Will stared at her face. Her features were almost obscured by the swelling. She was about Amanda's age, the same kind of cop, but not the same kind of woman. Will hadn't spent a lot of his life feeling envious of other people's parents. It was a waste of time to think about what could've been. But talking to Evelyn Mitchell, knowing the sacrifices she had made for all of her children, Will couldn't help but feel a little jealous.

He stood, thinking he should let her sleep, but Evelyn's eyes opened. She pointed to the pitcher of water. Will helped her drink from the straw. She wasn't as thirsty this time, but Will saw her hand clench around the morphine trigger.

"Thank you." She put her head back on the pillow. She pressed the trigger again.

Will didn't take his seat. "Can I get you anything else before I leave?"

She either didn't hear the question or chose to ignore it. "I know Mandy is hard on you, but it's because she loves you."

Will felt his eyebrows shoot up. The morphine had started working fast.

"She's so proud of you, Will. She brags about you all the time. How smart you are. How strong. You're like a son to her. In more ways than you know."

He felt the need to glance over his shoulder in case Amanda was laughing from the doorway.

Evelyn said, "She *should* be proud of you. You're a good man. And I wouldn't want my daughter partnered with anyone else. I was so happy when you two got together. I only wish it had turned into something more."

He checked the door one more time. No Amanda. When he turned back around, Evelyn was staring at him.

She asked, "May I be honest with you?"

He nodded, though Will wondered if that meant she hadn't been honest so far.

"I know you've had a difficult life. I know how hard you've worked to turn yourself into the right kind of person. And I know you deserve happiness. And it's not going to come from your wife."

As usual, Will's first impulse was to take up for Angie. "She's been through a lot."

"You deserve so much better."

He felt the need to tell her, "I've got some demons of my own."

"But yours are the good demons, the kind that make you stronger for having them." She tried to smile. " 'If I got rid of my demons, I'd lose my angels.' "

He took a wild guess. "Hemingway?"

"Tennessee Williams."

The door opened. Amanda tapped her watch. "Time's up." She waved for him to leave.

Will looked at the clock on his cell phone. She'd given him exactly an hour. "How did you even know I was here?"

"Walk and talk." She clapped her hands together. "Our girl needs her rest."

Will touched Evelyn's elbow because that was the only place that wasn't bandaged or hooked up to something. "Thank you, Captain Mitchell."

"Take care of yourself, Agent Trent."

Amanda gave Will a shove as he left the room. He almost knocked down a nurse in the hallway.

Amanda said, "You tired her out."

"She wanted to talk."

"She's been through a lot."

"Are there going to be any problems on her shooting Caleb Espisito?"

Amanda shook her head. "The only person who should be worried is Roz Levy. If it was left to me, I'd have her up on obstruction charges."

Will didn't disagree, but Mrs. Levy had perfected her old lady act. No jury in the world would ever convict her.

"I'll get the old hag eventually," Amanda promised. "She's like a stick—always stirring up shit."

"Right." Will tried to wrap this up. Sara had gotten off work five minutes ago. This morning, he'd suggested they have lunch together, but he wasn't sure she would remember. He told Amanda, "I'll see you tomorrow." He started walking toward the elevator. To his dismay, Amanda followed him.

She asked, "What did Evelyn tell you?"

He lengthened his strides, trying to lose her, or at least make her have to work for it. "The truth, I hope."

"I'm sure it was buried in there somewhere."

Will hated that she could so easily sow doubt in his mind. Evelyn Mitchell was Amanda's best friend, but the two women were nothing alike. Evelyn didn't play games. She didn't take pleasure in humiliating people. "I think she told me what I needed to know." He punched the down button on the elevator. He couldn't resist. "She said that you were proud of me."

Amanda laughed. "Well, that doesn't sound like me at all."

"No." A thought occurred to Will. Maybe Evelyn had been dancing around the truth after all. Had she secretly given him a clue? Will felt a wave of nausea come over him.

You're like a son to her. In more ways than you know.

He turned to Amanda, preparing himself for the worst day of his life. "Are you going to tell me that you're really my mother?"

Her laugh echoed down the hallway. She braced her hand against the wall so she wouldn't fall over.

"All right." He punched the button for the elevator again. And again. And then a third time. "I get it. Very funny."

She wiped tears from her eyes. "Oh, Will, do you really think a child of mine would turn out to be a man like you?"

"You know what?" He bent down so that he could look her in the eye. "I'm going to take that as a compliment, and you can't stop me."

"Don't be ridiculous."

He walked toward the emergency stairwell. "Thank you, Amanda, for saying such a nice thing to me."

"Come back here."

He pushed open the door. "I will treasure it forever."

"Don't you dare walk away from me."

Will did just that, taking the steps two at a time, safe in the knowledge that her little feet could not keep up with him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Sara took off her reading glasses and rubbed her eyes. She had been sitting at the table in the doctors' lounge for at least two hours. The patient's chart on the tablet in front of her was starting to blur. She had slept a total of six hours in the last four days. Her level of exhaustion was reminiscent of her residency, when she'd slept on a cot in the broom closet behind the nurses' station. The cot was still there. Grady had undergone a billion-dollar renovation since the last time Sara worked in the emergency department, but no hospital had ever wasted money on making residents' lives easier.

Nan, the student nurse, was on the couch again. She had a half-empty box of cookies on one side of her and a bag of potato chips on the other. Her thumbs were barely visible as they furiously tapped on her iPhone. She giggled every few minutes as, presumably, a new email came in. Sara wondered if it was possible that the girl was getting younger before her eyes. Her only consolation was that in a few years, the junk food Nan loved so much would start to matter.

"What's up?" Nan asked, dropping the phone. "You cool?"

"I'm cool." Sara was oddly relieved that the girl was talking to her again. Nan had been pouting since she'd realized that Sara was not going to share the juicy details of her part in the hospital shooting.

The girl stood, brushing crumbs off her scrubs. "You want lunch? I think Krakauer was gonna order from the Hut."

"Thanks for asking, but I've got plans." Sara looked at her watch. Will was supposed to take her to lunch. It would be their first date, which said a lot about the way Sara's life was going lately considering Will was the reason she wasn't getting any sleep.

"Later." Nan didn't so much push open the door as throw her body against it.

Sara took a moment to enjoy the peace and quiet in the lounge. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a folded sheet of paper. She'd accidentally left her glasses in her car this morning and had to hike back up the stairs in the parking deck to fetch them. That was when she'd found the note stuck under her windshield wiper. Oddly enough, it wasn't the first time someone had left the word *cunt* on Sara's car. She supposed she should be grateful that this time it wasn't keyed into the paint.

Sara didn't have to consult a handwriting expert to know that the message was from Angie Trent. There had been another note left on Sara's car yesterday morning, though this time the greeting had been waiting for her when she left her apartment. Angie was getting better. This second note packed more punch than the more innocuous "Whore" from the previous day.

Sara wadded up the paper and threw it toward the trashcan. Of course she missed. She got up to retrieve the note. Instead of tossing it into the trash where it belonged, she unfolded the paper again and stared at the word. It was certainly nasty, but Sara could not help but think it was deserved. In the heat of the moment, she never let herself think about the wedding ring around Will's

finger. The cold light of day was another matter. He was a married man. Even without that legal designation, there was still a bond between him and Angie. They were both connected in a way that Sara would never understand.

And it was very clear that Angie was not going to bow out gracefully. The only question was how long it would take before the woman managed to drag Sara down into the gutter with her.

There was a knock at the door.

Sara made sure the note was in the trash before opening the door. Will was there. He had his hands in his pockets. Though they had been together in every way possible, the first ten minutes between them were always awkward. It was as if he was perpetually waiting for Sara to make the first move, to give him some sort of sign that she hadn't yet tired of him.

He asked, "Is this a bad time?"

She opened the door wide. "Not at all."

He glanced around the room. "Am I allowed back here?"

"I think we can make an exception."

He stood in the middle of the room. His hands stayed in his pockets.

Sara asked, "How's Evelyn doing?"

"She's good. At least, I think she is." He took his hands out of his pockets, but only to start twisting the wedding band on his finger. "Faith's going to take some time off work to take care of her. I think it'll be good for both of them to have some time together. Or really bad. You never know."

Sara couldn't help it. She looked at the wadded-up note in the trashcan. Why was he still wearing his wedding ring? Probably for the same reason Angie kept leaving notes on Sara's car.

Will asked, "What is it?"

She indicated the table. "Can we sit down?"

He waited until she was seated, then took the chair across from her. He said, "This doesn't sound good."

"No," she agreed.

He tapped his fingers on the table. "I think I know what you're going to say."

She said it anyway. "I like you, Will. I really, really like you."

"But?"

She touched his hand, resting her finger on his wedding ring.

"Yeah," he said. No explanation. No excuse. No offer to take off the ring and throw it to the wind. Or at the very least, stick it in one of his damn pockets.

Sara forced herself to continue. "I know that Angie is a big part of your life. I respect that. I respect what she means to you."

She waited for a response, but none seemed to be coming. Instead, Will took her hand. His thumb traced along the lines in her palm. Sara couldn't stop the reaction her body felt from his touch. She looked down at their hands together. She let her finger slip under the cuff of his shirt. The ridge of the scar felt rough against her skin. She thought about all of the things she did not know about him—the torture he had endured. The pain he'd brought on himself. And all of it had happened with Angie right by his side.

"I can't compete with her," Sara admitted. "And I can't be with you if I'm worried about you wanting to be with her."

He cleared his throat. "I don't want to be with her." She waited for him to say

that he wanted to be with Sara. But he didn't.

She tried again. "I can't be second place. I can't know that no matter how much I might need you, you'll always go running to Angie first."

Again, she waited for him to say something—anything—that would convince her that she was wrong. Seconds ticked by. It felt like an eternity.

When he finally spoke, his voice was so quiet that she could barely hear him. "She cried wolf a lot." He licked his lips. "When we were little, I mean." He glanced up to make sure Sara was listening, then looked back down at their hands. "There was this one time when we were placed together. It was a foster home. More like a factory farm. They were doing it for the money. At least the wife was. The husband was doing it for the teenage girls."

Sara felt her throat tighten. She struggled against the impulse to feel sorry for Angie.

"So, like I said, Angie cried wolf a lot. When she accused the guy of molesting her, the caseworker didn't believe her. Didn't even open a file. Didn't listen to me when I said she wasn't lying this time." His shoulders went up in a shrug. "I would hear her at night sometimes. Screaming when he hurt her. He hurt her a lot. None of the other kids cared. I guess they were happy it wasn't happening to them. But for me ..." His words trailed off. He watched his thumb move along the back of her fingers. "I knew that they'd have to open an investigation if one of us got hurt. Or hurt ourselves." He tightened his grip around her hand. "So, I told Angie, this is what I'm going to do. And I did it. I took a razor blade out of the medicine cabinet and I cut myself. I knew it couldn't be a half measure. You've seen it." He gave a strained laugh. "It's not a half measure."

"No," she agreed. It was hard to understand how he'd managed not to pass out from the pain.

"So," Will said. "That got us out of that home and they shut it down and the people running it weren't allowed to foster kids anymore." He looked up, blinking a few times to clear his eyes. "You know, one of the things Angie said to me the other night was that I would never do that for you—never cut myself like that—and I think she's right." There was a sadness in his smile. "Not because I don't care about you, but because you would never put me in that kind of situation. You would never ask me to make that choice."

Sara looked into his eyes. The sun streaming in through the windows turned his eyelashes white. She could not imagine what he'd been through, the level of desperation that had driven him to take that razor in hand.

"I should let you get on with your day." He leaned over and kissed her hand, letting his lips linger for a few seconds. When he straightened up, something about him had changed. His voice was firmer, more determined. "You have to know that if you ever need me, I'll be there. No matter what else happens. I'll be there."

There was something final in what he said, as if everything was settled. He almost seemed relieved.

"Will—"

"It's all right." He gave one of his awkward laughs. "I guess you're immune to my astounding charm."

Sara felt a lump in her throat. She couldn't believe that he was giving in so easily. She wanted him to fight for this. She wanted him to pound his fist on the

table and tell her there was no way this was over, that he wasn't going to give her up that easily.

But he didn't. He just slid his hand out of hers and stood up. "Thank you. I know that sounds stupid." He glanced at her, then at the door. "Just—thank you."

She heard his footsteps cross the floor, the noise from the hallway as the door swung open. Sara pressed her fingers to her eyes, trying to stop the tears. She couldn't get past his tone of resignation, his easy acquiescence to what he clearly felt was inevitable. She had no idea what his story about Angie was meant to accomplish. Was Sara supposed to feel sorry for the woman? Was she supposed to find it romantic that Will was ready to kill himself in order to rescue her?

She realized now that Will was more like Jeffrey than she'd wanted to admit. Maybe Sara had a thing for firemen, not cops. Both men had shown a propensity for running straight into burning buildings. In the last week alone, Will had been shot at by gangsters, threatened by a psychopath, browbeaten by at least three women, emasculated in front of strangers, crammed into the trunk of a car for hours on end, and willingly volunteered himself to go into a situation where he knew there was a high probability that he would be killed. He was so damn intent on rescuing everyone else in the world that Will didn't realize what he really needed was rescuing from himself. Everyone took advantage of him. Everyone exploited his good graces, his decency, his kindness. No one thought to ask Will what *he* needed.

His whole life had been spent in the shadows, the stoic kid sitting in the back of the classroom, afraid to open his mouth for fear of being found out. Angie kept him in the dark because it served her selfish needs. Sara had quickly realized her first time with Will that he'd never been with a woman who really knew how to love him. No wonder he had capitulated so easily when she'd told him it was over. Will had taken it as a given that nothing good in his life would ever last. That was why he had sounded so relieved. His toes had been dangling over the edge. He was too afraid to take the leap because he'd never really fallen.

Sara felt her mouth open in surprise. She was just as guilty as the rest of them. She had been so desperate for Will to fight for her that it had never occurred to her that Will was waiting for Sara to fight for him.

She was through the door and running down the hallway before logic could intervene. As usual, the ER was packed. Nurses ran with bags of IVs. Gurneys flew past. Sara sprinted to the elevator. She stabbed the down button a dozen times, silently begging the doors to open. The stairs exited at the back of the hospital. Parking was in the front. Will would be home by the time she ran around the building. Sara looked at her watch, wondering how much time she had wasted feeling sorry for herself. Will was probably halfway to the decks by now. Three structures. Six stories of cars. More if he'd used one of the decks for the university. She should wait in the street. Sara tried to map the roads in her head. Bell. Armstrong. Maybe he had parked at the Grady Detention Center.

The doors finally opened. George, the security guard, was standing there with his arm resting on his gun. Will was beside him.

George asked, "Everything okay, Doc?"

Sara could only nod.

Will stepped off the elevator, a sheepish look on his face. "I forgot that Betty's at your place." He gave that familiar, awkward smile. "At the risk of sounding like a country music singer, you can take my heart, but I can't let you take my dog."

Sara was bumped by an EMT passing behind her. She braced her palms against Will's chest to keep from falling. He just stood there with his hands in his pockets, smiling down at her with a curious look on his face. Who had ever taken up for this man? Not his family, who'd abandoned him to state care. Not the foster parents who'd thought he was expendable. Not the doctors who'd experimented on his busted lip. Not the teachers and social workers who'd taken his dyslexia for stupidity. And especially not Angie, who had so easily gambled with his life. His precious life.

"Sara?" Will looked concerned. "Are you okay?"

She slid her hands up to his shoulders. Sara could feel the familiar hard muscle beneath his shirt, the heat from his skin. She had kissed his eyelids this morning. He had delicate lashes, blond and soft. She had teased him, kissing his eyebrows, his nose, his chin, letting her hair drape across his face and chest. How many hours had Sara spent over the last year wondering how the scar above his mouth would feel against her lips? How many nights had she dreamt about waking up in his arms?

So many hours. So many nights.

Sara stood on her toes to look him in the eye. "Do you want to be with me?"

"Yes."

She relished the sound of his certainty. "I want to be with you, too."

Will shook his head. He looked like he was waiting for the punch line to a very bad joke. "I don't understand."

"It worked."

"What worked?"

"Your astounding charm."

His eyes narrowed. "What charm?"

"I changed my mind."

He still didn't seem to believe her.

"Kiss me," she told him. "I changed my mind."

*To all the librarians in the world
on behalf of all the kids y'all helped
grow up to be writers*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As always, tremendous thanks go to Victoria Sanders, my agent, and my editors Kate Miciak and Kate Elton. Angela Cheng Caplan should be in here somewhere, too. I would also like to thank everyone at my publishing houses for their continued support. Gina Centrello and Libby McGuire, it's been a pleasure getting to know y'all. Adam Humphrey, I appreciate your letting me kill you. And beat you. And humiliate you. And all the other things Claire takes for granted.

Thanks to the incomparable Vernon Jordan for regaling me with tales of 1970s Atlanta. You, sir, are a legend. David Harper, this is at least your tenth year of helping me make Sara look like a doctor. As always, I am enormously grateful for your help and apologize for any errors, which were committed in service of story. Special Agent John Heinen, the same goes for you. Any gun mistakes are my own. I have many people to thank at the Georgia Bureau of Investigation, including Pete Stuart, Wayne Smith, John Bankhead, and Director Vernon Keenan. Y'all are so generous with your time, and so passionate about what you do, that it's a pleasure to be in your company. Speaker David Ralston, I appreciate your continued support.

Daddies don't get much page time in this book, but I'd like to thank mine for being such a wonderful father. I'd write a story about you, but no one would believe how good you are. And speaking of goodness, DA—as always, you are my heart.

To my readers, please note that this is a work of fiction. Though I have been an Atlanta resident for more than half my life, I am also a writer, and have changed streets, building design, and neighborhoods to suit my dastardly needs. (Come on, Sherwood Forest, you know you deserve it!)

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

KARIN SLAUGHTER

“[A] hold-on-to-your-hat,
nail-biting story.”

—*The Washington Post*

FIRST TIME
IN PRINT:
THE BONUS
STORY
“SNATCHED”

Criminal

A NOVEL

“Slaughter’s best yet, by far.”

—LEE CHILD

CRIMINAL

A NOVEL

KARIN SLAUGHTER



DELL BOOKS
NEW YORK

Criminal is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2012 by Karin Slaughter

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by Delacorte Press,
an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group,
a division of Random House, Inc., New York.

DELACORTE PRESS is a registered trademark of Random House, Inc., and the colophon is a trademark of Random House, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Slaughter, Karin
Criminal : a novel / Karin Slaughter.
p. cm.

eISBN: 978-0-345-52851-3

I. Title.

PS3569.L275C75 2012

813'.54—dc23 2012001504

www.bantamdell.com

Jacket design: Carlos Beltrán

v3.1_r3

Contents

Master - Table of Contents

Criminal

Title Page

Copyright

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 33

Dedication
Acknowledgments

August 15, 1974

LUCY BENNETT

A cinnamon brown Oldsmobile Cutlass crawled up Edgewood Avenue, the windows lowered, the driver hunched down in his seat. The lights from the console showed narrow, beady eyes tracing along the line of girls standing under the street sign. Jane. Mary. Lydia. The car stopped. Predictably, the man tilted up his chin toward Kitty. She trotted over, adjusting her miniskirt as she navigated her spiked heels across the uneven asphalt. Two weeks ago, when Juice had first brought Kitty onto the corner, she'd told the other girls she was sixteen, which probably meant fifteen, though she looked no older than twelve.

They had all hated her on sight.

Kitty leaned down into the open window of the car. Her stiff vinyl skirt tipped up like the bottom of a bell. She always got picked first, which was becoming a problem that everyone but Juice could see. Kitty got special favors. She could talk men into doing anything. The girl was fresh, childlike, though like all of them, she carried a kitchen knife in her purse and knew how to use it. Nobody wanted to do what they were doing, but to have another girl—a newer girl—picked over them hurt just as much as if they were all standing on the sidelines at the debutante ball.

Inside the Oldsmobile, the transaction was quickly negotiated, no haggling because what was on offer was still worth the price. Kitty made the signal to Juice, waited for his nod, then got into the car. The muffler chugged exhaust as the Olds made a wide turn onto a narrow side street. The car shook once as the gear was shoved into park. The driver's hand flew up, clamped around the back of Kitty's head, and she disappeared.

Lucy Bennett turned away, looking up the dark, soulless avenue. No headlights coming. No traffic. No business. Atlanta wasn't a nighttime town. The last person to leave the Equitable building usually turned off the lights, but Lucy could see the bulbs from the Flat-iron glowing clear across Central City Park. If she squinted hard enough, she could find the familiar green of the C&S sign that anchored the business district. The New South. Progress through commerce. The City Too Busy to Hate.

If there were men out walking these streets tonight, it was with no amount of good on their minds.

Jane lit a smoke, then tucked the pack back into her purse. She wasn't the kind to share, but she was certainly the kind to take. Her eyes met Lucy's. The dead in them was hard to look at. Jane must've felt the same. She quickly

glanced away.

Lucy shivered, even though it was the middle of August, heat wafting off the pavement like smoke from a fire. Her feet were sore. Her back ached. Her head was pounding like a metronome. Her gut felt like she'd swallowed a truckload of concrete. Cotton filled her mouth. Her hands felt the constant prick of pins and needles. A clump of her blonde hair had come out in the sink this morning. She had turned nineteen two days ago and already she was an old woman.

In the side street, the brown Olds shook again. Kitty's head came up. She wiped her mouth as she got out of the car. No dawdling. No giving the john time to reconsider his purchase. The car drove away before she could shut the door, and Kitty teetered for a moment on the high heels, looking lost, afraid, and then angry. They were all angry. Fury was their refuge, their comfort, the only thing that they could truly call their own.

Lucy watched Kitty pick her way back toward the corner. She gave Juice the cash, trying to keep her forward momentum, but he caught her arm to make her stop. Kitty spat on the sidewalk, trying to look like she wasn't terrified as Juice unfolded the wad of cash, counted off each bill. Kitty stood there, waiting. They all waited.

Finally, Juice lifted his chin. The money was good. Kitty took her place back in the line. She didn't look at any of the other girls. She just stared blankly into the street, waiting for the next car to roll up, waiting for the next man who would either give her a nod or pass her by. It'd taken two days, tops, for her eyes to develop the same dead look as the rest of the girls. What was going through her mind? Probably the same as Lucy, that familiar chant that rocked her to sleep every night: *When-will-this-be-over? When-will-this-be-over? When-will-this-be-over?*

Lucy had been fifteen once. From this distance, she could barely remember that girl. Passing notes in class. Giggling about boys. Rushing home from school every day to watch her soap. Dancing in her room to the Jackson Five with her best friend, Jill Henderson. Lucy was fifteen years old, and then life had opened up like a chasm, and little Lucy had plummeted down, down into the unrelenting darkness.

She had started taking speed to lose weight. Just pills at first. Benzedrine, which her friend Jill had found in her mother's medicine cabinet. They took them sparingly, cautiously, until the feds had gone crazy and banned the pills. The medicine cabinet was empty one day, and the next—or so it seemed—Lucy's weight ballooned back up to well over one hundred fifty pounds. She was the only overweight kid in school save for Fat George, the boy who picked his nose and sat by himself at the lunch table. Lucy hated him the same way he hated her, the same way she hated her own reflection in the mirror.

It was Jill's mother who taught Lucy how to shoot up. Mrs. Henderson wasn't stupid; she had noticed the missing pills, been pleased to see Lucy finally doing something to get rid of her baby fat. The woman availed herself of the drug for the same reason. She was a nurse at Clayton General Hospital. She walked out of the emergency room with glass vials of Methedrine chattering like teeth in the pocket of her white uniform. Injectable amphetamine, she told Lucy. The same as the pills, only faster.

Lucy was fifteen years old the first time the needle pierced her skin.

"Just a little bit at a time," Mrs. Henderson coached, drawing a red tinge of blood into the syringe, then slowly pressing home the plunger. "You control it. Don't let it control you."

There was no real high, just a lightheadedness, and then of course the welcome loss of appetite. Mrs. Henderson was right. The liquid was faster than the pills, easier. Five pounds. Ten pounds. Fifteen. Then—nothing. So Lucy had redefined her "just a little bit at a time" until she was drawing back not five cc's, but ten, then ten turned to fifteen, then her head exploded and she was on fire.

What did she care about after that?

Nothing.

Boys? Too stupid. Jill Henderson? What a drag. Her weight? Never again.

By the age of sixteen, Lucy was just under a hundred pounds. Her ribs, her hips, her elbows, jutted out like polished marble. For the first time in her life, she had cheekbones. She wore dark Cleopatra eyeliner and blue eye shadow and ironed her long blonde hair so that it slapped stiffly against her impossibly thin ass. The little girl her fifth-grade PE coach had, much to the delight of the rest of the class, nicknamed "Steam Roller" was model-thin, carefree, and—suddenly—popular.

Not popular with her old friends, the ones she had known since kindergarten. They all spurned her as a waste, a dropout, a loser. For once in her life, Lucy didn't care. Who needed people who looked down on you for having a little fun? Lucy had only ever been a token anyway—the fat girl to pal around with so the other girl could be the pretty one, the charming one, the one all the boys flirted with.

Her new friends thought Lucy was perfect. They loved it when she made a sarcastic quip about someone from her old life. They embraced her weirdness. The girls invited her to their parties. The boys asked her out. They treated her as an equal. She finally fit in with a group. She finally didn't stick out as *too* anything. She was just one of many. She was just Lucy.

And what of her old life? Lucy felt nothing but disdain for everyone who had inhabited it, especially Mrs. Henderson, who abruptly cut her off and said Lucy needed to get her shit together. Lucy's shit was more together than it had ever been. She had no intention whatsoever of giving up her new life.

All of her old friends were squares, obsessed with college prep, which mostly consisted of debating which sorority they would rush. The finer points of these sororities, whose Victorian and Greek Revival-style mansions dotted Milledge Avenue and South Lumpkin Street at the University of Georgia, had been part of Lucy's vernacular since the age of ten, but the lure of amphetamine reduced her Greek to a forgotten language. She didn't need the disapproving glances from her old friends. She didn't even need Mrs. Henderson anymore. There were plenty of new friends who could hook her up, and Lucy's parents were generous with her allowance. On the weeks she was short, her mother never noticed money missing from her purse.

It was so easy to see now, but at the time, the spiraling down of her life seemed to happen in seconds, not the actual two full years it had taken for Lucy to fall. At home, she was sullen and sulky. She started sneaking out at night and lying to her parents about stupid things. Mundane things. Things that could be easily disproven. At school, Lucy failed class after class, finally ending up in

rudimentary English with Fat George sitting in the front and Lucy and her new friends in the back row, mostly sleeping off the lows, biding their time until they could get back to their real love.

The needle.

That finely honed piece of surgical steel, that seemingly innocuous device of delivery that ruled every moment of Lucy's life. She dreamed about shooting up. That first prick of flesh. That pinch as the tip pierced vein. That slow burn as the liquid was injected. That immediate euphoria of the drug entering her system. It was worth everything. Worth every sacrifice. Worth every loss. Worth the things she had to do to get it. Worth the things she all but forgot about the second the drug entered her bloodstream.

Then, suddenly, came the crest of the last hill, the biggest hill, on her roller coaster ride down.

Bobby Fields. Almost twenty years older than Lucy. Wiser. Stronger. He was a mechanic at one of her father's gas stations. Bobby had never noticed her before. Lucy was invisible to him, a pudgy little girl with lank pigtails. But that changed after the needle entered Lucy's life. She walked into the garage one day, her jeans hanging low on her newly lean hips, bell-bottoms frayed from dragging the floor, and Bobby told her to stop and talk awhile.

He listened to her, too, and Lucy only then realized that no one had really listened to her before. And then, Bobby had reached up with his grease-stained fingers and stroked back a piece of hair that was hanging in her face. And then, somehow, they were in the back of the building and his hand was on her breast, and she felt alive under the bright glare of his undivided attention.

Lucy had never been with a man before. Even high as a kite, she knew she should say no. She knew that she had to save herself, that no one wanted spoiled goods. Because as improbable as it now seemed, back then there was still a part of her who assumed that despite the slight detour, one day she'd end up at UGA, pledge herself to whichever house she chose, and get married to an earnest young man whose bright future met with her father's approval.

Lucy would have babies. She would join the PTA. She would bake cookies and drive her kids to school in a station wagon and sit in her kitchen smoking with the other mothers while they complained about their boring lives. And, maybe while the other women discussed marital discord or colicky babies, Lucy would smile pleasantly, remembering her reckless youth, her crazy, hedonistic affair with the needle.

Or, maybe one day she would be on a street corner in the middle of Atlanta and feel her stomach drop at the thought of losing that homey kitchen, those close friends.

Because, while sixteen-year-old Lucy had never been with a man before, Bobby Fields had been with plenty of women. Plenty of young women. He knew how to talk to them. He knew how to make them feel special. And, most important, he knew how to move his hand from breast to thigh, from thigh to crotch, and from there to other places that made Lucy gasp so loudly that her father called from the office to see if she was okay.

"I'm all right, Daddy," she had said, because Bobby's hand had felt so good that Lucy would've lied to God Himself.

At first, their relationship was a secret, which of course made it more exciting.

They had a bond. They had a forbidden thing between them. For nearly a full year, they carried on their clandestine affair. Lucy would avoid Bobby's gaze when she made her weekly trek to the garage to count quarters with her daddy. She would pretend Bobby didn't exist until she couldn't take it anymore. She would go to the dirty bathroom behind the building. He would grip his greasy hands so hard around her ass that she would feel the pain when she sat back down beside her father.

The hunger for Bobby was almost as intense as her hunger for the needle. She skipped school. She fabricated a part-time job and fake sleepovers that her parents never bothered to verify. Bobby had his own place. He drove a Mustang Fastback like Steve McQueen. He drank beer and he smoked dope and he scored speed for Lucy and she learned how to go down on him without gagging.

It was all perfect until she realized that she couldn't keep up her fake life anymore. Or maybe she just didn't want to. She dropped out of high school two months before graduation. The final straw came the weekend her parents took a trip to visit her brother in college. Lucy spent the entire time at Bobby's. She cooked for him. She cleaned for him. She made love to him all night, and during the day she stared at the clock, counting down the minutes until she could tell him that she loved him. And Lucy *did* love him, especially when he got home at night with a big grin on his face and a little vial of magic in his pocket.

Bobby was generous with the needle. Maybe too generous. He got Lucy so high that her teeth started chattering. She was still high when she stumbled home the next morning.

Sunday.

Her parents were supposed to go to church with her brother before driving back, but there they were, sitting at the kitchen table, still in their traveling clothes. Her mother hadn't even taken off her hat. They had been waiting up all night. They had called her friend, her alibi, who was supposed to say that Lucy had spent the night. The girl had lied at first but after only the slightest bit of pressure told Lucy's parents exactly where their daughter was and exactly what she'd been up to for the last several months.

Lucy was seventeen by then, still considered a child. Her parents tried to have her committed. They tried to have Bobby arrested. They tried to prevent other garages from hiring him, but he just moved to Atlanta, where no one cared who fixed their car so long as it was cheap.

Two months of hell passed, and then, suddenly, Lucy was eighteen. Just like that, her life was different. Or different in a different way. Old enough to quit school. Old enough to drink. Old enough to leave her family without the pigs dragging her back home. She went from being her daddy's girl to Bobby's girl, living in an apartment off Stewart Avenue, sleeping all day, waiting for Bobby to come home at night so he could shoot her up, screw her, then let her sleep some more.

The only regret Lucy felt at the time was toward her brother, Henry. He was in law school at UGA. He was six years older, more like a friend than a sibling. In person, they generally shared long moments of silence, but since he'd gone away to school, they had written each other letters two or three times a month.

Lucy had loved writing letters to Henry. She was the old Lucy in all of her correspondences: silly about boys, anxious for graduation, eager to learn how to

drive. No talk of the needle. No talk of her new friends who were so far outside the margins of society that Lucy was afraid to bring them home lest they steal her mother's good silver. That is, if her mother even let them through the door.

Henry's responses were always brief, but even when he was covered up in exams, he managed to send Lucy a line or two to let her know what was going on. He was excited about her joining him on campus. He was excited about showing around his baby girl to his friends. He was excited about everything, until he wasn't, because her parents told him that his darling sister had moved to Atlanta as the whore of a thirty-eight-year-old hippie, drug-dealing gearhead.

After that, Lucy's letters came back unopened. Henry's scrawl informed her, "Return to sender." Just like that, he dropped Lucy like trash in the street.

Maybe she was trash. Maybe she deserved to be abandoned. Because once the rush wore off, once the highs turned less intense and the lows became almost unbearable, what was there left to Lucy Bennett but a life on the street?

Two months after Bobby moved her to Atlanta, he kicked her out. Who could blame him? His hot young fox had turned into a junkie who met him at the door every night begging for the needle. And when Bobby stopped supplying her, she found another man in the complex who was willing to give her anything she wanted. So what if she had to spread her legs for it? He was giving her what Bobby wouldn't. He was supplying her demand.

His name was Fred. He cleaned planes at the airport. He liked to do things to Lucy that made her cry, and then he'd give her the needle and everything would be okay again. Fred thought he was special, better than Bobby. When Fred figured out the gleam in Lucy's eye was for the drug and not for him, he started beating her. He didn't stop beating her until she landed in the hospital. And then when she got a taxi back to the apartment complex, the manager told her that Fred had moved out, no forwarding address. And then the manager told Lucy that she was welcome to stay with him.

Much of what came next was a blur, or maybe it was so clear that she couldn't see it, the way putting on someone else's glasses makes your eyes cross. For almost a year, Lucy went from man to man, supplier to supplier. She did things—horrible things—to get the needle. If there was a totem pole in the world of speed, she had started at the top and quickly hit bottom. Day after day, she felt the dizzying spin of her life circling the drain. Yet, she felt helpless to stop it. The pain would kick in. The need. The yearning. The longing that burned like hot acid in her gut.

And then finally, the very bottom. Lucy was terrified of the bikers who sold speed, but eventually, inevitably, her love of the speed won out. They tossed her around like a baseball, everyone taking a hit. All of them had fought in Vietnam and were furious at the world, the system. Furious at Lucy, too. She had never overdosed before, at least not bad enough to end up in the hospital. Once, twice, a third time, she was dropped off the back of a Harley in front of the Grady emergency room. The bikers didn't like that. Hospitals brought the cops and the cops were expensive to buy off. One night, Lucy got too high and one of them brought her down with heroin, a trick he'd picked up fighting Charlie.

Heroin, the final nail in Lucy's coffin. As with the speed, she was a quick convert. That deadening sensation. That indescribable bliss. The loss of time. Space. Consciousness.

Lucy had never taken money for sex. Her transactions until this point had always had an air of bartering. Sex for speed. Sex for heroin. Never sex for money.

But now, Lucy found herself in desperate need of money.

The bikers sold speed, not heroin. Heroin belonged to the coloreds. Even the Mafia was hands-off. H was a ghetto drug. It was too potent, too addictive, too dangerous for white people. Especially white women.

Which is how Lucy ended up being tricked out by a black man with a tattoo of Jesus on his chest.

The spoon. The flame. The smell of burning rubber. The tourniquet. The filter from a broken cigarette. There was a romantic pageantry to the whole thing, a drawn-out process that made her former affair with the needle seem woefully unsophisticated. Even now, Lucy could feel herself getting excited at the thought of the spoon. She closed her eyes, imagining the bent piece of silver, the way the neck resembled a broken swan. Black swan. Black sheep. Black man's whore.

Suddenly, Juice was at her side. The other girls cautiously moved away. Juice had a way of sensing weakness. It was how he got them in the first place. "What it is, Sexy?"

"Nothing," she mumbled. "Everything's dyn-o-mite."

He took the toothpick out of his mouth. "Don't play me, gal."

Lucy looked down at the ground. She could see his white patent leather shoes, the way the bell-bottom of his custom-made green pants draped across the wingtips. How many strangers had she screwed to put the shine on those shoes? How many back seats had she lain down in so he could go to the tailor in Five Points to have his inseam measured?

"Sorry." She chanced a look at his face, trying to gauge his temper.

Juice took out his handkerchief and rubbed the sweat off his forehead. He had long sideburns that connected to his mustache and goatee. There was a birthmark on his cheek that Lucy stared at sometimes when she needed to concentrate on other things.

He said, "Come on, gal. You don't tell me what's on your mind, I cain't fix it." He pushed her shoulder. When she didn't start talking, he pushed her harder to get the point across. He wasn't going away. Juice hated when they kept secrets from him.

"I was thinking about my mother," Lucy told him, which was the first time she'd told a man the truth in a long while.

Juice laughed, used the toothpick to address the other girls. "Ain't that sweet? She been thinkin' about her mammy." He raised his voice. "How many'a y'all's mama's here for ya now?"

There was a titter of nervous laughter. Kitty, ever the suck-up, said, "We just need you, Juice. Only you."

"Lucy," Mary whispered. The word nearly got trapped in her throat. If Juice got pissed off, none of them would get what they wanted, and all that they wanted right now, all that they needed, was the spoon and the H that Juice had in his pocket.

"Nah, it's all right." Juice waved off Mary. "Let her talk. Come on, girl. Speak."

Maybe it was because he said the same thing that you'd say to a dog

—“speak,” like Lucy would get a treat if she barked on command—or maybe it was because she was so used to doing exactly what Juice told her to do, that Lucy’s mouth started moving of its own volition.

“I was thinkin’ about this time my mama took me into town.” Lucy closed her eyes. She could feel herself back in the car. See the metal dashboard of her mother’s Chrysler gleaming in the bright sunlight. It was hot, steamy, the sort of August that made you wish you had air-conditioning in your car. “She was gonna drop me off at the library while she did her chores.”

Juice chuckled at her memory. “Aw, that’s sweet, girl. Your mama takin’ you to the liberry sose you can read.”

“She couldn’t get there.” Lucy opened her eyes, looked directly at Juice in a way she’d never before dared. “The Klan was having a rally.”

Juice cleared his throat. He cut his eyes to the other girls, then zeroed back in on Lucy. “Keep going.” His deep tone wedged a splinter of cold into her spine.

“The streets were blocked. They were stopping traffic, checking cars.”

“Hush now,” Mary whispered, begging for Lucy to stop. But Lucy couldn’t stop. Her master had told her to speak.

“It was a Saturday. Mama always took me to the library on Saturdays.”

“That right?” Juice asked.

“Yes.” Even with her eyes open, Lucy could still see the scene playing out in her head. She was in her mother’s car. Safe. Carefree. Before the pills. Before the needle. Before the heroin. Before Juice. Before she lost that little Lucy who sat so patiently in her mother’s car, worried that she wasn’t going to get to the library in time for her reading group.

Little Lucy was a voracious reader. She gripped the stack of books in her lap as she stared at the men blocking the streets. They were all dressed in their white robes. Most of them had their hoods pulled back because of the heat. She recognized some from church, a couple from school. She waved at Mr. Sheffield, who owned the hardware store. He winked at her and waved back.

Lucy told Juice, “We were on a hill near the courthouse, and there was a black guy in front of us, stopped at the stop sign. He was in one of those little foreign cars. Mr. Peterson walked right up to him, and Mr. Laramie was on the other side.”

“That right?” Juice repeated.

“Yes, that’s right. The guy was terrified. His car kept rolling back. He must’ve had a clutch. His foot was slipping because he was so panicked. And I remember my mama watching him like we were watching *Wild Kingdom* or something, and she just laughed and laughed, and said, ‘Lookit how scared that coon is.’ ”

“Jesus,” Mary hissed.

Lucy smiled at Juice, repeated, “Lookit how scared that coon is.”

Juice took the toothpick out of his mouth. “You best watch yourself, gal.”

“Lookit how scared that coon is,” Lucy mumbled. “Lookit how scared ...” She let her voice trail off, but it was only like an engine idling before it was gunned. For no reason, the story struck her as hilariously funny. Her voice went up, the sound echoing off the buildings. “Lookit how scared that coon is! Lookit how scared that coon is!”

Juice slapped her, open palm, but hard enough to spin her around. Lucy felt blood slide down her throat.

Not the first time she'd been hit. Not the last. It wouldn't stop her. Nothing could stop her. "Lookit how scared that coon is! Lookit how scared that coon is!"

"Shut up!" Juice punched his fist into her face.

Lucy felt the crack of a tooth breaking. Her jaw twisted like a Hula Hoop, but she still said, "Lookit how scared—"

He kicked her in the stomach, his tight pants keeping his foot low so that she felt the toe of his shoe scrape her pelvic bone. Lucy gasped from the pain, which was excruciating, but somehow liberating. How many years had it been since she'd felt something other than numb? How many years had it been since she'd raised her voice, told a man no?

Her throat felt tight. She could barely stand. "Lookit how scared that—"

Juice punched her in the face again. She felt the bridge of her nose splinter. Lucy staggered back, arms open. She saw stars. Literal stars. Her purse dropped. The heel of her shoe snapped off.

"Get out my face!" Juice waved his fist in the air. "Get outta here 'fore I kill you, bitch!"

Lucy stumbled into Jane, who pushed her away like a diseased dog.

"Just go!" Mary begged. "Please."

Lucy swallowed a mouthful of blood and coughed it back out. Pieces of white speckled the ground. Teeth.

"Get on, bitch!" Juice warned her. "Get on outta my sight."

Lucy managed to turn. She looked up the dark street. There were no lights showing the way. Either the pimps shot them out or the city didn't bother to turn them on. Lucy stumbled again, but kept herself upright. The broken heel was a problem. She kicked off both shoes. The soles of her feet felt the intense heat of the asphalt, a burning sensation that shot straight up to her scalp. It was like walking on hot coals. She'd seen that on TV once—the trick was to walk fast enough to deprive the heat of oxygen so your skin didn't burn.

Lucy picked up her pace. She straightened herself as she walked. She kept her head held high despite the breathtaking pain in her ribs. It didn't matter. The darkness didn't matter. The heat in her soles didn't matter. Nothing mattered.

She turned, screaming, "Look at how scared that coon is!"

Juice made to run after her, and Lucy bolted down the street. Her bare feet slapped against the pavement. Her arms pumped. Her lungs shook as she rounded the corner. Adrenaline raced through her body. Lucy thought of all those PE classes in school, when her bad attitude had earned her five, ten, twenty laps around the track. She had been so fast then, so young and free. Not anymore. Her legs started to cramp. Her knees wanted to buckle. Lucy chanced a look behind her, but Juice was not there. No one was there. She stumbled to a stop.

He didn't even care enough to chase her.

Lucy bent over, bracing her hand against a phone booth, blood dripping from her mouth. She used her tongue to find the source. Two teeth were broken, though thank God they were in the back.

She went inside the booth. The light was too bright when she closed the door. She let it hang open and leaned against the glass. Her breath was still labored. Her body felt as if she'd run ten miles, not a handful of blocks.

She looked at the phone, the black receiver on the hook, the slot for the dime.

Lucy traced her fingers along the bell symbol engraved in the metal plate, then let her hand move down to find the four, the seven, the eight. Her parents' phone number. She still knew it by heart, just like she knew the street number where they lived, her grandmother's birthday, her brother's upcoming graduation date. That earlier Lucy was not completely lost. There still existed her life in numbers.

She could call, but even if they answered, no one would have anything to say.

Lucy pushed herself out of the phone booth. She walked slowly up the street, in no particular direction but away. Her stomach clenched as the first wave of withdrawal made itself known. She should go to the hospital to get patched up and beg the nurse for some methadone before it got really bad. Grady was twelve blocks down and three over. Her legs weren't cramping yet. She could make the walk. Those laps around the high school track hadn't always felt like a punishment. Lucy used to love to run. She loved jogging on weekends with her brother Henry. He always gave up before she did. Lucy had a letter from him in her purse. She'd gotten it last month from the man at the Union Mission, where the girls took their downtime when Juice was mad at them.

Lucy had kept the letter for three whole days before opening it, afraid it would be bad news. Her father dead. Her mother run off with the Charles Chips man. Everyone was getting divorced now, weren't they? Broken homes. Broken children. Though Lucy had been broken for a long time, so it was nothing to open and read a simple letter, right?

Henry's cramped script was so familiar that it felt like a soft hand on her cheek. Tears had filled her eyes. She read the letter through once, then again, then again. One page. No gossip or family news, because Henry was not that way. He was precise, logical, never dramatic. Henry was in his last year of law school. He was looking for a job now because he'd heard the market was tough. He would miss being a student. He would miss being around his friends. And he really missed Lucy.

He missed Lucy.

This was the part she had read four times, then five, then so many more that she had lost count. Henry missed Lucy. Her brother missed his sister.

Lucy missed herself, too.

But Lucy had dropped her purse back on the street corner. Juice probably had it now. He'd probably shaken it out onto the sidewalk and combed through everything like it belonged to him. Which meant he had Henry's letter and Lucy's kitchen knife that was sharp enough to cut the skin on her leg, which she knew because she had done it last week just to make sure she could still bleed.

Lucy took a left at the next corner. She turned around to look at the moon. It punctured the black sky with the curved edge of its fingernail. The skeleton of the unfinished Peachtree Plaza hotel loomed in the distance—the tallest hotel in the world. The whole city was under construction. In a year or two, there would be thousands of new hotel rooms opening downtown. Business would be booming, especially in the streets.

She doubted she'd live to see it.

Lucy tripped again. Pain shot up her spine. The damage to her body was making itself known. Her rib must be fractured. She knew that her nose was broken. The clenching in her stomach was getting worse. She would need a fix

soon or she'd go into the DTs.

She made herself put one foot in front of the other. "Please," she prayed to the God of Grady Hospital. "Let them give me methadone. Let them give me a bed. Let them be kind. Let them be—"

Lucy stopped. What the hell was wrong with her? Why was she leaving her fate to some bitch nurse who would take one look at her and know exactly what she was? Lucy should go back to her strip. She should make up with Juice. She should get down on her hands and knees and beg him for forgiveness. For mercy. For a hit. For salvation.

"Good evening, sister."

Lucy spun around, half expecting to see Henry, though he had never greeted her that way. There was a man standing a few feet behind her. White. Tall. Covered in shadow. Lucy's hand flew to her chest. Her heart pounded underneath her palm. She knew better than to let some john sneak up on her like that. She reached for her purse, the knife she kept inside, but too late remembered that she'd lost everything.

"Are you all right?" the man asked. He was clean-cut, something Lucy hadn't seen in a long while, except on a pig. His light brown hair was shaved into a buzz cut. Sideburns short. No shadow of a beard even this late at night. Military, she guessed. Lots of guys were coming home from Nam. In six months, this asshole would be just like all the other vets Lucy knew, wearing his dirty hair in a braid, beating down some woman and talking shit about the Man.

Lucy tried to make her voice strong. "Sorry, handsome. I'm done for the night." Her words echoed in the cavern formed by the tall buildings. She was aware that she was slurring, and straightened her shoulders so he wouldn't think she was an easy target. "Closed for business."

"I'm not looking for business." He took a step forward. He had a book in his hands. The Bible.

"Shit," she mumbled. These guys were everywhere. Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, even some of the freaks from the local Catholic church. "Lookit, I don't need saving."

"I hate to argue, sister, but you look like you do."

"I'm not your sister. I have a brother, and you're not him." Lucy turned around and started walking. She couldn't go back to Juice right now. Lucy didn't think she could stand another beating. She would go to the hospital and make such a stink that they'd have to sedate her. That, at least, would get her through the night.

"I bet he's worried about you."

Lucy kept walking.

"Your brother?" the man asked. "I bet he's worried about you. I know I'd be."

She clutched her hands together, but didn't turn around. Footsteps followed her. Lucy didn't quicken her pace. Couldn't quicken her pace. The pain in her stomach was strong, a knife cutting through her viscera. The hospital was fine for one night, but there was tomorrow, and the next day, and the next. Lucy would have to find a way back into Juice's good graces. Tonight had been slow. Even Kitty wasn't bringing in much. Juice was all about cold, hard cash, and Lucy was betting this Jesus freak had at least ten bucks on him. Sure, Juice would still beat her, but the money would soften his blows.

"I want to call him." Lucy kept a careful pace. She could hear the man following, keeping his distance. "My brother. He'll come get me. He said he would." She was lying, but her voice was strong. "I don't have any money. To call him, that is."

"If it's money you want, I can give you that."

Lucy stopped. Slowly, she turned around. The man was standing in a sliver of light that came from the lobby of a nearby office building. Lucy was too tall, five-ten with her shoes off. She was used to looking down at most people. This guy was well over six feet. The hands that held the Bible were huge. His shoulders were broad. Long legs, but not lean. Lucy was fast, especially when she was scared. The minute he took out his wallet, she would grab it and dash away.

She asked, "You a marine or what?"

"4-F." He took a step toward her. "Medical disability."

He looked capable enough to Lucy. He probably had a daddy who bought him out of the draft, same as Lucy's dad had with Henry. "Give me some money so I can call my brother." She remembered, "Please."

"Where is he?"

"Athens."

"Greece?"

She sputtered a laugh. "Georgia. He's in college. Law school. He's about to get married. I wanna call him. Congratulate him." She added, "Get him to pick me up and take me home. To my family. Where I belong."

The man took another step forward. The light picked out the features of his face, which were normal, even average. Blue eyes. Nice mouth. Sharp nose. Square jaw. "Why aren't you in college?"

Lucy felt a tingle at the back of her neck. She wasn't sure how to describe it. Part of her was afraid of the man. Part of her was thinking she hadn't talked to a guy like this in more years than she could remember. He wasn't looking at her like she was a whore. He wasn't proposing a transaction. There was nothing in his eyes that told her he was a threat. And yet, it was two in the morning and he was standing in the empty street of a city that pretty much closed its doors at six o'clock after all the white people went back to the suburbs.

The truth was, neither one of them belonged here.

"Sister." He took another step closer. Lucy was shocked to see the concern in his eyes. "I don't want you to be afraid of me. I let the Lord guide my hand."

Lucy had trouble answering. Years had passed since anyone had looked at her with anything close to compassion. "What makes you think I'm afraid?"

"I think you've lived with fear for a long time, Lucy."

"You don't know what I've—" She stopped. "How do you know my name?"

He seemed confused. "You told me."

"No, I didn't."

"You told me your name was Lucy. Just a few minutes ago." He held up the Bible for emphasis. "I swear."

All the saliva in her mouth was gone. Her name was her secret. She never gave it away to strangers. "No, I didn't."

"Lucy ..." He was less than five feet away from her now. There was that same concerned look in his eyes, though he could easily take one more step and wrap

both hands around her neck before she knew what was happening.

But he didn't. He just stood there holding his Bible to his chest. "Please, don't be scared of me. You have no reason to be afraid."

"Why are you here?"

"I want to help you. To save you."

"I don't need saving. I need money."

"I told you I'd give you all the money you need." He tucked the Bible under his arm and took out his wallet. She could see bills stacked neatly in the fold. Hundreds. He fanned them out in his hand. "I want to take care of you. That's all I've ever wanted."

Her chest shook. She eyed the money. There was at least five hundred there, possibly more. "I don't know you."

"No, not yet."

Lucy's foot stepped back, but she needed to go forward, needed to grab the cash and run. If the man sensed her plans, he didn't show it. He stood there with the hundreds looking like postage stamps in his large hands, not moving, not speaking. All that cash. Five hundred dollars. She could rent a hotel room, keep herself off the street for months, maybe a year.

Lucy felt her heart banging against her shattered rib. She was torn between snatching the dough and running for her life and just plain running *from* her life. The hair on the back of her neck stood at attention. Her hands were shaking. She felt heat radiating somewhere behind her. For a moment, Lucy assumed the sun was coming up over Peachtree Plaza, streaking down the street, warming her neck and shoulders. Was this some sign from above? Was this finally her moment of salvation?

No. No salvation. Just money.

She forced herself to take a step forward. Then another. "I want to know you," she told the man, fear making the words slur on her tongue.

He smiled. "That's good, sister."

Lucy made herself return the smile. Made her shoulders curve so she looked younger, sweeter, innocent. And then she grabbed the wad of cash. She turned to run, but her body jerked back like a slingshot.

"Don't fight me." His fingers were clamped around her wrist. Half her arm disappeared inside his grip. "You can't escape."

Lucy stopped fighting. She didn't have a choice. Pain was shooting up her neck. Her head was throbbing. Her shoulder crunched in the socket. Still, she kept her fist wrapped around the money. She could feel the stiff bills scraping against her palm.

He said, "Sister, why do you crave a life of sin?"

"I don't know." Lucy shook her head. She looked down at the ground. She sniffed back the blood that dripped from her nose. And then she felt his grip start to loosen.

"Sister—"

Lucy wrenched away her arm, her skin feeling torn, like a glove ripping off. She ran as fast and as hard as she could, feet slapping pavement, arms pumping. One block. Two. She opened her mouth, taking deep gulps of air that sent stabbing pains into her chest. Broken ribs. Busted nose. Shattered teeth. Money in her hand. Five hundred dollars. A hotel room. A bus ticket. Safety. All the H

that she could handle. She was free. Goddamn it, she was finally free.

Until her head flew back. Her scalp felt like the teeth of a zipper being wrenched apart as chunks of hair were snatched out at the root. Lucy's forward momentum didn't stop. She saw her legs shoot out in front of her, feet level to her chin, and then her back slammed down flat to the ground.

"Don't fight," the man repeated, straddling her, his hands wrapping around her neck.

Lucy clawed at his fingers. His grip was relentless. Blood poured from her torn scalp. It went into her eyes, her nose, her mouth.

She couldn't scream. She blindly reached out, trying to dig her fingernails into his eye sockets. She felt the side of his face, his rough skin, then her hands dropped because she couldn't hold up her arms anymore. His breath quickened as her body spasmed. Warm urine ran down her leg. She could feel his excitement even as a sense of hopelessness took over. Who was Lucy fighting for? Who cared if Lucy Bennett lived or died? Maybe Henry would be sad when he heard the news, but her parents, her old friends, even Mrs. Henderson, would probably feel nothing but relief.

Finally, the inevitable.

Lucy's tongue swelled in her mouth. Her vision blurred. It was useless. There was no air left for her lungs. No oxygen going to her brain. She felt herself start to give, her muscles releasing. The back of her head hit pavement. She stared up. The sky was impossibly black, pinholes of stars barely visible. The man stared down at her, the same concerned look in his eyes.

Only this time, he was smiling.

Present Day**MONDAY**

Will Trent had never been alone in someone else's home before unless that person was dead. As with many things in his life, he was aware that this was a trait he shared with a lot of serial killers. Fortunately, Will was an agent with the Georgia Bureau of Investigation, so the empty bathrooms he searched and the deserted bedrooms he tossed all fell under the category of intrusions for the greater good.

This revelation didn't help ease his mind as he walked through Sara Linton's apartment. Will had to keep telling himself he had a legitimate reason to be here. Sara had asked him to feed and walk the dogs while she worked an extra shift at the hospital. Barring that, they were hardly strangers. They'd known each other for almost a full year before they'd finally gotten together two weeks ago. Will had spent every night here since. Even before that, he'd met Sara's parents. He'd dined at her family's table. Given all of this familiarity, his feelings of trespass didn't really add up.

Which still didn't stop him from feeling like a stalker.

Maybe this came from the way Will felt being alone here. He was pretty sure that he was obsessed with Sara Linton. He wanted to know everything about her. And while he wasn't seized by the urge to take off his clothes and roll around naked on her bed—at least, not without Sara there with him—he felt the compulsion to look at all the things on her shelves and in her drawers. He wanted to flip through the photo albums she kept in a box in her bedroom closet. He wanted to peruse her books and scroll through her iTunes collection.

Not that he would act on these impulses. Unlike most serial killers, Will was aware that any one of these things crossed the line into creepy. But the desire left him feeling unsettled all the same.

He looped the dogs' leashes around the hook inside the hall closet. Sara's two greyhounds were piled onto the living room couch. A ray of sun bleached their fawn-colored fur. The loft was a penthouse corner unit, which was one of the perks of being a pediatrician instead of a lowly civil servant. The L-shaped wall of windows gave a stellar view of downtown Atlanta. The Bank of America Plaza that looked like the builders had forgotten to remove the scaffolding up top. The steplike Georgia Pacific tower that was built over the movie theater where *Gone with the Wind* premiered. The tiny Equitable building sitting like a black granite paperweight beside the pencil cup of the Westin Peachtree Plaza.

Atlanta was a small town in the scheme of things—the population inside the

city limits was slightly north of five hundred thousand. Bump that out to the metro area and it was closer to six million. The city was a Mecca on the Piedmont, the center of business in the Southeast. Over sixty languages were spoken here. There were more hotel rooms than residents, more office spaces than people. Three hundred murders a year. Eleven hundred reported rapes. Nearly thirteen thousand aggravated assault charges.

More like a small town with a chip on its shoulder.

Will made his way to the kitchen and picked up the water bowls from the floor. The thought of going home to his small house made him feel lonely, which was strange considering Will had grown up wanting to be nothing but alone. There was more to his life than Sara Linton. He was a grown man. He had a job. He had his own dog to look after. He had a home. He'd even been married before. Technically, he was still married, though that hadn't mattered much until recently.

Will was eight years old when the cops dropped off Angie Polaski at the Atlanta Children's Home. She was eleven, and a girl, which meant she stood a good chance of being adopted, but Angie was mouthy and wild and no one wanted her. No one wanted Will, either. He'd spent most of his early life being checked in and out of the children's home like a dog-eared library book. Somehow, Angie made all of it more bearable. Except for the times when she was making it unbearable.

Their marriage had taken place two years ago. It had been perpetrated on a double dog dare, which might explain why neither of them took it very seriously. Angie had lasted less than a week. Two days after the civil ceremony, Will woke up to find her clothes gone, the house empty. He wasn't surprised. He wasn't hurt. Actually, he was enormously relieved that it had happened sooner rather than later. Angie disappeared on him all the time. Will knew that she would be back. She always came back.

Only, this time, for the first time, something had happened while Angie was away. There was Sara. There was the way she breathed in Will's ear. There was the way she traced her fingers down his spine. There was her taste. Her smell. There were all these things Will had never even noticed with Angie.

He clicked his tongue as he put down the water bowls. The dogs stayed on the couch, unimpressed.

Will's Glock was on the counter beside his suit jacket. He clipped the holster onto his belt. He checked the time on the stove as he pulled on his jacket. Sara's shift ended in five minutes, which meant it was at least ten minutes past time for Will to leave. She would probably call him when she got home. He would tell her he was doing paperwork or about to get on the treadmill or some other lie that made it clear he hadn't been sitting around waiting for her to call, and then he would run back over here like Julie Andrews prancing up that hill in *The Sound of Music*.

He was heading to the front door when his cell phone vibrated in his pocket. Will recognized his boss's number. For a split second, he considered sending the call to voicemail, but he knew from experience that Amanda would not be easily deterred.

He answered, "Trent."

"Where are you?"

For some reason, he found the question intrusive. "Why?"

Amanda gave a weary sigh. He could hear noises on her end—the low murmur of a crowd, a repetitive clicking sound. "Just answer me, Will."

"I'm at Sara's." She didn't respond, so he asked, "Do you need me?"

"No, I most certainly do not. You're still on airport duty until further notice. Do you understand me? Nothing else."

He stared at the phone for a moment, then put it back to his ear. "All right."

Abruptly, she ended the call. Will had the distinct feeling she would've slammed down the receiver if such a thing were possible on a cell phone.

Instead of leaving, he stood in the foyer, trying to figure out what had just happened. Will replayed the conversation in his head. No obvious explanation jumped out. Will was used to his boss being obtuse. Anger was hardly a new emotion. But while Amanda had certainly hung up on him before, Will couldn't fathom why she cared where he was at the moment. Actually, he was surprised that she was even talking to him. He hadn't heard her voice in two weeks.

Deputy Director Amanda Wagner was an old-timer, from that group of cops who easily bent the rules to make a case but stuck to the manual when it came to the dress code. The GBI required all non-undercover agents to keep their hair half an inch off their collar. Two weeks ago, Amanda had actually slapped a ruler to the back of Will's neck, and when he hadn't taken the hint, she'd transferred him to airport duty, which required Will to hang out in various men's toilets, waiting for someone to sexually proposition him.

Will's mistake was mentioning the ruler to Sara. He'd told her the story as a sort of joke as well as an explanation for why he needed to run up the street to the barbershop before they went to dinner. Sara hadn't told Will *not* to get his hair cut. She was so much smarter than that. She'd told him she liked his hair the length that it was. She'd told him that it looked good on him. She'd stroked the back of his neck while she said this. And then she had suggested that instead of going to the barber, they go into the bedroom and do something so filthy that Will had experienced a few seconds of hysterical blindness.

Which was why he was looking at spending the rest of his career doing a Mr. Bojangles under the bathroom stall of every men's toilet in the busiest passenger airport in the world.

But it didn't explain why Amanda had felt the need to locate Will on this particular day at this particular time.

Or the sound of people gathered in the background. Or the familiar clicking noise.

Will went back into the living room. The dogs shifted on the couch, but Will didn't sit down. He picked up the remote and turned on the television. A basketball game was on. He flipped to the local station. Monica Pearson, the Channel 2 anchor, was sitting behind her news desk. She was doing a story on the Beltline, the new transportation system that was hated by everyone in Atlanta except for the politicians. Will's finger was on the power button when the story changed. Breaking news. The image of a young woman appeared over Pearson's shoulder. Will turned up the volume as the story was tossed to a live news conference.

What he saw made him sit down.

Amanda Wagner stood at a wooden podium. A handful of microphones were

in front of her. She was waiting for silence. Will heard the familiar sounds: cameras clicking over the low murmur of the crowd.

He'd seen his boss do hundreds of news conferences. Usually, Will was in the back of the room, trying to stay off camera, while Amanda basked in the glow of undivided attention. She loved being in charge. She lived to control the slow trickle of information that fed the media. Except for now. Will studied her face as the camera closed in. She looked tired. More than that—she looked worried.

She said, "The Georgia Bureau of Investigation has released an Alert Bulletin on Ashleigh Renee Snyder. The nineteen-year-old female was reported missing at approximately three-fifteen this afternoon." Amanda paused, giving the newspaper journalists time to scribble down the description. "Ashleigh lives in the Techwood area and is a sophomore at the Georgia Institute of Technology."

Amanda said more, but Will tuned out the words. He watched her mouth move. He saw her point to different reporters. Their questions were long. Her answers were brief. She didn't put up with much. There was none of her usual bantering back and forth. Finally, Amanda left the podium. Monica Pearson returned. The photo of the missing girl was back over her shoulder. Blonde, pretty, thin.

Familiar.

Will took his phone out of his pocket. He touched his thumb to the speed dial for Amanda, but didn't press the number.

By state law, the GBI had to be asked by the local police before they could take over a case. One of the rare exceptions was with kidnappings, where timing was critical and abductors could quickly cross county and state lines. An Alert Bulletin would mobilize all of the GBI field offices. Agents would be called back in. Any collected evidence would be given top priority at the labs. All the agency's resources would be directed toward this one case.

Every resource but Will.

He probably shouldn't read anything into this. It was just another way Amanda had found to punish him. She was still mad about Will's hair. She was petty enough to make a point of keeping him off a case. That was all it was. Will had worked kidnappings before. They were awful cases. They seldom ended well. Still, every cop wanted to work one. The ticking clock. The tension. The chase. The adrenaline jolt was part of the reason they joined in the first place.

And Amanda was punishing Will by keeping him off the case.

Techwood.

A student.

Will turned off the TV. He felt a drop of sweat slide down his back. His mind couldn't settle on any one particular thought. Finally, he shook his head to clear it. That was when he noticed the time on the cable box. Sara's shift had ended twelve minutes ago.

"Crap." Will had to move the dogs before he could stand up. He headed to the front door. Abel Conford, Sara's neighbor, was in the hallway waiting for the elevator.

"Good after—"

Will ducked into the stairwell. He took the steps two at a time, eager to leave so Sara wouldn't think he'd been mooning over her. She lived a few blocks from the hospital. She would be here any minute.

She was actually already here.

Will saw her sitting in her BMW as soon as he opened the lobby door. For a foolish split second, he considered darting into the trees. Then he realized that Sara had already seen his car. His '79 Porsche was parked nose-out beside her brand-new SUV. Will couldn't open his door without hitting Sara's.

He muttered under his breath as he plastered a smile onto his face. Sara didn't return it. She was just sitting there gripping the steering wheel, staring straight ahead. He walked toward the car. The sun was bright enough to turn her windshield into a mirror, so he didn't notice until he was right up on her that she had tears in her eyes.

Instantly, his issue with Amanda ceased to matter. Will pulled the handle on the door. Sara unlocked it from the inside.

He asked, "You okay?"

"Yep." She turned around to face him, propping her feet on the running board. "Bad day at work."

"Want to talk about it?"

"Not really, but thank you." She traced her fingers along the side of his face, tucked his hair behind his ear.

Will leaned in closer. All he could do was look at her. Sara's auburn hair was pulled back into a ponytail. The sunlight brought out the intense green of her eyes. She was wearing her hospital scrubs. There were a few drops of dried blood on the sleeve. She had a series of numbers scribbled on the back of her hand. Blue ink on milky white skin. All the patient charts at Grady were on digital tablets. Sara used the back of her hand to calculate dosages for patients. Knowing this last week would've saved Will two sleepless nights of insane jealousy, but he wasn't one to quibble.

She asked, "Were the dogs okay?"

"They did all the things dogs are supposed to do."

"Thank you for taking care of them." Sara rested her hands on his shoulders. Will felt a familiar stirring. It was like there was an invisible string between them. The slightest tug and he was incapacitated.

She stroked the back of his neck. "Tell me about your day."

"Boring and sad," he answered, which was mostly true. "Some old guy told me I have a nice package."

She gave a sly smile. "Can't arrest him for being honest."

"He was pleasuring himself when he said it."

"That sounds like something fun to try."

Will felt the string go taut. He kissed her. Sara's lips were soft. They tasted like peppermint from the lip balm she used. Her fingernails scratched into his hair. He leaned in closer. And then everything stopped when the front door to the building banged open. Abel Conford gave them a scowl as he stomped toward his Mercedes.

Will had to clear his throat before he could ask Sara, "Are you sure you don't want some time to yourself?"

She adjusted the knot in his tie. "I want to go for a walk with you, and then I want to eat an entire pizza with you, and then I want to spend the rest of the night with you."

Will looked down at his watch. "I think I can fit that in."

Sara slid out of the car and locked the door. Will tucked the key fob into his pocket. The plastic hit the familiar cold metal of his wedding ring. Will had taken off the ring two weeks ago, but for reasons he couldn't begin to decipher, that was as far as he'd gotten.

Sara took his hand as they walked down the sidewalk. Atlanta was at its most spectacular in late March, and today was no exception. A light breeze cooled the air. Every yard was packed with flowers. The oppressive heat of the summer months seemed like an old wives' tale. The sun cut through the swaying trees, lighting up Sara's face. Her tears had dried, but Will could see that she was still troubled about what had happened at the hospital.

He asked, "Sure you're okay?"

Instead of answering, Sara wrapped his arm around her shoulders. She was a few inches shorter than Will, which meant she fit like a puzzle piece under his arm. He felt her hand slip up under his suit jacket. She hooked her thumb over the top of his belt, just shy of his Glock. They passed the usual foot traffic in the neighborhood—joggers, occasional couples, men pushing baby strollers. Women walking dogs. Most of them were on their cell phones, even the runners.

Sara finally spoke. "I lied to you."

He glanced down at her. "About what?"

"I didn't pull an extra shift at the hospital. I stayed around because ..." Her voice trailed off. She looked out into the street. "Because no one else was there."

Will didn't know what else to say but, "Okay."

Her shoulders went up as she took a deep breath. "An eight-year-old boy was brought in around lunchtime." Sara was the pediatric attending in Grady's ER. She saw a lot of kids in bad shape. "He OD'd on his grandmother's blood pressure meds. He took half her ninety-day supply. It was hopeless."

Will kept silent, giving her time.

"His heart rate was less than forty when they brought him in. We lavaged him. We ran through the glucagon. Maxed out on dopamine, epinephrine." Her voice got softer with each word. "There was nothing else I could do. I called the cardiologist to put in a pacemaker, but ..." Sara shook her head again. "We had to let him go. We ended up shipping him to the ICU."

Will saw a black Monte Carlo coasting down the street. The windows were down. Rap music shook the air.

Sara said, "I couldn't leave him alone."

His attention moved away from the car. "Weren't the nurses there?"

"The ward was already packed." Again, she shook her head. "His grandmother wouldn't come to the hospital. Mom's in jail. Dad's unknown. No other relatives. He wasn't conscious. He didn't even know I was there." She paused a moment. "It took him four hours to die. His hands were already cold when we moved him upstairs." She stared down at the sidewalk. "Jacob. His name was Jacob."

Will chewed at the inside of his mouth. He'd been in and out of Grady as a kid. The hospital was the only publicly funded facility left in Atlanta.

He said, "Jacob was lucky to have you."

She tightened her grip around him. Her gaze was still lowered, as if the cracks in the sidewalk needed further study.

They walked on, both silent. Will felt a weight of expectancy. He knew that Sara was thinking about Will's childhood, the fact that his own life could've

ended the same way Jacob's had. Will should at least acknowledge this, remind her that the system had done better by him than most. But he couldn't find the words.

"Hey." Sara tugged at the back of Will's shirt. "We should probably turn around."

She was right. The foot traffic had thinned out. They were nearing Boulevard, which wasn't the best place to be this time of day. Will glanced up, blinking at the bright sun. There were no tall buildings or skyscrapers blocking the light. Just rows and rows of government-subsidized housing.

Techwood had been like this neighborhood up until the mid-nineties, when the Olympics had changed everything. The city had razed the slums. The inhabitants had been moved farther south. Students lived in the upscale apartment buildings now.

Students like Ashleigh Snyder.

Will spoke before he could stop himself. "Why don't we go up that way?"

Sara gave him a curious look. He was pointing toward the projects.

He said, "I want to show you something."

"Around here?"

"It's just a few blocks this way." Will pulled at her shoulder to get her going again. They crossed another street, stepping over a pile of litter. Graffiti was everywhere. Will could practically feel the hair standing up on the back of Sara's neck.

She asked, "Are you sure about this?"

"Trust me," he said, though as if on cue, they approached a seedy-looking clump of shirtless teenagers. All of them sported scowls and low-hanging jeans. They were a veritable rainbow coalition of tweakers, representing almost every ethnicity Atlanta had to offer. One of them had a small swastika tattooed on his fish-white belly. Another had a Puerto Rican flag on his chest. Ball caps were turned backward. Teeth were missing or covered in gold. All of them held liquor-shaped brown paper bags in their hands.

Sara leaned closer to Will. He stared back at the kids. Will was six-three on a good day, but pulling back his jacket sent the stronger message. Nothing discouraged conversation more than the fourteen rounds in a government-issued Glock model 23.

Wordlessly, the group turned and headed in the opposite direction. Will let his eyes track them just to make it clear they should keep moving.

"Where are we going?" Sara asked. She obviously hadn't planned on their afternoon stroll turning into a tour of one of the city's most crime-ridden areas. They were in the full glare of the sun now. There was no shade in this part of town. No one planted flowers in their front yards. Unlike the dogwood-lined streets in the more affluent areas, there was nothing here but bright xenon streetlights and clear open spaces so the police helicopters could track stolen cars or fleeing perpetrators.

"Just a little bit more," Will said, rubbing her shoulder in what he hoped was a soothing manner.

They walked silently for a few more blocks. He could feel Sara tense up the farther they got from home.

Will asked, "Do you know what this area is called?"

Sara glanced around at the street signs. "SoNo? Old Fourth Ward?"

"It used to be called Buttermilk Bottom."

She smiled at the name. "Why?"

"It was a slum. No paved streets. No electricity. See how steep the grade is?"

Sara nodded. "The sewage used to back up here. They said it smelled like buttermilk." Will saw she wasn't smiling anymore. He dropped his arm to Sara's waist as they turned onto Carver Street. He pointed to the boarded-up coffee shop on the corner. "That used to be a grocery store."

She looked up at him.

"Mrs. Flannigan sent me there every day after school to buy her a pack of Kool 100s and a bottle of Tab."

"Mrs. Flannigan?"

"She ran the children's home."

Sara's expression didn't change, but she nodded.

Will felt an odd sensation in his belly, like he'd swallowed a handful of hornets. He didn't know why he'd brought Sara here. He wasn't generally impulsive. He'd never been one to volunteer details about his life. Sara knew Will had grown up in care. She knew that his mother had died shortly after he was born. Will assumed she'd figured out the rest on her own. Sara wasn't just a pediatrician. She'd been the medical examiner back in her small town. She knew what abuse looked like. She knew what Will looked like. Given her training, it wasn't hard to put together the clues.

"Record shop," Will said, pointing out another abandoned building. He kept his arm around her waist, guiding her toward their ultimate destination. The hornet sensation got worse. Ashleigh Snyder kept flashing into his mind. The photo they showed on the news must have been from her student ID card. The girl's blonde hair was pulled back. Her lips showed an amused smile, as if the photographer had said something funny.

Sara asked, "Where did you live?"

Will stopped. They had almost passed the children's home. The building was so changed that it was barely recognizable. The Spanish Revival brick architecture had been completely bastardized. Large metal awnings eyebrowed the front windows. The red brick had been painted a rheumy yellow. Chunks of the façade were missing. The huge wooden front door that had been gloss black as long as Will could remember was now a garish red. The glass was caked with dirt. In the yard, Mrs. Flannigan's white painted tires no longer held tulips and pansies. They were no longer white, either. Will was afraid to guess what was inside them now, and he didn't want to get close enough to find out. There was a sign slapped onto the side of the building.

"'Coming soon: Luxury Condos,'" Sara read. "Not too soon, I'm guessing."

Will stared up at the building. "It didn't used to be like this."

Sara's reluctance was palpable, but she still asked, "Do you want to look inside?"

He wanted to run away from here as fast as he could, but Will forced himself to walk up the front steps. As a kid, he'd always felt a certain amount of dread every time he entered the home. There were new boys constantly in and out. Each of them had something to prove, sometimes with their fists. This time, it wasn't physical violence that sent a cold fear through Will. It was Ashleigh

Snyder. It was the unreasonable connection Will was making because the missing girl looked so much like his mother.

He pressed his face close to the window, but couldn't see anything other than the reflection of his own eyes staring back. The front door was secured with an expensive-looking padlock. The wood was so rotted that one yank on the hasp pulled out the screws.

Will hesitated, his palm flat to the door. He felt Sara standing behind him, waiting. He wondered what she would do if he changed his mind and walked back down the stairs.

As if sensing his thoughts, she said, "We can go." Then, more pointedly, "Why don't we go?"

Will pushed open the door. There was no expected creaking of hinges, but the door caught on the warped wooden floor so that he had to shove it open. Will tested the floorboards as he entered. Though it was still light out, the house was dark, thanks mostly to the heavy awnings and dirty windows. A musky smell greeted him, nothing like the welcoming scent of Pine-Sol and Kool 100s Will recalled from his childhood. He tried the light switch to no avail.

Sara said, "Maybe we should—"

"Looks like it was turned into a hotel." Will pointed to the caged front desk. Keys still hung from the cubbyholes along the back wall. "Or a halfway house."

Will glanced around what he guessed was the lobby. Broken glass pipes and tinfoil littered the floor. The crack addicts had demolished the couch and chairs. There were several used condoms melted into the carpet.

"My God," Sara whispered.

Will felt oddly defensive. "Picture it with the walls painted white, and the sofa this big, yellow, kind of corduroy sectional." He looked down at the floor. "Same carpet. It was a lot cleaner, though."

Sara nodded, and he walked toward the back of the building before she could run out the front. The large open spaces from Will's childhood had been chopped up into single-room apartments, but he could still remember what it had looked like in better times.

He told Sara, "This was the dining hall. There were twelve tables. Kind of like picnic benches, but with tablecloths and nice napkins. Boys on one side, girls on the other. Mrs. Flannigan was careful about letting the girls and boys mingle too much. She said she didn't need more kids than she already had."

Sara didn't laugh at the joke.

"Here." Will stopped in front of an open doorway. The room was a dark hole. He could easily picture how it used to be. Flowery wallpaper. A metal desk and wooden chair. "This was Mrs. Flannigan's office."

"What happened to her?"

"Heart attack. She died before the ambulance got here." He continued down the hallway and pushed open a familiar-looking swinging door. "The kitchen, obviously." This space, at least, hadn't changed. "That's the same stove from when I was a kid." Will opened the pantry door. There was still food stacked on the shelves. Mold had turned a loaf of bread into a black brick. Graffiti marred the back of the door. "Fuck you! Fuck you! Fuck you!" was carved into the soft wood.

Sara said, "Looks like the addicts redecorated."

"That was always there," Will admitted. "This is where you had to go if you acted up."

Sara pressed her lips together as she studied the bolt on the door.

Will said, "Trust me, being locked in a pantry wasn't the worst thing that ever happened to a lot of these kids." He saw the question in her eyes. "I was never locked in there."

She gave a strained smile. "I should hope not."

"It wasn't as bad as you're thinking. We had food. We had a roof over our heads. We had a color TV. You know how much I love watching television."

She nodded, and he led her back into the hallway toward the front stairs. He tapped a closed door along the way. "Basement."

"Did Mrs. Flannigan lock kids down there, too?"

"It was off limits," Will answered, though he happened to know that Angie had spent a lot of time down there with the older boys.

Carefully, Will walked up the stairs, testing each step before letting Sara follow. The scruffy treads were just as he remembered, but he had to duck at the top of the landing to keep from smacking his head on a structural beam.

"Back here." He took purposeful strides down the hallway, acting as if this was exactly what he'd planned to do with his evening. As with downstairs, the space was divided into single rooms that met with the needs of the prostitutes, drug addicts, and alcoholics who'd likely rented space by the hour. Most of the doors were open or hanging off their hinges. The plaster around the baseboards had been nibbled away by rats. The walls were probably crawling with their offspring. Or cockroaches. Or both.

Will stopped at the next-to-last door and pushed it open with his foot. An iron cot and a smashed wooden table were the only contents. The carpet was a fecal brown. The one window in the room was cut in half, the other side shared with the next-door neighbor.

"My bed was here against the wall. Bunk bed. I got the top."

Sara didn't respond. Will turned around to look at her. She was biting her lip in a way that made him think that the pain was the only thing keeping her from crying.

"I know it looks awful," he said. "But it wasn't like this when I was a kid. I promise. It was nice. It was clean."

"It was an orphanage."

The word echoed in his head like she'd shouted it down a well. There was no getting past this difference between them. Sara had grown up with two loving parents, a doting sister, and a stable, solidly middle-class life.

And Will had grown up here.

"Will?" she asked. "What just happened?"

He rubbed his chin. Why was he such an idiot? Why did he keep making mistakes with Sara that he'd never made with anyone else in his life? There was a reason he didn't talk about his childhood. People felt pity when they should've felt relief.

"Will?"

"I'll take you home. I'm sorry."

"Please don't be. This is your home. Was your home. It's where you grew up."

"It's a flophouse in the middle of a slum. We're probably going to get stabbed

by a junkie as soon as we leave.”

She laughed.

“It’s not funny, Sara. It’s dangerous here. Half the crime in the city happens—”

“I know where we are.” She put her hands on either side of his face. “Thank you.”

“For what? Making you need a tetanus shot?”

“For sharing part of your life with me.” She gently kissed him on the lips.

“Thank you.”

Will stared into her eyes, wishing he could read her mind. He didn’t understand Sara Linton. She was kind. She was honest. She wasn’t storing up information to later use against him. She wasn’t jabbing her thumb into open wounds. She wasn’t anything like any woman he’d ever met in his life.

Sara kissed him again. She stroked his hair back over his ear. “Sweetheart, I know that look, and it’s not going to happen here.”

Will opened his mouth to respond, but stopped when he heard the sound of a car door slamming.

Sara jumped at the noise, her fingers digging into his arm.

“It’s a busy street,” Will told her, but he still went to the front of the house to investigate. Through the broken window at the end of the hallway, he saw a black Suburban parked at the curb. The glass was smoked black. The freshly washed exterior sparkled in the sun. The back end was lower than the front because of the large metal gun cabinet bolted into the rear of the SUV.

Will told Sara, “That’s a G-ride.” A government-issued vehicle. Amanda drove one exactly like it, so he shouldn’t have been surprised to see her get out of the Suburban.

She was talking on her BlackBerry. A hammer was in her other hand. The claw was long and nasty. She swung it at her side as she walked toward the front door.

Sara asked, “What’s she doing here?” She tried to look out the window, but Will pulled her back. “Why does she have a hammer?”

Will didn’t answer—couldn’t answer. There was no reason for Amanda to be here. No reason for her to call and ask Will where he was. No reason to tell him to report to the airport like she was giving a child a time-out in the corner.

Amanda’s voice carried through the closed window as she talked on the phone. “That’s unacceptable. I want the full team answering to me. No exceptions.”

The front door opened. It creaked this time. Will heard footsteps across the floor.

Amanda made a disgusted noise. “This is my case, Mike. I’ll work it how I see fit.”

Sara whispered, “What is she—”

Will’s expression must’ve stopped her. His jaw felt clamped shut. He was gripped by a sudden, inexplicable fury. He held up his hand, indicating Sara should stay there. Before she could argue, Will headed down the stairs, stepping carefully so the treads wouldn’t creak. He was sweating again. The hornets in his gut had worked their way into his chest, trapping his breath.

Amanda tucked her BlackBerry in her back pocket. She gripped the hammer in her hand as she started down the basement stairs.

He said, "Amanda."

She spun around, grabbing the handrail for support. There was no mistaking the look on her face for anything but absolute shock. "What are you doing here?"

"Is the girl still missing?"

She didn't move from the top stair. She was obviously still too shocked to speak.

He repeated his question. "Is the girl still—"

"Yes."

"Then why are you here?"

"Go home, Will." He'd never heard anything like fear in her voice, but he could tell now that she was deathly afraid—not of Will, but of something else. "Just let me handle this."

"Handle what?"

She rested her hand on the doorknob, as if she wanted nothing more than to close him out. "Go home."

"Not until you tell me why you're alone in an abandoned building when there's an active case."

She raised an eyebrow. "I'm not actually alone, am I?"

"Tell me what's going on."

"I'm not—" Her words were cut off by a loud crack. Panic filled her eyes. Another crack came like a shotgun blast. Amanda started to fall. She clutched the doorknob. Will lunged to help, but he was too late. The door slammed closed as the stairs collapsed. The noise rumbled through the building like a charging freight train.

Then—nothing.

Will jerked open the door. The knob rattled at his feet. He stared down into absolute blackness. Uselessly, he flipped the light switch up and down.

"Amanda?" he called. His voice echoed back at him. "Amanda?"

"Will?" Sara was on the landing. She quickly took in what had happened. "Give me your phone."

Will tossed her the phone. He took off his jacket and holster and got down on the floor.

Sara said, "You are *not* going down there."

Will froze, startled by the order, the unfamiliar sharp tone of her voice.

"We're in a crack house, Will. There could be needles down there. Broken glass. It's too dangerous." She held up her finger as the phone was obviously answered on the other end. "This is Dr. Linton from the ER. I need a bus and rescue sent to Carver Street for an officer down."

Will provided, "Street number's 316." He sat on his knees and leaned his head into the basement as Sara rattled off the details. "Amanda?" He waited. No response. "Can you hear me?"

Sara ended the call. "They're on their way. Just stay there until—"

"Amanda?" Will glanced around the hallway, trying to put together a plan. Finally, he turned around and got down on his belly.

Sara pleaded, "Will, don't."

He elbowed back until his feet hung down into the basement.

"You're going to fall."

He edged back farther, expecting any moment for his feet to hit solid ground.

"There are broken pieces of wood down there. You could shatter your ankle. You could land on Amanda."

Will gripped the edge of the doorjambs with his fingers, praying that his arms wouldn't give. Which they eventually did. He dropped straight down like the blade on a guillotine.

"Will?" Sara was in the open doorway. She got down on her knees. "Are you all right?"

Pieces of wood poked into his back like sharp fingers. Sawdust filled the air. Will's nose had banged into his knee so hard that pinpoints of light exploded in front of his eyes. He touched the side of his ankle. A nail had scraped across the bone. His teeth ached at the memory.

"Will?" Sara's tone rose in alarm. "Will?"

"I'm all right." He felt his ankle squick as he moved. Blood pooled into the heel of his shoe. He tried to make light of the situation. "Looks like I was right about needing that tetanus shot."

She mumbled a shocking expletive.

Will tried to stand, but his feet couldn't find purchase. He blindly reached out, thinking Amanda was close by. He got on his knees, leaning out farther, and finally was rewarded with a foot. Her shoe was missing. Her pantyhose were torn.

"Amanda?" Carefully, Will picked his way across the shards of wood and broken nails. He put his hand on her shin, then her thigh. He gently felt along until he found her arm folded over her stomach.

Amanda moaned.

Will's stomach roiled as his fingers followed the unnatural angle of her wrist. "Amanda?" he repeated.

She moaned again. Will knew she'd have a Maglite in the Suburban. He dug his fingers into the front pockets of her jeans, trying to find her keys. He could send Sara out to the car. She would have to search for the flashlight. He would tell her it was in the glove compartment or one of the locked drawers. She would spend several minutes looking for the light, which was exactly what Will needed.

"Amanda?" He checked her back pockets. The tips of his fingers brushed along the broken plastic case on her BlackBerry.

Suddenly, Amanda's good hand clamped around his wrist. She asked, "Where's My-kel?"

Will stopped searching for the keys. "Amanda? It's Will. Will Trent."

Her tone was terse. "I know who you are, Wilbur."

Will felt his body go rigid. Only Angie called him Wilbur. It was the name on his birth certificate.

Sara asked, "Is she okay?"

Will had to swallow before he could speak. "I think her wrist is broken."

"How's her respiration?"

He listened for the cadence of her breath, but all he could hear was his own blood pounding in his ears. Why was Amanda here? She should be out looking for the missing girl. She should be leading the team. She shouldn't be here. In this basement. With a hammer.

"Will?" Sara's tone was softer now. She was worried about him.

He asked, "How long before the ambulance gets here?"

"Not much longer. Are you sure you're all right?"

"I'm fine." Will put his hand on Amanda's foot again. He could feel a steady pulse near her ankle. He'd worked for this woman most of his career but still knew very little about her. She lived in a condo in the heart of Buckhead. She had been on the job longer than he had been alive, which put her age in the mid-sixties. She kept her salt-and-pepper hair coiffed in the shape of a football helmet and wore pantyhose with starched blue jeans. She had a sharp tongue, more degrees than a college professor, and she knew that his name was Wilbur even though he'd had it legally changed when he entered college and every piece of paper the GBI had on file listed his legal name as William Trent.

He cleared his throat again so that he could ask Sara, "Is there anything I should be doing?"

"No, just stay where you are." Sara used a raised, clear tone Will thought of as her doctor's voice. "Amanda. This is Dr. Linton. Can you tell me today's date?"

She groaned out a pained breath. "I told Edna to shore up those steps a million times."

Will sat back on his heels. Something sharp pressed against his knee. He felt blood sliding across his ankle, dripping through his sock. His heart was pounding so hard that he was sure Sara could hear it.

"Will," Amanda mumbled. "What time is it?"

Will couldn't answer her. His mouth felt wired shut.

Sara took over, saying, "It's five-thirty."

"In the evening," Amanda said, not a question. "We're at the children's home. I fell down the basement stairs." She lay there taking deep breaths of the pungent air. "Dr. Linton, am I going to live?"

"I'd be very surprised if you didn't."

"Well, I suppose that's as much as I can ask for right now. Did I lose consciousness?"

"Yes," Sara answered. "For about two minutes."

Amanda spoke more to herself. "I don't know what that means. Are you touching my foot?"

Will pulled away his hand.

"I can move my toes." Amanda sounded relieved. "My head feels like it's been cracked open." He heard movement, the rustling of clothes. "No, nothing sticking out. No blood. No soft spots. God, my shoulder hurts."

Will tasted blood. His nose was bleeding. He used the back of his hand to wipe his mouth.

Amanda let out another heavy sigh. "I'll tell you what, Will. You get past a certain age and a broken bone or a cracked head is no laughing matter. It's with you for the rest of your life. What's left of the rest of your life."

She was quiet for a few seconds. From the sound of it, she was trying to keep her breathing steady. Despite the fact that he was obviously not going to answer, she told Will, "When I joined the Atlanta Police Department, there was a whole division assigned to checking our appearance. The Inspection Division. Six full-duty officers. I'm not making that up."

Will glanced up at Sara. She shrugged.

"They would show up during roll call, and if you didn't fix what they told you to fix, you were suspended without pay."

He put his hand to his watch, wishing he could feel the second hand ticking by. Grady Hospital was only a few blocks away. There was no reason for the ambulance to be taking so long. They knew Amanda was a cop. They knew she needed help.

Amanda said, "I remember the first time I rolled up on a signal forty-five. Some jackass had a CB radio stolen out of his car. We were always getting forty-fives on CB radios. They had those big antennas pointing like arrows off their back bumpers."

Again, Will glanced up at Sara. She made a circling motion, indicating he should keep Amanda talking.

Will's throat was too tight. He couldn't force out the words, couldn't pretend that they were all just a bunch of friends who'd had a bad day.

Amanda didn't seem to need encouragement. She chuckled under her breath. "They laughed at me. They laughed at me when I got there. They laughed at me when I took the report. They laughed at me when I left. No one thought women should be in uniform. The station would get calls every week—someone reporting that a woman had stolen a squad car. They couldn't believe we were on the job."

Sara said, "I think they're here," just as Will heard the distant wail of a siren. "I'll go wave them down."

Will waited until Sara's footsteps were on the front porch. It took everything in him not to grab Amanda by the shoulders and shake her. "Why are you here?"

"Is Sara gone?"

"Why are you here?"

Amanda's tone turned uncharacteristically gentle. "I have to tell you something."

"I don't care," he shot back. "How did you know—"

"Shut up and listen," she hissed. "Are you listening?"

Will felt the dread come flooding back. The siren was louder. The ambulance braked hard in front of the house.

"Are you listening?"

Will found himself speechless again.

"It's about your father."

She said more, but Will's ears felt muffled, as if he was listening to her voice underwater. As a kid, Will had ruined the earpiece to his transistor radio that way, putting the bud in his ear, dunking his head in the bathtub, thinking that would be a cool new way to hear music. It had been in this very house. Two floors up in the boys' bathroom. He was lucky he hadn't electrocuted himself.

There was a loud thunk overhead as paramedics shoved open the front door. Heavy footsteps banged across the floor. The bright beam of a Maglite suddenly filled the basement. Will blinked in the glare. He felt dizzy. His lungs ached for breath.

Amanda's words came rushing back to him the same way sound had come back to his ears when he'd grabbed the sides of the tub and thrust his head above water.

"Listen to me," she'd ordered.

But he didn't want to. He didn't want to know what she had to say.
The parole board had met. They had let Will's father out of prison.

three

October 15, 1974

LUCY BENNETT

Lucy had lost track of time once the symptoms had subsided. She knew it took heroin three days to fully leave your bloodstream. She knew that the sweats and sickness lasted a week or more, depending on how far gone you were. The stomach cramps. The throbbing pain in your legs. The alternating constipation and diarrhea. The bright red blood from your lungs giving up the Drano or baby formula or whatever was used to cut down the Boy.

People had died trying to leave H on their own. The drug was vengeful. It owned you. It clawed into your skin and wouldn't let go. Lucy had seen its castoffs laid out in back rooms and vacant parking lots. Their flesh desiccated. Fingers and toes curled. Their nails and hair kept growing. They looked like mummified witches.

Weeks? Months? Years?

The stifling August heat had been broken by what could only be fall temperatures. Cool mornings. Cold nights. Was winter coming? Was it still 1974, or had she missed Thanksgiving, Christmas, her birthday?

Sands through the hourglass.

Did it really matter anymore?

Every day, Lucy wished that she was dead. The heroin was gone, but not a second went by when she wasn't thinking about that high. The transcendence. The obliteration. The numbing of her mind. The ecstasy of the needle hitting vein. The rush of fire burning through her senses. Those first few days, Lucy could still taste the H in her vomit. She'd tried to eat it, but the man had forced her to stop.

The man.

The monster.

Who would do something like this? It defied logic. There was no pattern in Lucy's life to explain why this was happening. As bad as some of her johns were, they always let her go. Once they got what they wanted, they tossed her back into the street. They didn't want to see her again. They hated the sight of her. They kicked her if she didn't move fast enough. They shoved her out of their cars and sped away.

But not him. Not this man. Not this devil.

Lucy wanted him to fuck her. She wanted him to beat her. She wanted him to do anything but the loathsome routine she had to endure every day. The way he brushed her hair and teeth. The way he bathed her. The chaste way he used the

rag to wash between her legs. The gentle pats of the towel as he dried her. The look of pity every time her eyes opened and closed. And the praying. The constant praying.

“Wash away your sins. Wash away your sins.” It was his mantra. He said nothing directly to her. He only spoke to God, as if He would listen to an animal like this man. Lucy asked why—why her? Why this? She screamed at him. She begged him. She offered him anything, and all he said was, “Wash away your sins.”

Lucy had grown up with prayer. Over the years, she had often found solace in religion. The smell of a burning candle or the taste of wine could send her back to the church pew, where she happily sat between her mother and father. Her brother, Henry, would scribble crude drawings on the bulletin, bored nearly to death, but Lucy loved listening to the preacher extol the vast rewards of a godly life. On the streets, it gave her comfort to think about those sermons from long ago. Even as a sinner, she was not completely without salvation. The crucifixion meant nothing if not to redeem Lucy Bennett’s soul.

But not like this. Never like this. Not the soap and water. Not the blood and wine. Not the needle and thread.

There was penance, and then there was torture.

July 7, 1975

MONDAY

Amanda Wagner let out a long sigh of relief as she drove out of her father's Ansley Park neighborhood. Duke had been in rare form this morning. He'd begun a litany of complaints the moment Amanda walked through his kitchen door and not stopped until she was waving goodbye from behind the wheel of her car. Feckless veterans looking for handouts. Gas prices through the roof. New York City expecting the rest of the country to bail them out. There was not one story in the morning paper about which Duke did not share his opinion. By the time he'd started listing the seemingly endless faults of the newly organized Atlanta Police Department, Amanda was only half listening, nodding occasionally to keep his temper from turning in the wrong direction.

She cooked his breakfast. She kept his coffee mug filled. She emptied his ashtrays. She laid out a shirt and tie on his bed. She wrote down directions for thawing the roast so she could fix his supper after work. Meanwhile, the only thing that made it all bearable was thinking about her tiny studio apartment on Peachtree Street.

The place was less than five minutes away from her father's house, but it might as well be on the moon. Stuck between the library and the hippie compound along Fourteenth Street, the apartment was one of six units in an old Victorian mansion. Duke had taken one look at the space and snorted that he'd had better accommodations on Midway during the war. None of the windows would properly close. The freezer wasn't cold enough to make ice. The kitchen table had to be moved before the oven door could be opened. The toilet lid scraped the side of the bathtub.

It was love at first sight.

Amanda was twenty-five years old. She was going to college. She had a good job. After years of begging, she'd finally managed by some miracle to persuade her father to let her move out. She wasn't exactly Mary Richards, but at least she wouldn't pass for Edith Bunker anymore.

She slowed her car and took a right turn onto Highland Avenue, then another right into the strip mall behind the pharmacy. The summer heat was almost suffocating, though it was only quarter till eight in the morning. Steam misted from the asphalt as she pulled into a parking space at the far end of the lot. Her hands were sweating so badly that she could barely grip the steering wheel. Her pantyhose were cutting into her waist. The back of her shirt stuck to the seat. There was a throbbing ache in her neck that was working its way up to her

temples.

Still, Amanda rolled down her shirtsleeves and buttoned the tight cuffs at her wrists. She dragged her purse off the passenger's seat, thinking the bag got heavier every time she lifted it. She reminded herself that it was better than what she was wearing on patrol this time last year. Undergarments. Pantyhose. Black socks. Navy-colored, polyester-blend pants. A man's cotton shirt that was so big the breast pockets tucked below her waist. Underbelt. Metal hooks. Outer belt. Holster. Gun. Radio. Shoulder mic. Kel-Lite. Handcuffs. Nightstick. Key holder.

It was no wonder the patrolwomen of the Atlanta police force had bladders the size of watermelons. It took ten minutes to remove all the equipment from your waist before you could go to the bathroom—and that was assuming you could sit down without your back going into spasms. The Kel-Lite alone, with its four D-cell batteries and eighteen-inch-long shaft, weighed in at just under eight pounds.

Amanda felt every ounce of the weight as she hefted her purse onto her shoulder and got out of the car. Same equipment, but now that she was a plainclothes officer it was in a leather bag instead of on her hips. It had to be called progress.

Her father had been in charge of Zone 1 when Amanda joined the force. For nearly twenty years, Captain Duke Wagner had run the unit with an iron fist, right up until Reginald Eaves, Atlanta's first black public safety commissioner, fired most of the senior white officers and replaced them with blacks. The collective outrage had nearly toppled the force. That previous chief John Inman had done basically the same thing in reverse seemed to be a fact lost in everyone's collective memory. The good ol' boy network was fine so long as you were one of the lucky few who were dialed in.

Consequently, Duke and his ilk were suing the city for their old jobs back. Maynard Jackson, the city's first black mayor, was backing his man. No one knew how it would end, though to hear Duke talk, it was just a matter of time before the city capitulated. No matter their color, politicians needed votes, and voters wanted to feel safe. Which explained why the police force gripped the city like a devouring octopus, its tentacles spreading in every direction.

Six patrol zones stretched from the impoverished Southside to the more affluent northern neighborhoods. Spotted within these zones were so-called "Model Cities," precincts that served the more violent sections of the downtown corridor. There were small pockets of wealth inside Ansley Park, Piedmont Heights, and Buckhead, but a good many of the city's inhabitants lived in slums, from Grady Homes to Techwood to the city's most notorious housing project, Perry Homes. This Westside ghetto was so dangerous it warranted its own police force. It was the sort of job returning vets clamored for, more like a war zone than a neighborhood.

The plainclothes and detective units were posted across the zones. There were twelve divisions in all, from vice control to special investigations. Sex crimes was one of the few divisions that allowed women in any numbers. Amanda doubted very seriously her father would've let her apply for the unit had he still been on the force when she submitted her application. She cringed to think what would happen if Duke won his lawsuit and got reinstated. He'd likely have her

back in uniform performing crossing-guard duties in front of Morningside Elementary.

But that was a long-term problem, and Amanda's day—if it was like any other—would be filled with short-term problems. The primary issue each morning was with whom she would be partnered.

The federal Law Enforcement Assistance Association grant that had created the Atlanta police sex crimes division required all teams to be comprised of three-officer units that were racially and sexually integrated. These rules were seldom followed, because white women could not ride alone with black men, black women—at least the ones who wanted to keep their reputations—did not want to ride with black men, and none of the blacks wanted to ride with any man who was white. Every day was a battle just to figure out who was going to work with whom, which was ludicrous considering that most of them changed partners once they were out on the streets anyway.

Still, there were often heated arguments about assignments. Much posturing was to be found. Names were called. Occasionally fists were employed. In fact, the only thing that the men of the sex crimes unit could agree upon as far as assignments were concerned was that none of them wanted to be stuck with women.

At least, not unless they were pretty.

The problem trickled down to other divisions as well. Every morning, Commissioner Reginald Eaves's daily bulletin was read at the beginning of roll call. Reggie was always transferring people around to fill whatever federal quota was being forced down their throats that day. No officer knew where he or she would land when they showed up for work. It could be the middle of Perry Homes or the living hell that was the Atlanta airport. Just last year, a woman had been assigned to SWAT for a week, which would've been a disaster if she'd actually had to do anything.

Amanda had always been on day watch, probably because her father wanted it that way. No one seemed to notice or care that she continued with the schedule even as Duke sued the city. Day watch, the easiest rotation, was from eight to four. Evening watch was four to midnight, and morning watch, which was the most dangerous, ran from midnight until eight in the morning.

The patrol officers worked roughly the same schedules as the detective and plainclothes divisions, less an hour on either side, which followed the old 7–3–11 railroad schedule. The thinking was that one would hand over to the other. This seldom happened. Most of the time when Amanda got into work, she'd run into a couple of suspects sporting black eyes or bloody bandages on their heads. They were generally handcuffed to the benches by the front door and no one could say exactly how they'd gotten there or with what they'd been charged. Depending on how a uniformed officer's arrests were looking that month, some of the prisoners were freed, then immediately arrested again for loitering.

As with most zone headquarters, Zone 1 was housed in a dilapidated storefront that looked like the sort of place the police should be raiding, not milling around inside of drinking coffee and trading war stories about yesterday's arrests. Located behind the Plaza Pharmacy and a theater specializing in pornographic films, the zone headquarters had been unceremoniously relocated to this location when it was discovered the previous

HQ was located directly above a sinkhole. *The Atlanta Constitution* had had a field day with that one.

There were only three rooms in the building. The largest was the squad room, which had the sergeant's office cordoned off by a glass partition. The captain's office was far nicer, meaning that the windows actually opened and closed. Before the Fourth of July holiday, someone had broken the plate-glass window in front of the squad room in order to let in fresh air. No one had bothered to fix it, probably because they knew it would just be broken again.

The third room was the toilet, but it was shared, and it had been ensured that no woman would ever be able to sit down on the seat. The one time Amanda had walked into the bathroom, she'd ended up dry heaving behind the Plaza Theater while the grunts and moans of *Winnie Bango* reverberated through the cinder-block wall.

"Mornin', ma'am." One of the patrolmen tipped his hat as Amanda walked by.

She nodded in return, making her way past a cluster of familiar white Atlanta Police cruisers as she headed for the squad entrance. The stench of winos permeated the air, though the benches were absent any handcuffed vagrants. A veil of cigarette smoke hugged the stained drop ceiling. Every surface had a layer of dust, even the long cafeteria-style tables set out in crooked lines across the room. The podium in front was empty. Amanda looked at the clock. She had ten minutes to spare before morning roll call.

Vanessa Livingston was sitting in the back of the squad room going over paperwork. She was wearing gray slacks and the same ugly, black men's shoes they'd all been forced to wear when they were in uniform. Her light blue shirt was short-sleeved and she wore her dark hair in a pageboy that curved out widely at the sides.

Amanda had patrolled with Vanessa a few times back when they were both in uniform. She was a reliable partner, but she could be a little hippie-dippie and there were rumors going around that she was trim—code for women who made themselves sexually available to police officers. Amanda didn't have a choice but to sit by her. As usual, the squad room was divided into four quadrants. White and black either side, women in back, men in the front.

Amanda kept her gaze straight ahead as she walked through a cluster of uniformed men. They all waited until the last minute to let her pass. A group in the corner were working deadbolt locks. There were daily competitions to see who could pick a lock the fastest. A few officers were trading hot-loaded ammunition. Over the last two years, fourteen Atlanta cops had been shot dead. A faster bullet in your gun was not a bad idea.

Amanda dropped her purse onto the table as she sat down. "How are you?"

"I'm very well." Vanessa's voice was cheerful, as usual. "I lucked up with Inspection Division this morning."

"They've already left?"

Vanessa nodded. Amanda immediately unbuttoned her cuffs and rolled up her sleeves. The fresh air on her arms was almost enough to make her swoon.

Amanda asked, "It wasn't Geary?" There was no way Sergeant Mike Geary would've given Vanessa a pass. He didn't think women should be on the job, and he had the power to do something about it. For some reason, he particularly had it in for Amanda. She was one more citation away from a daylong suspension.

She couldn't even think what she'd do for rent if that happened.

"Geary's out today." Vanessa stacked her reports together. "It was Sandra Phillips, the black chick keeps her head shaved like a man?"

"I have a class with her," Amanda said. Most everyone she knew was taking night courses at Georgia State. The federal government paid tuition and the city was forced to bump up your pay if you got a degree. This time next year, Amanda would be pulling in almost twelve thousand dollars.

Vanessa asked, "You have a good Fourth?"

"I took a few extra shifts," Amanda admitted. She'd volunteered for no other reason than she couldn't face a whole day of her father rehashing every story he'd read in the newspapers. Thank goodness the paper only came twice a day or he'd never sleep. "What about you?"

"Drank so much I crashed my car into a telephone pole."

"Is the car all right?"

"Fender's smashed, but it still drives." Vanessa made her voice low. "You heard about Oglethorpe?"

Lars Oglethorpe was one of Duke's friends. They'd both been fired the same day. "What about him?"

"State supreme court ruled in his favor. Full back pay and benefits. Reinstated rank. He's been assigned to his old uniformed squad. I bet Reggie had a cow when he heard."

Amanda didn't have time to answer. There was a series of masculine cheers as Rick Landry and Butch Bonnie walked into the squad. As usual, the homicide detectives were up against the clock. Roll call was scheduled to start in two minutes. Amanda reached into her purse and pulled out a stack of typed reports.

"You're a doll." Butch took the reports and tossed his notebook on the table in front of Amanda. "Hope you can read it."

She looked at his scrawl across the first page and frowned. "I swear sometimes you make this illegible on purpose."

"Gimme a call, sweetheart. Day or night." He gave her a wink as he followed Landry to the front of the room. "Night's preferable."

There were chuckles around the room, which Amanda pretended to ignore as she flipped through Butch's notes. The words got easier to read as she paged along. Butch and Rick worked homicide division. There was a job Amanda never wanted. Because she typed Butch's reports, she couldn't help but absorb some of the details. They had to tell relatives that their family members were murdered. They had to look at dead people and watch autopsies. Just reading about these things turned Amanda's stomach. There really were some jobs that only men could do.

Vanessa asked, "Did you hear we've got a new sergeant?"

Amanda waited expectantly.

"He's one of Reggie's boys."

Amanda suppressed a groan. One of Reginald Eaves's seemingly better ideas was to finally institute a written exam for promotions. Amanda had actually been foolish enough to believe she had a chance. When none of the black officers could pass the written exam, Eaves had thrown out the results and instituted an oral exam. Predictably, very few white officers were able to pass the orals. None of them had been women.

Vanessa said, "I hear he's from up North. Sounds like Bill Cosby."

They both turned around, trying to see into the sergeant's office. There were filing cabinets stacked in front of the glass partition. The door was open, but all Amanda could see was another filing cabinet and the edge of a wooden desk. A glass ashtray was on the leather blotter. A black hand reached over and tapped a cigarette against the glass. The fingers were slim, almost delicate. The nails were trimmed in a straight, blunt line.

Amanda turned back around. She pretended to read Butch's notes, but her mind wouldn't focus. Maybe it was the heat. Or maybe it was because she was sitting next to a mynah bird.

Vanessa said, "I wonder where Evelyn is?"

Amanda shrugged, still staring at the notes.

"I can't believe she came back," Vanessa continued. "She's gotta be trippin'."

Despite her best intentions, Amanda felt herself getting sucked back in. "It's been almost two years," she realized. Duke had been off the job eleven months. Evelyn had left to have her baby the year before that. The woman had just made plainclothes division. Everyone assumed that was the end of her working life.

Vanessa said, "If I had a husband and a kid, no way I'd show up at this dump every day. It'd be 'Good night, John-Boy' for me."

"Maybe she has to." Amanda kept her voice low so no one could hear her gossiping. "For the money."

"Her husband makes plenty of dough. He's sold insurance to half the force." Vanessa snorted a laugh. "That's probably the only reason she came back—to help him sell policies." Her teasing tone dropped. "You really should talk to him, though. He's got cheaper rates than Benowitz. Plus, you wouldn't be giving your money to a Jew."

"I'll ask Evelyn," Amanda said, though she liked Nathan Benowitz. Her Plymouth belonged to the city, but they all had to pay for their own car insurance. Benowitz had always been nice to Amanda.

"Shh," Vanessa hushed, though Amanda hadn't said anything. "He's coming."

The assembled officers quieted down as the new sergeant walked into the room. He was wearing their winter colors, dark navy pants and a matching long-sleeved shirt. He was very light skinned. He kept his hair shaved in a square military cut. Unlike everyone else, there was no visible sweat on the man's brow.

Amanda watched as he navigated the invisible line down the center of the squad where none of the tables touched. The new sergeant looked to be around thirty years old. He was fit and lean, his body more like a teenager's than a grown man's, but he still had to turn sideways to pass between the tables. Amanda noticed that the gap was tighter than usual. Pettiness was generally the only thing that compelled them all to work together. The black cops would hate the new man because he was from the North. The whites would hate him because he was one of Reggie's boys.

He stacked his papers against the podium, cleared his throat, and said in a surprisingly deep baritone, "I'm Sergeant Luther Hodge." He glanced around the room as if he expected someone to challenge him. When no one spoke, he continued, "I'll read the daily briefing before roll call, since there are a considerable number of transfers."

A groan went around the room, but all Amanda could think was how refreshing it was that someone had actually figured out it was better to announce transfers before taking roll.

Hodge read through the names. Vanessa was right that he sounded like Bill Cosby. He spoke carefully if not slowly. Every word was fully enunciated. The uniformed men in the front rows stared openly, as if they were watching a dog walk on its hind legs. Black or white, they were all straight off the farm or freshly discharged from military service. The majority of them spoke in the same heavy dialect that Amanda's country cousins used. She couldn't help staring at Hodge herself.

He finished reading out the lengthy transfers, then cleared his throat again. "Roll will be called in teams. Some of you will have to wait for your partners to come from other divisions. Please check with me to make certain that your partner is accounted for before you go out into the streets."

As if on cue, Evelyn Mitchell rushed into the squad room, glancing around with an almost panicked look in her eyes. Amanda was still in uniform when Evelyn got promoted to sex crimes, but the few times she'd seen her, the woman was always stylishly dressed. Today, she was carrying a large suede purse with an Indian pattern on the front and tassels hanging down from the wide gusset. She wore a navy skirt with a yellow blouse. Her blonde hair was cut to shoulder length and very flattering, reminiscent of the style worn by Angie Dickinson. Obviously, Amanda wasn't the only one thinking this. Butch Bonnie called out, "Hey, Pepper Anderson, you can cuff me anytime."

The men laughed in unison.

"I'm sorry I'm late," Evelyn told the new sergeant. "It won't happen again." She spied Amanda and Vanessa and headed toward the back table. Her heels made a clicking sound that echoed through the space.

Hodge stopped her. "I didn't catch your name, Detective."

His words seemed to suck all the air from the room. Heads swiveled around to Evelyn, who stood frozen beside Amanda. The dread coming off of her was as palpable as the heat.

Hodge cleared his throat again. "Am I missing something, Officer? I assume you're a detective since you're not in a patrolman's uniform?"

Evelyn opened her mouth, but it was Rick Landry who answered. "She's plainclothes, not detective."

Hodge persisted. "I'm not sure I understand the difference."

Landry jabbed his thumb toward the back of the room. The cigarette in his mouth bobbed as he spoke. "Well, ya see those two tits under her shirt?"

The room erupted in laughter. Evelyn clutched her purse to her chest, but she laughed along with them. Amanda laughed, too. The sound rattled in her throat like a drain.

Hodge waited for the chatter to die down. He asked Evelyn, "What's your name, Officer?"

"Mitchell," she provided, sinking down into the chair beside Amanda. "Mrs. Evelyn Mitchell."

"I suggest you avoid tardiness in the future, Mrs. Mitchell." He looked down at the roll sheet and checked off her name. "You'll be with Miss Livingston today." He went to the next name. "Miss Wagner, we'll put you with Detective Peterson,

who'll be coming from—" Someone gave a loud wolf whistle. Hodge talked over it. "—from Zone Two."

Evelyn turned to Amanda and rolled her eyes. Kyle Peterson was a mess. When he wasn't trying to put his hand up your skirt, he was sleeping one off in the back of the car.

Vanessa leaned over and whispered to Evelyn, "I like your new cut. It's very chic."

"Thanks." She pulled at the back of her hair as if she wished she could make it longer. She asked Amanda, "Did you hear Oglethorpe got reinstated?"

"They gave him his old squad back," Vanessa supplied. "I wonder what that means for us?"

"Probably nothing at all," Evelyn murmured.

They all turned their attention back to the front of the room. There was a white man standing on the periphery, just inside the open doorway. He was around Amanda's age and wearing a sharp, powder blue three-piece suit. His sandy blond hair was long in the back, his sideburns untrimmed. His arms were crossed impatiently over his chest. The round paunch of his stomach stuck out below.

"Brass?" Vanessa guessed.

Evelyn shook her head. "Too well dressed."

"Lawyer," Amanda told them. She'd been to the downtown office of her father's lawyer enough times to know what they looked like. The nice suit was a giveaway, but the arrogant tilt to his chin was the only clue she needed.

"Detectives Landry and—" Luther Hodge seemed to realize no one was paying attention to him anymore. He looked up from the roll sheet and stared at the visitor for a few seconds before saying, "Mr. Treadwell, we can talk in my office." He told the squad, "I'll be a few minutes. If someone could take over?"

Butch jumped up. "I'll handle it."

"Thank you, Detective." Hodge seemed to miss the wary expressions around the room. Putting Butch in charge of the schedule was like putting a fox in charge of the henhouse. He would change the assignments into his own version of *The Dating Game*.

Hodge made his way back to the rear of the room, angling his lanky frame through the narrow dividing line. The lawyer, Treadwell, followed along the outside wall. He lit a cigarette as he walked into the office and shut the door.

Evelyn asked, "Wonder what that's about?"

"Never mind them," Vanessa said. "Why on earth did you come back?"

"I like it here."

Vanessa pulled a face. "Come on, kid. The truth."

"The truth is really boring. Let's wait to see what the rumors say." Evelyn smiled, then unzipped her purse and searched around inside.

Vanessa looked to Amanda for an explanation, but she could only shake her head.

"Yassuh, yassuh," someone said.

Amanda saw a group of black patrolmen had taken it upon themselves to narrate the goings-on in Hodge's office. Amanda glanced at Evelyn, then Vanessa. They all turned around for the full effect.

Behind the glass partition, Treadwell's mouth moved, and one of the black

cops said in a pompous voice, "Now, see here, boy, my taxes pay your salary."

Amanda stifled a laugh. She heard this same phrase almost every day—as if Amanda's taxes didn't pay just as much of her salary as the next person's.

Hodge was looking down at his desk. There was a meekness to the slump in his shoulders as his mouth moved. "Yassuh," the first cop supplied. "I's'a gone look into it fo ya, suh. Yes indeedy-do."

Treadwell jabbed a finger at Hodge. The second cop grumbled, "This city is a mess, I say. What's the world coming to? The monkeys are running the zoo!"

Hodge nodded, his eyes still trained downward. The first cop offered, "Yassuh, it sho do be a mess. Cain't even eat my cone-bread without hearing 'bout them po' white women what's gettin' harassed by Negro men."

Amanda chewed her bottom lip. There were a few nervous titters.

Treadwell's hand dropped. The second cop said, "I say, you damn niggers act like you own the place!"

No one laughed at that, not even the black officers. The joke had gone too far.

When Treadwell threw open the office door and stormed out, the room remained stiflingly silent.

Luther Hodge was a study in contained fury as he walked to the open door. He pointed at Evelyn. "You." His finger jabbed in Amanda and Vanessa's general direction. "And you. In my office."

Vanessa stiffened in her chair. Amanda put her hand to her chest. "Me or—"

"Do you women understand orders? In my office." He told Butch, "Continue roll call, Detective Bonnie. I shouldn't have to tell you twice."

Evelyn clutched her purse to her chest as she stood. The back of Amanda's legs felt cool as she rose to follow. She turned to Vanessa, who looked both guilty and enormously relieved. Evelyn was standing in front of Hodge's desk when Amanda joined her. He sat in his chair and started writing on a piece of paper.

Amanda turned to shut the door, but Hodge said, "Leave it open."

If Amanda thought she'd been sweating before, it was nothing compared to how she felt now. Evelyn was obviously feeling it, too. She nervously pulled at the back of her hair. The thin silver of her wedding ring caught the light from the overhead fluorescents. Butch Bonnie's dull monotone called out team assignments in the other room. Amanda knew that even with the door closed, Luther Hodge had heard the black officers making fun of him.

Hodge put down his pen. He sat back in his chair and looked at first Evelyn, then Amanda. "You two are on the sex crimes unit."

They both nodded, though he hadn't asked a question.

"There's been a signal forty-nine reported at this address." A rape. Hodge held out the sheet of paper. There was a moment's hesitation before Evelyn took it.

She looked down at the page. "This is in Techwood." The ghetto.

"That's correct," Hodge answered. "Take statements. Determine whether or not a crime has been committed. Make an arrest if necessary."

Evelyn glanced at Amanda. They were obviously wondering the same thing: what did this have to do with the lawyer who'd just been in here?

"Do you need directions?" Hodge asked, though, again, it wasn't really a question. "I assume you ladies know your way around the city? Should I have one of the squad cars provide you with an escort? Is that how this works?"

"No," Evelyn said. Hodge stared at her until she added, "Sir."

"Dismissed." He opened a file and began reading it.

Amanda looked to Evelyn, who nodded toward the door. They both edged out, not quite sure what had just happened. Roll call was finished. The squad room was empty but for a few stragglers who were waiting for their newly transferred partners to arrive. Vanessa was gone, too. Probably with Peterson. She would certainly enjoy the assignment more than Amanda.

"Can we take your car?" Evelyn asked. "I'm in the station wagon today and it's packed full."

"Sure." Amanda followed her into the parking lot. Evelyn wasn't lying. Boxes were crammed into every available space in her red Ford Falcon.

"Bill's mother moved in down the street this weekend. She's going to help take care of the baby while I'm at work."

Amanda climbed into her Plymouth. She didn't want to pry into Evelyn's private life, but the arrangement struck her as odd.

"Don't get me wrong," Evelyn said, settling into the passenger's seat. "I love Zeke and it was great spending this last year and a half with him, but I swear to God, one more day being stuck at home with a kid, and I'd end up swallowing a bucket of Valium."

Amanda had been about to put her key in the ignition, but she stopped. She turned to Evelyn. Most everything she knew about the woman had been filtered through her father. She was beautiful, which Duke Wagner didn't view as an asset for someone in uniform. "Opinionated" was the word that came up most often, with "pushy" serving a close second.

Amanda asked, "Your husband was okay with you working again?"

"He came around to it." She unzipped her purse and pulled out an Atlanta city map. "Do you know Techwood?"

"No. I've been to Grady Homes a few times." Amanda didn't mention that she mostly took calls from North Atlanta, where the victims were white and generally had mothers who offered sweet tea and talked about quickly putting this ordeal behind them. "How about you?"

"Somewhat. Your dad sent me there a few times."

Amanda pumped the gas as she turned the key. The engine caught on the second try. She kept her mouth closed as she backed out of the parking lot. Evelyn had been on patrol for most of her tenure under Duke Wagner. Her plainclothes promotion had been something he didn't agree with, but the winds were shifting by then and he had lost the battle. Amanda could easily see her father sending Evelyn out to the projects to teach her a lesson.

"Let's try to figure this out." Evelyn unfolded the map and spread it out on her lap. She traced her finger down and across to the area near Georgia Tech. The projects of Techwood were incongruous with the setting of one of the state's top technological universities, but the city was running out of places to house the poor. Clark Howell Homes, University Homes, Bowen Homes, Grady Homes, Perry Homes, Bankhead Courts, Thomasville Heights—they all had long waiting lists, despite the fact that they were effectively slums.

Not that any of them had started out that way. In the 1930s, the city had built the Techwood apartment buildings on the site of a former shantytown called Tanyard Bottom. It was the first public housing of its kind in the United States.

All the buildings had electricity and running water. There was a school on site, a library and laundry facilities. President Roosevelt had been at the opening ceremonies. It had taken less than ten years for Techwood to revert back to its original shantytown state. Duke Wagner often said that desegregation was the final nail in Techwood's coffin. No matter what the case, Georgia Tech spent thousands of dollars a year hiring private security to keep students safe from their neighbors. The area was one of the most dangerous in the city.

"Okeydokey." Evelyn folded the map, saying, "Get us to Techwood Drive and I can tell you where to go from there."

"The buildings don't have numbers." This was a problem not just limited to the projects. When Amanda was in uniform, the first half hour of most of her calls was wasted searching for the correct address.

"Don't worry," Evelyn said. "I've figured out their system."

Amanda made her way up Ponce de Leon Avenue, past old Spiller Field where the Crackers used to play. The stadium had been torn down to build a shopping mall, but the magnolia tree that had been in center field was still there. She cut through a side alley by the Sears building to get to North Avenue. Both Amanda and Evelyn rolled up their windows as they approached Buttermilk Bottom. The shanties had been torn down a decade ago, but no one had bothered to do anything about the sewage problem. A sour smell filled Amanda's nostrils. She had to breathe through her mouth for the next five blocks. Finally, they were able to roll down the windows again.

"So," Evelyn said. "How's your father's case going?"

This was the second time she'd asked about it, which made Amanda wary. "He doesn't really talk about it with me."

"That's good news about Oglethorpe, right? Good news for your father?"

"I expect it is." Amanda stopped at a red light.

"What do you think this Techwood forty-nine has to do with Treadwell showing up?"

Amanda had been too flustered before to consider the question, but now she said, "Perhaps he was reporting a rape on behalf of a client."

"Lawyers in hundred-dollar suits don't have clients at Techwood." Evelyn rested her head against her hand. "Treadwell shows up bossing Hodge around. Hodge calls us in and bosses us around. There has to be a connection. Don't you think?"

Amanda shook her head. "I have no idea."

"He looked young, right? He must've just gotten out of school. His daddy's firm really got behind the mayor's election bid."

"Maynard Jackson?" Amanda asked. She hadn't really thought about white people supporting the city's first black mayor, but then, Atlanta's businessmen had never let race get in the way of making money.

Evelyn supplied, "Treadwell-Price was knee-deep in the campaign. Daddy Treadwell had his picture in the paper with Jackson the day he won. They had their arms around each other like two showgirls. Adam? Allen?" She blew out a stream of air. "Andrew. That's his name. Andrew Treadwell. Sonny boy must be a Junior. I bet they call him Andy."

Amanda shook her head slowly from side to side. She left politics to her father. "Never heard of any of them."

"Junior was certainly walking around with confidence. Hodge was terrified of him. Pantomime aside. Wasn't that a gas?"

"Yes." Amanda looked up at the red light, wondering why it was taking so long to change.

"Just pull through," Evelyn suggested. She noticed Amanda's worried expression and said, "Relax. I won't arrest you."

Amanda checked both ways twice, then a third time, before edging the Plymouth forward.

"Watch it," Evelyn warned. There was a Corvette cresting the hill on Spring Street. Sparks flew from under the engine as it scraped the asphalt and blew through the intersection. "Where's a cop when you need 'em?"

Amanda's calf ached from pounding the brake home. "My car insurance is with Benowitz, if you're trying to make your husband some money."

Evelyn laughed. "Benowitz isn't bad once you look past the horns."

Amanda couldn't tell if Evelyn was mocking her or stating her own opinion. She checked the light. Still red. She inched forward again, wincing as she pressed the accelerator. Amanda didn't feel her shoulders relax until they had passed the Varsity restaurant. And then they went back up again.

The smell engulfed the interior of the car as soon as they had crossed over the four-lane expressway. It wasn't sewage this time, but poverty, and people living stacked on top of one another like animals in crates. The heat was doing no one any favors. Techwood Homes was made of poured concrete with a brick façade, which breathed about as well as Amanda's nylons.

Beside her, Evelyn closed her eyes and took a few shallow breaths through her mouth. "Okay." She shook her head, then looked down at the map. "Left on Techwood. Right on Pine."

Amanda slowed the car to navigate the narrow streets. In the distance, she could see the brick row houses and garden apartments of Techwood Homes. Graffiti marred most surfaces, and where there was no spray paint, there was trash piled waist-high. A handful of children were playing in the dirt courtyard. They were dressed in rags. Even from a distance, Amanda could see the sores on their legs.

Evelyn directed, "Take a right up here."

Amanda went as far as she could go before the road became impassable. A burned-out car blocked the street. The doors were open. The hood was raised, showing the engine like a charred tongue. Amanda pulled onto a berm and put the gear in park.

Evelyn didn't move. She was staring at the children. "I'd forgotten how bad it is."

Amanda stared at the boys. They were all dark skinned and knobby kneed. They used their bare feet to kick around a flat-looking basketball. There was no grass here, only dry, red Georgia clay.

The kids stopped playing. One of the boys pointed to the Plymouth, which the city bought in lots and the population easily recognized as an unmarked police car. Another boy ran into the nearest building, dust kicking up behind him.

Evelyn huffed a laugh. "And there the little angel goes to alert the welcoming committee."

Amanda popped open the door handle. She could see the Coca-Cola tower in

the distance, sandwiching the fourteen-block slum with Georgia Tech. “My father says Coke’s trying to get the city to tear this place down. Move them somewhere else.”

“I can’t see the mayor throwing away the people who elected him.”

Amanda didn’t vocally disagree, but in her experience, her father was always right about these things.

“Might as well get this over with.” Evelyn pushed open her door and got out of the car. She unzipped her purse and pulled out her radio, which was half as long as a Kel-Lite and almost as heavy. Amanda checked to make sure the zipper on her own bag was closed as Evelyn gave dispatch their location. Amanda’s radio seldom worked, no matter how many times she changed the battery. She would’ve left it at home but for Sergeant Geary. Every morning, he made all the women dump out their purses so he could make sure they were properly equipped.

“This way.” Evelyn walked up the hill toward the apartment block. Amanda could feel hundreds of sets of eyes tracking their movement. Given the setting, not many people were at work during the day. There was plenty of time to stare out the window and wait for something awful to happen. The farther away they got from the Plymouth, the sicker Amanda felt, so that by the time Evelyn stopped in front of the second building, she felt as if she might be ill.

“Okay.” Evelyn pointed to the doorways, counting off, “Three, four, five ...” She mouthed the rest silently as she continued walking. Amanda followed, wondering if Evelyn knew what she was doing or was just trying to show off.

Finally, Evelyn stopped again and pointed to the middle unit on the top floor. “Here we are.”

They both stared at the open doorway that led to the stairwell. A single shaft of sunlight illuminated the bottom steps. The windows at the front of the vestibule and on the upper landings were all boarded over, but the metal-encased skylight provided enough light to see by. At least so long as it was daytime.

“Fifth floor, penthouse,” Evelyn said. “How’d you do on the fitness exam?”

Another one of Reggie’s new rules. “I barely clocked the mile.” They were given eight and a half minutes. Amanda had pushed it to the last second.

“They gave me a pass on the pull-ups or I’d be at home right now watching *Captain Kangaroo*.” She gave a cheery smile. “I hope your life doesn’t depend on my upper body strength.”

“Surely you can outrun me if it comes to that.”

Evelyn laughed. “I’m planning on it.” She zipped her purse, then buttoned the flap closed. Again, Amanda made sure her purse was closed tightly. The first thing you learned about going into the projects was you never left your bag open and you never put it down anywhere. No one wanted to bring lice or cockroaches home to their families.

Evelyn took a deep breath, as if she was about to dunk her head underwater, then entered the building. The smell hit them both like a brick to the face. Evelyn covered her nose with her hand as she started up the steps. “You’d think sniffing a baby’s diaper all day would accustom me to the smell of urine. I suppose grown men eat different foods. I know asparagus makes mine smell. I tried cocaine once. I can’t remember what my pee smelled like, but zow-ee, did I

not care one bit.”

Amanda stood shocked at the bottom of the stairs, looking up at Evelyn, who seemed not to realize that she’d just admitted to using an illegal narcotic.

“Oh, don’t pimp me out to Reggie. I looked the other way on that red light.” Evelyn flashed a smile. She turned the corner on the landing and she was gone.

Amanda shook her head as she followed her up the stairs. Neither of them touched the handrails. Cockroaches skittered underfoot. Trash seemed glued to the treads. The walls felt as if they were closing in.

Amanda forced herself to breathe through her mouth, just as she forced one foot after the other. This was crazy. Why hadn’t they called for backup? Half of the signal 49s in Atlanta were reported by women who’d been raped in stairwells. They were as ubiquitous to the housing projects as rats and squalor.

As Evelyn rounded the next landing, she tugged at the back of her hair. Amanda guessed this was a nervous tic. She shared the anxiety. The higher up they climbed, the more her insides rattled. Fourteen cops killed in the last two years. Gunshots to the head. Sometimes to the stomach. One officer had lived for two days before finally succumbing. He’d been in so much pain you could hear his screams all the way downstairs in the Grady Hospital ER.

Amanda’s heart clenched as she rounded the next landing. Her hands started shaking. Her knees wanted to give out. She felt seized by the desire to burst into tears.

Surely one of the patrol units had heard Evelyn call in their location to dispatch. The men seldom waited for any female officer to request backup. They just arrived on scene, taking over the case, shooing the women away like they were silly children. Normally, Amanda felt slightly irked by this macho grandstanding, but today, she would’ve welcomed them with open arms.

“This is crazy,” she mumbled, rounding the next landing. “Absolutely crazy.”

“Just a little bit farther,” Evelyn happily called back.

It wasn’t like they were undercover. Everyone knew there were two cops in the building. White cops. Female cops. The hum of televisions and whispered conversations buzzed around. The heat was as stifling as the shadows. Every closed door represented an opportunity for someone to jump out and hurt one or both of them.

“Okay, what’ve we got?” Evelyn asked no one in particular. “Four hundred forty-three rapes reported last year.” Her voice clattered down the stairs like a bell. “One hundred thirteen were white women. What is that, a one-in-four chance of us being raped?” She looked back at Amanda. “Twenty-five percent?”

Amanda shook her head. The woman might as well be speaking in tongues.

Evelyn continued up the stairs. “Four times one hundred thirteen ...” Her voice trailed off. “I was almost right. We have a twenty-six percent chance of being raped today. That’s not high at all. That’s a seventy-four percent chance of nothing happening.”

The numbers, at least, made sense. Amanda felt an ounce of pressure lift off her chest. “That doesn’t seem so bad.”

“No, it doesn’t. If I had a seventy-four percent chance of winning the Bug, I’d be down on Auburn right now betting my paycheck.”

Amanda nodded. The Bug was a numbers game run out of Colored Town. “Where did you—”

There was a commotion down the hallway. A door slammed. A child screamed. A man's voice shouted for everyone to shut the hell up.

The pressure came back like a boulder dropping from the sky.

Evelyn had stopped on the stairs. She was looking directly down at Amanda. "Statistically, we're fine. More than fine." She waited for Amanda to nod before continuing the climb. Evelyn's posture had lost its certainty. She was breathing heavily. Suddenly, Amanda realized that the other woman had taken the lead. If there was something bad waiting for them at the top of the stairs, Evelyn Mitchell would meet it first.

Amanda asked, "Where did you get those numbers?" She'd never heard them before and frankly did not care. All she knew was that talking was the only thing keeping her from vomiting. "The reported rapes?"

"Class project. I'm taking statistics at Tech."

"Tech," Amanda repeated. "Isn't that hard?"

"It's a great way to meet men."

Again, Amanda didn't know if she was joking. Again, she didn't care. "How many of the perpetrators were white?"

"What's that?"

"Techwood is ninety percent black. How many of the rapists were—"

"Oh, right, right." Evelyn stopped at the top of the stairs. "You know, I can't recall. I'll look it up for you later. This is it." She pointed down the hallway. All the lights were blown out. The skylight cast everything in shadow. "Fourth door on the left."

"Do you want my Kel?"

"I don't think a light will make much difference. Ready?"

Amanda felt her throat work as she tried to swallow. There was an apple core on the floor that seemed to be moving. It was completely covered in ants.

Evelyn said, "Smell's not so bad up here."

"No," Amanda agreed.

"I suppose if you're going to relieve your bladder on the floor, you need not climb five flights of stairs to do it."

"No," Amanda repeated.

"Shall we?" Evelyn walked down the hall with renewed purpose. Amanda caught up with her in front of the closed door. A plastic cutout of the letter C was nailed to the wall. Taped just below the spyhole was a strip of notebook paper with blue capital letters written in a child's hand.

Amanda read, "Kitty Treadwell."

"The plot thickens." Evelyn took a deep breath through her nose. "You smell that?"

Amanda had to concentrate in order to discern the new odor. "Vinegar?"

"That's what heroin smells like."

"Don't tell me you've tried that, too?"

"Only my hairdresser knows for sure." She motioned for Amanda to stand to the side of the door. Evelyn took the opposite side. This marginally ensured their safety in case someone was standing behind the door with a loaded shotgun.

Evelyn raised her hand and knocked on the door with such force that the wood shook on its hinges. Her voice was entirely different—deeper, more masculine—when she shouted, "Atlanta Police Department!" She saw Amanda's

expression and gave her a wink before banging again. "Open up!" she ordered.

Amanda listened to her own heartbeat, the quick gulps of breath. Seconds passed. Evelyn raised her hand again, then dropped it when a muffled woman's voice said, "Jesus," from behind the door.

There was a shuffling noise inside the apartment. A chain slid back. Then a lock turned. Then another lock. Then the handle moved as the thumb latch was toggled.

The girl inside was obviously a prostitute, though she was dressed in a thin cotton shift that was more appropriate for a ten-year-old girl. Bleach blonde hair hung to her waist. Her skin was so white it bordered on blue. Her age was between twenty and sixty. Track marks riddled her body—her arms, her neck, her legs, pricking open like wet, red mouths on the veins of her bare feet. Missing teeth gave her face a concave appearance. Amanda could see how the ball-and-socket joint in her shoulder worked as she folded her arms low on her waist.

Evelyn asked, "Kitty Treadwell?"

Her voice had a smoker's rasp. "Whatchu bitches want?"

"Good morning to you, too." Evelyn breezed into the apartment, which looked just as Amanda expected. Molded dishes filled the sink. Empty fast-food bags were everywhere. Clothes were strewn across the floor. There was a stained blue couch in the middle of the room with a coffee table in front. Syringes and a spoon rested on a dingy washrag. Matches. Pieces of cigarette filters. A small bag of dirty white powder was laid out beside two cockroaches that were either dead or so high they couldn't move. Someone had pulled the kitchen stove into the middle of the room. The oven door was open, the edge resting on the coffee table to support the large color television set on top.

"Is that Dinah?" Evelyn asked. She turned up the volume. Jack Cassidy was singing with Dinah Shore. "I just love her voice. Did you see David Bowie on here last week?"

The girl blinked several times.

Amanda checked for roaches before turning on the floor lamp. A harsh light filled the room. The windows were covered in yellow construction paper, but that only served to filter the bright morning sun. Perhaps that was why Amanda felt safer inside the apartment than she had in the stairwell. Her heartbeat was returning to normal. She wasn't sweating any more than dictated by the temperature.

"David Bowie," Evelyn repeated, turning off the TV. "He was on *Dinah* last week."

Amanda stated the obvious. "She's stoned out of her gourd." A heavy sigh came from deep inside her chest. They had risked their lives for this?

Evelyn patted the girl on the cheek. Her palm made a firm slapping sound against the skin. "You in there, sweetheart?"

"I'd soak that hand in Clorox," Amanda advised. "Let's get out of here. If this girl was raped, she probably deserved it."

"Hodge sent us here for a reason."

"He sent you and Vanessa here," Amanda countered. "I can't believe we've wasted our whole morning—"

"Fonzie," the girl mumbled. "He wa' talkin' to Fonzie."

"That's right," Evelyn said, smiling at Amanda as if she'd won a prize. "Bowie was on *Dinah* last week with Fonzie from *Happy Days*."

"I seen 'em." Kitty ambled over to the couch and collapsed onto the cushions. Amanda didn't know if it was the drugs or her circumstances that made the girl's speech almost unintelligible. She sounded as if someone had turned upside down the entire Flannery O'Connor canon and shaken her out. "I don't remember what he sang."

"You know, I don't either." Evelyn motioned for Amanda to check the rest of the place.

Amanda asked, "What am I looking for, back editions of *Good Housekeeping*?"

Evelyn smiled sweetly. "Wouldn't that be funny if you actually found some?"

"Just hilarious."

Reluctantly, Amanda did as she was asked, trying not to let her arms touch the walls of the narrow hallway as she walked to the back. The apartment was larger than her own. There was a proper bedroom separate from the living area. The door to the closet was off its hinges. Several torn black garbage bags seemed to hold the girl's clothing. The bed was a pile of stained sheets wadded up on the carpet.

Impossibly, the bathroom was even more disgusting than the rest of the apartment. Black mold had replaced the grout in the tile. The sink and toilet were serving double duty as ashtrays. The trashcan was overflowing with used sanitary napkins and toilet paper. The floor was smeared with something Amanda didn't want to know about.

Taking up every available surface were various personal grooming products, which, to Amanda's thinking, was the very definition of irony. Two cans of Sunsilks hairspray. Four Breck shampoo bottles at varying levels. A ripped box of Tampax. An empty bottle of Cachet by Prince Matchabelli. Two open pots of Pond's cold cream, both caked with a yellowed rind. Enough makeup to stock the Revlon counter at Rich's. Brushes. Pencils. Liquid eyeliner. Mascara. Two combs, both clumped with hair. Three very well used toothbrushes sticking out of a Mayor McCheese drinking glass.

The shower curtain was torn from the hooks, giving the cockroaches in the tub a clear view of Amanda. They stared at her intently as she shuddered uncontrollably. She gripped her purse, knowing she was going to have to shake it out before she even thought about putting it in the car.

Back in the living room, Evelyn had moved on from Arthur Fonzarelli to the reason for their visit. "Andy Treadwell is your cousin or your brother?"

"Uncle," the girl said, and Amanda assumed she meant the elder Andrew Treadwell. "What time is it?"

Amanda looked at her watch. "Nine o'clock." She felt the need to add, "In the morning."

"Shee-it." The girl reached down between the couch cushions and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. Amanda watched as, entranced, the girl studied the pack of Virginia Slims as if they'd just fallen like manna from heaven. Slowly, she took out a cigarette. It was bent at an angle. Still, she grabbed the matches off the table and with shaking hands lit the cigarette. She blew out a stream of smoke.

"I hear those will kill you," Evelyn said.

"It's waitin'," the girl answered.

Evelyn countered, "There are faster ways."

"You stick aroun', you see how fast."

Amanda detected an edge to the girl's tone. "Why is that?"

"Them kids done seen ya pull up. My daddy gonna wanna know why two white bitches chattin' me up."

Evelyn said, "I think your uncle Andy is worried about you."

"He want his dick suck again?"

Amanda exchanged a look with Evelyn. Most of these girls claimed an uncle or father had abused them. Around the sex crimes units they called it an Oedipal complex. Not technically correct, but close enough, and obviously a waste of police time.

Kitty said, "You cain't arrest me. I ain't did nothin'."

"We don't want to arrest you," Evelyn tried again. "We were told by our sergeant that you'd been raped."

"S'what I get pay for, ain't it?" She blew out another plume of smoke, this one straight into their faces.

Evelyn's sunny disposition faltered. "Kitty, we need to speak with you and take a statement."

"Ain't ma problem."

"All right. We'll just leave then." Evelyn snatched the bag of heroin off the coffee table and turned on her heel.

If Amanda hadn't been so surprised to see Evelyn take the drugs, she would've been heading toward the door herself. As it was, she saw everything—the shock on the girl's face, the way she sprang from the couch, fingers out like the claws on a cat.

Seemingly of its own volition, Amanda's foot rose up. She didn't trip the girl. She kicked her in the ribs, sending her straight into the stove. The blow was hard. Kitty slammed into the television, breaking off the stove door. The TV cracked against the floor. Tubes popped. Glass shattered.

Evelyn stared at Amanda in visible shock. "What was that?"

"She was about to jump you."

"You certainly stopped her." Evelyn knelt down on the floor. She took a handkerchief out of her purse and handed it to the girl.

"Bitches," Kitty slurred. Her fingers went to her mouth. She pulled out one of her last remaining teeth. "Got damn bitches."

Evelyn stood back up, probably thinking it wasn't wise to kneel in front of an angry prostitute. Still, she said, "You need to tell us what's going on. We're here to help you."

"'uck you," the girl mumbled, fingers feeling around inside her mouth. Amanda saw old scars across her wrist where Kitty had tried to slice open the veins. "'et the 'uck outta 'ere."

Evelyn's voice turned hard. "Don't make us drag you to the station, Kitty. I don't care who your uncle is."

Amanda thought of her car, the time it would take to wash away the grime from the back seat. She told Evelyn, "You can't seriously be considering—"

"Like hell I'm not."

"There's no way I'm letting this—"

"Shut up!" the girl yelled. "I ain't even Kitty. I's Jane. Jane Delray."

"Oh for the love of—" Amanda threw her hands into the air. All the terror she'd experienced on the stairwell turned into anger. "We don't even have the right girl."

"Hodge didn't give a name. Just an address."

Amanda shook her head. "I don't know why we even listened to him. He's been here less than a day. The same as you, I might add."

"I was in uniform for three years before—"

"Why are you back?" Amanda demanded. "Are you here to do the job or is it something else?"

"You're the one who wants to hightail it out of here."

"Because this whore can't tell us anything."

"Hey!" Jane screamed. "Who you callin' a whore?"

Evelyn looked down at the girl. Sarcasm dripped from her voice. "Really, darling? You want to make that argument now?"

Jane wiped the blood from her mouth. "Y'all ain't from the gubmint."

"Brilliant deduction," Evelyn said. "Exactly who from the government is looking for you?"

Her shoulders gave a slight shrug. "I might'a been down to the Five on account'a needin' s'money."

Evelyn put her hand to her head. "The Five" referred to the Five Points Station bus line that serviced the welfare office. "You were trying to cash Kitty's government assistance voucher."

Amanda asked, "Isn't it mailed?"

They both stared openly at Amanda. Evelyn explained, "The post office boxes here aren't exactly secure."

Jane said, "Kitty don't need it. She ain't never need it. She rich. Gotta family that's connected. Thass why you bitches here, ain't it?"

Evelyn asked, "Where is she now?"

"She be gone six months."

"Where did she go?"

"Dis'peared. Same wid Lucy. Same wid Mary. All dem jes up and dis'peared."

"These are working girls?" Evelyn asked. "Lucy and Mary?" The girl nodded. "Is Kitty on the game, too?" Again, the girl nodded.

Amanda had had quite enough of this. "Should I write this down for the newspaper? Three prostitutes are missing. Stop the presses."

"Ain't missin'," the girl insisted. "They gone. Real gone. Dis'peared." She wiped blood from her lips. "They's all livin' here. They stuff's here. They's puttin' down roots. They's cashin' they vouchahs from the Five."

Amanda said, "Until you tried to get their vouchers instead."

"Y'ain't lissenin' to me," Jane insisted. "They all gone. Lucy been gone a year. She here one minute, then—" She snapped her fingers. "Poof."

Evelyn turned to Amanda, and in a deadly serious tone said, "We need to put out an immediate APB on a man wearing a cape and a magician's hat." She stopped. "Hold that. Let's check to see if Doug Henning's in town."

Amanda couldn't help herself. She laughed at the joke.

They all jumped when the front door slammed open. Wood splintered. The knob dug into the wall. Plaster shattered. The air seemed to shake.

A well-built black man stood in the doorway. He was out of breath, probably

from running up the stairs. His thick sideburns grew into a goatee and mustache that circled his mouth. His pants and shirt were a matching lime green. He was obviously a pimp, and clearly furious. "Whatchu honky bitches doin' here?"

Amanda could not move. She felt as if her body had turned to stone.

"We were looking for Kitty," Evelyn answered. "Do you know Kitty Treadwell? Her uncle is a very good friend of Mayor Jackson's." Her throat worked as she swallowed. "That's why we're here. They asked us to come. The mayor's friend. They're very concerned that Kitty is missing."

The man ignored her, grabbing Jane up by her hair. She screamed in pain, her fingers digging into his hands as she tried to keep her scalp from ripping. "You been talkin' to the po-lice, gal?"

"Ain't say nothin'. Honess." Jane could barely speak from terror. "They jes' show up."

He shoved her out into the hall. Jane stumbled, falling against the wall before she found her footing.

"We're leaving now." Evelyn's voice was shaking. She edged toward the door, motioning Amanda to follow. "We don't want trouble."

The man shut the door. The sound was like a gunshot. He stared at Amanda for a few intent seconds, then Evelyn. His eyes looked as if they were on fire.

Evelyn said, "Our sergeant knows we're here."

He turned around and slowly slid the chain into the track. And then he locked the deadbolt. And then the next one.

"We talked to dispatch before we—"

"I hear ya, Mrs. Pig. Lessee can the mayor get here 'fore I'm through." He took the key from the lock and slid it into his front pocket. His voice went into a deep baritone. "You a fine-lookin' woman. You know that?"

He wasn't talking to Evelyn. His eyes were trained on Amanda. He licked his lips, his gaze lingering on her chest. She tried to back up, but he followed. Her legs hit the arm of the couch. His fingers touched the side of her neck. "Damn, gal. So fine."

Amanda fought a wave of dizziness. She reached down to her purse, fidgeting with the zip, trying to get it to open. "Call for backup."

Evelyn already had her radio in her hand. She clicked the button.

The man's hand circled Amanda's neck. His thumb pressed under her chin. "Radio ain't gone work up here. We too high for the antennies."

Evelyn furiously clicked the button. There was only static. "Shit."

"We gone have some fun, ain't we, Fuzzy?" His hand tightened around Amanda's throat. She could smell his cologne and sweat. There was a birthmark on his cheek. A patch of hair showed where his shirt was unbuttoned. Gold chains. A tattoo of Jesus with a crown of thorns.

"Ev ...," Amanda breathed. She could feel the outline of the revolver inside her purse. She tried to force her finger into the trigger guard.

"Mmm-hmm," the pimp moaned. He unzipped his pants. "Fine-lookin' woman."

"Eh-eh-ev ...," Amanda stuttered. His hand slipped under her skirt. She could feel his fingernails scrape her bare flesh, the pressure of him against her thigh.

Evelyn jammed the radio back into her purse and zipped closed the bag as if she was preparing to leave. Amanda panicked. And then gasped as Evelyn

gripped the straps with both hands, swung around and smashed her bag into the side of the man's head.

Gun. Badge. Handcuffs. Kel-Lite. Radio. Nightstick. Nearly twenty pounds of equipment. The pimp collapsed to the floor like a rag doll. Blood spurted from the side of his head. There were deep cuts across his cheek where the Indian tassels had sliced open the skin.

Amanda grabbed her revolver out of her purse. The bag fell to the floor. Her hands shook as she tried to grip the gun. She had to lean against the arm of the couch so she wouldn't fall down.

"Christ." Evelyn stood over the man, mouth agape. The blood was really flowing now.

"My God," Amanda whispered. She pushed down her skirt. Her pantyhose were ripped from his prying fingernails. She could still feel his hand on her throat. "My God."

"Are you okay?" Evelyn asked. She put her hands on Amanda's arms. "You're okay, all right?" Slowly, she reached down for Amanda's revolver. "I've got this, okay? You're fine."

"Your gun ..." Amanda was panting so hard she was going to hyperventilate. "Why didn't ... Why didn't you shoot him?"

Evelyn chewed her bottom lip. She stared at Amanda for what seemed like a full minute before finally admitting, "Bill and I agreed that we shouldn't keep a loaded gun in the house because of the baby."

Words clogged Amanda's throat. She screamed, "Your gun isn't loaded!"

"Well ..." Evelyn dug her fingers into the back of her hair. "It worked out, right?" She let out a strained laugh. "Sure, it worked out. We're both fine. We're both just fine." She looked down at the pimp again. His pants were splayed open. "I guess it's not true what they say about—"

"He was going to rape me! He was going to rape both of us!"

"Statistically ..." Evelyn's voice trailed off before she admitted, "Well, yes. It was bound to happen. I didn't want to tell you before, but ..." She picked up Amanda's purse from the floor. "Yeah."

For the first time in two months, Amanda wasn't hot anymore. Her blood had turned cold.

Evelyn kept babbling. She zipped Amanda's gun inside her purse, looped the strap over her shoulder. "We're both okay, though. Right? I'm okay. You're okay. We're all okay." She spotted a telephone on the floor by the couch. Her hand was shaking so hard that she dropped the receiver. It rattled in the cradle, dingling the bell. She finally managed to pick up the phone and put it to her ear. "I'll call this in. The boys will come running. We'll get out of here. We're both fine. All right?"

Amanda blinked sweat out of her eye.

Evelyn stuck her finger in the dial. "I'm sorry. I talk when I get nervous. It drives my husband crazy." The rotary slid back and forth. "What about those missing girls the whore mentioned? Do you recognize any of their names?"

Amanda blinked away more sweat. Her mind flashed up strange images. The disgusting bathroom. The shampoo bottles. The piles of makeup.

Evelyn said, "Lucy. Mary. Kitty Treadwell. Maybe we should write that down somewhere. I'm certain I'll forget the minute I get a drink in me. Two drinks. A

whole bottle.” She huffed out a short breath. “It’s weird that Jane was worried about them. These girls usually don’t worry about anything but keeping their pimps happy.”

Three used toothbrushes in the glass. The long, dark hair clumped in one of the combs.

Amanda said, “Jane’s hair is blonde.”

“I wouldn’t bet on that.” Evelyn looked down at the unmoving man. “His wallet’s in his back pocket. Could you—”

“No!” The panic came back in full force.

“You’re right. Never mind. They’ll ID him at the jail. I’m sure he has a record. Hey, Linda.” Evelyn’s voice wavered as she spoke into the phone. “Ten-sixteen, my location. Hodge sent us in on a forty-nine and it turned into a fifty-five.” She looked at Amanda. “Anything else?”

“Tell them you’re twenty-four,” Amanda managed.

Duke Wagner was wrong about Evelyn Mitchell being pushy and opinionated. The woman was just plain crazy.

Present Day

SUZANNA FORD

Zanna fell back on the bed, her feet still on the floor. She held up her iPhone and checked her messages. No texts. No voicemail. No email. The asshole was already ten minutes late. If she showed up downstairs without any money, Terry was going to beat her ass. Again. He seemed to forget it was his job to screen these losers. Not that Terry ever took the blame for anything.

She looked out the window at the downtown skyline. Zanna was born and raised in Roswell, half an hour and a lifetime away from Atlanta. Except for the buildings that had names on them, she had no idea what she was looking at. Equitable. AT&T. Georgia Power. All she knew was she was going to be seriously screwed if her john didn't show.

The plasma TV on the wall flashed on. Zanna had rolled over on the remote. She saw Monica Pearson behind the news desk. Some girl was missing. White, blonde, pretty. They sure as shit wouldn't care if Zanna was gone.

She flipped around the channels, trying to find something more interesting, finally giving up when she got into the triple digits. She tossed the remote onto the bedside table. Her arms itched. She wanted a cigarette. She wanted more than that.

If she thought about the meth long enough, she could taste the powder in the back of her throat. Her freaking nose was rotting from the inside, but she couldn't stop snorting the stuff. Couldn't stop thinking about the smash cut to her brain. The way it shook through her body. The way it made the world so much more bearable.

That wasn't going to happen for at least an hour. To tide herself over, she went to the minibar and took out four small bottles of vodka. Zanna downed them in quick succession, then filled the empties in the bathroom sink. She was stacking the bottles back in the refrigerator when there was a knock at the door.

"Thank Jesus," she groaned. She checked herself in the mirror. Not too bad. She could still pass for sixteen if the lights were turned down low enough. She twisted the wand to close the blinds and turned off one of the bedside lamps before answering the door.

The man was massive. The top of his head almost touched the doorway. His shoulders were nearly as wide as the frame. Zanna felt a stir of panic, but then she remembered Terry was downstairs, and that he had cleared this guy, and that whatever was about to happen wouldn't matter when that first huff of meth snaked into her brain.

She said, “Hey, Daddy,” because he was older. Zanna didn’t want to think about the geezer using his social security check to pay for this. She looked at his face, which was pretty smooth considering his age. His neck was a little scrawny. You could really tell it in his hands. Liver spots. The hair on his arms was white, though what was left on his head was sandy brown.

Zanna threw open the door. “Come in, big boy.” She tried to swing her hips as she walked, but the carpet combined with her new high heels wasn’t a good mix. She ended up having to brace herself against the wall. She turned around and waited for him to come in.

He took his time. He didn’t seem nervous and God knew you didn’t pop your first whore at his age. He glanced up and down the hallway before finally shutting the door behind him. He was still in good shape despite the years on him. His hair was in a military cut. His shoulders were square. World War II, she thought, then her middle school history came back to her and Zanna figured he wasn’t old enough for that. Probably Vietnam. A lot of her customers lately were young guys just back from Afghanistan. She didn’t know which was worse—the sad ones who tried to make love or the angry ones who wanted to hurt her.

She got straight to the point. “You a cop?”

He said what they always said. “Do I look like a cop?” But he unzipped his pants without prompting. It was the last vestige of democracy. Even undercover, a cop wasn’t allowed to show you his junk. “All right?”

Zanna nodded, suppressing a shudder. He was huge. “Damn,” she managed. “That looks fun.”

The man zipped back up. “Have a seat.” He indicated the chair. Zanna sat, legs apart, so he’d have a good view from the bed. Only, he kept standing. His shadow stretched across the room, nearly reaching the edge of the door.

“How do you like it?” she asked, though Zanna had a sneaking suspicion he liked it rough. She pulled in her shoulders, tried to look smaller than she already was. “You wanna be gentle with me. I’m just a girl.”

His lip quivered, but that was the only reaction she got. He asked, “How did you get here?”

She thought he meant the literal path she’d taken—up Peachtree, left on Edgewood. Then she realized he meant her current state of employment.

Zanna shrugged. “What can I say? I love sex.” That’s what they wanted to hear. That’s what they tried to tell themselves when they ripped you apart and threw money in your face—that you loved it, couldn’t live without it.

“No,” he said. “I want the real story.”

“Oh, you know.” She blew out a puff of air. Her story was so boring. You couldn’t turn on the television without seeing some iteration of the same. Zanna hadn’t been tossed out on the streets. She hadn’t been abused. Her parents were divorced, but they were good people. The problem was Zanna. She’d started smoking weed so a boy would think she was cool. She’d started taking pills because she was bored. She’d started smoking meth to lose weight. And then it was too late to do anything else but hang on by her fingernails until the next hit.

Her mom let her live at home until she figured out Zanna was smoking more than Marlboros. Her dad let her live in his basement until his new wife found the blackened pieces of tinfoil that smelled like marshmallows. Then, they put her up in an apartment. Then they got all tough love, and two failed stints in

rehab later, Zanna was out on the street, earning her fix between her legs.

"Tell me the truth," the man said. "How did you get here?"

Zanna tried to swallow. Her mouth was dry. She couldn't tell if it was from withdrawal or from the scary feeling she was getting off this guy. She told him what she knew he wanted to hear. "My daddy hurt me."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"I didn't have a choice." She sniffed and looked down at the floor. She used the back of her hand to wipe away fake tears. Her jaw could've come unhinged like a boa constrictor's, so bored was Zanna with spinning this story. "I didn't have anywhere to go. I was sleeping on the streets. Sex is something I like. And I'm good at it, so ..."

He knelt down to look at her. Even on his knees, he was taller than her. Zanna glanced at him, then quickly looked away. It was shame this guy was looking for. Older generation. They lapped it up. Zanna could give him plenty of shame. Valerie Bertinelli. Meredith Baxter. Tori Spelling. Zanna had seen the look in every single Lifetime movie she'd ever watched.

She said, "I miss him. That's the sad part." She looked back up at the man, blinked her eyes a few times. "I miss my daddy."

He took her hand, gently sandwiching it between both of his. Zanna couldn't see anything but her wrist. His touch was light on her skin, but she felt like he'd trapped her. Her breath stuttered in her chest. Panic was a natural instinct she thought she'd learned to control. There was something about this man that set off what little warning system she had left.

He said, "Suzanna, don't lie to me."

Bile boiled up into her mouth. "That's not my name." She tried to pull away. His fingers clamped around her wrist. "I didn't tell you my name."

"Didn't you?"

She was going to kill that fucking pimp. He'd sell his mother for an extra twenty. "What did Terry tell you? My name is Trixie."

"No," the man insisted. "You told me your name is Suzanna."

She felt pain rush up her arm. She looked down. He held both her wrists in one hand. He leaned into her legs, trapping her against the chair. "Don't fight," he said, his free hand wrapping around her neck. The tips of his fingers touched in the back. "I want to help you, Suzanna. To save you."

"I-I-I'm not—" She couldn't speak. She was choking. She couldn't breathe. Panic jerked through her body like a live wire. Her eyes rolled upward. She felt a stream of urine dribble down her leg.

"Just relax, sister." He hovered above her. His eyes going back and forth as if he did not want to miss a second of her fear. A smile creased his lips. "The Lord will guide my hand."

Present Day**MONDAY**

Sara walked through the Grady Hospital emergency room, trying not to get pulled away on cases. Even if she tattooed “off duty” on her forehead, the nurses wouldn’t leave her alone. She shouldn’t blame them. The hospital was notoriously understaffed and overburdened. There had not been a time in Grady’s 120-year history when supply was able to keep up with demand. Working here was tantamount to signing away your life, which had been just what Sara needed when she’d taken the job. She hadn’t really had a life back then. She was newly widowed, living in a different city, starting over from scratch. Throwing herself into a demanding job was the only way she’d been able to cope.

It was amazing how quickly her needs had changed in the last two weeks.

Or the last hour, for that matter. Sara had no idea what was going on between Will and Amanda. Their relationship had always puzzled her, but the exchange in the hallway before the stairs collapsed had been downright bizarre. Even after the fall, when it was clear that Amanda had been badly injured, Will seemed more intent on questioning the woman than helping her. Sara still felt shocked by his tone of voice. She’d never heard such coldness from him before. It was like he was another person, a stranger she did not want to know.

At least Sara had finally figured out the root of their conversation, though it was through no brilliant deduction of her own. The television over the nurses’ station was always tuned to the news. Closed captioning scrolled mindlessly day and night. The missing girl from Georgia Tech had made the jump to the national news, courtesy of CNN, whose world headquarters was just down the street from the university. The video of Amanda leading the press conference played on an endless loop, reporters flashing up statistics and the sort of non-information required to fill twenty-four-hour programming.

The latest speculation held that perhaps Ashleigh Renee Snyder had faked her own abduction. Students claiming to be close friends of the missing girl had come forward, giving details about her life, Ashleigh’s fears that her grades were slipping. Maybe she really was hiding somewhere. The theory was not completely without foundation. Georgia had a short history of women pretending to be kidnapped, the most famous being the so-called Runaway Bride, a silly woman who’d wasted several days of police time hiding from her own fiancé.

“Sara.” A nurse rushed up with a lab report. “I need you to—”

"Sorry. I'm off duty."

"What the hell are you doing back here?" The woman didn't wait around for an answer.

Sara checked the board to see if Will had been assigned a room. Generally, a case as mundane as sutures would take hours to get to, but before Sara dealt with Amanda, she'd made certain the admitting nurse hadn't abandoned Will to the waiting room. He'd been assigned one of the curtains in the back. Sara felt her spine stiffen when she saw Bert Krakauer's name instead of her own adjacent to Will's.

She headed toward the back, a startling sense of ownership quickening her pace. The curtain was open. Will was sitting up in bed. A drape was around his foot. Worst of all, Krakauer had a pair of pick-ups in his hand.

"No-no-no," she said, jogging toward the two men. "What are you doing?"

Krakauer indicated the needle holder. "They didn't let you play with these in medical school?"

Sara gave him a tight smile. "Thanks. I'll take over from here." He took the hint, returning the instrument to the tray and taking his leave. Sara gave Will a sharp look as she closed the curtain. "You were going to let Krakauer sew you up?"

"Why not?"

"For the same reason you weren't left rotting in the waiting room." Sara washed her hands at the sink. "If someone broke into my apartment, would you let another cop investigate it?"

"I don't normally work burglaries."

Sara wiped her hands dry with a paper towel. Will wasn't normally this obtuse. "What's going on?"

"He said I need stitches."

"Not that." She sat down on the edge of the bed. "You've been acting strange since we got here. Is it Amanda?"

"Why? Did she say something to you?"

Sara had a creeping sense of déjà vu. She'd spoken briefly to Amanda and gotten the same question about Will. "What would Amanda tell me?"

"Nothing important. She wasn't making a lot of sense."

"She seemed pretty sharp to me." Sara resisted the urge to put her hands on her hips like a lecturing schoolmarm. "I saw Ashleigh Snyder on the news."

Will sat up. "Did they find her?"

"No. They're speculating that she might've staged her own kidnapping. One of her friends came forward and said she was about to flunk out of school."

Will nodded, but didn't offer his opinion.

"Are you working the case?"

"Nope." His tone was clipped. "Still keeping Atlanta's airport toilets safe from horny business travelers."

"Why aren't you on the kidnapping?"

"You'd have to ask Amanda."

Here they were, full circle again.

"Is she all right?" Will asked, though the question seemed obligatory. "Amanda, I mean."

Sara had never been good at staring contests, especially with someone as

blatantly pigheaded as the man she'd been sleeping with for the last two weeks. "She has what's called a Colles' fracture. Ortho is reducing it right now. She'll get a cast. She's pretty banged up, but she'll be okay. Normally, she'd be sent home, but she lost consciousness, so she'll have to spend the night."

"Good." He stared at her blankly. Sara got the feeling that she might as well be talking to a brick wall. The tension between them was just as thick.

She took his hand. "Will—"

"Thanks for letting me know."

Sara waited for him to say more. Then she realized they only had twelve hours before it would be too late to suture his ankle. She slipped on a pair of surgical gloves. She could tell from the mess that Krakauer had already cleaned out the wound. "Your ankle is numb?"

Will nodded.

"Let's see what we have." She pressed her fingers around the open skin. The laceration was at least an inch long and half as deep. Fresh blood wept out when she forced together the skin. She asked, "You didn't think to tell me that a nail went into your ankle?"

"The other doctor said it barely needs a stitch."

"The other doctor is never going to have to see your ankle again." Sara rolled over the stool so she could sit down. She took the scalpel and used the edge to shape the jagged opening into an ellipse. "I'll make sure there isn't a scar."

"You know that doesn't matter."

Sara looked up at him. There were worse scars on his body. It was something they didn't talk about. One of the many things they didn't talk about.

She tried, again. "What's going on with you?"

Will shook his head, looking away. He was obviously still angry, but Sara had no idea why. There was no use asking him. As sweet and kind and gentle as Will Trent was, Sara had learned that he was about as forthcoming as an amnesiac with lockjaw.

She didn't know what else to do but start suturing. Her glasses were in her purse, which she assumed was still locked inside her car. Sara leaned in close and hooked the needle into the flesh just beneath Will's skin. The chromic thread dipped in and out as she placed a single row of interrupted sutures. Pull, knot, cut. Pull, knot, cut. Over the years, Sara's hands had performed this same action so many times that she went into autopilot, which, unfortunately, gave her mind plenty of time to wander.

The same question she'd been asking herself for the last two weeks popped into her head: What was she doing?

She liked Will. He was the first man Sara had really been with since her husband had died. She enjoyed his company. He was funny and smart. Handsome. Incredibly good in bed. He'd met her family. Her dogs adored him. Sara adored his dog. Over the last few weeks, Will had practically moved into her apartment, but in some ways, he still felt like a stranger.

What little he revealed about his past always came in sugarcoated sound bites. Nothing was ever too bad. No one was that horrible. To hear Will tell it, he'd lived a charmed life. Never mind the cigarette and electrical burns on his body. The jag to his upper lip where the skin had been busted in two. The deep gouge that followed his jawline. Sara kissed these places and rubbed her hands along

them as if they didn't exist.

"Halfway there." Sara glanced up at Will again. He was still looking away.

She tied off the last knot and picked up a new needle threaded with Prolene. She started the running subcuticular row, zigzagging the thread back and forth, all the while berating herself for giving in to Will's silence.

When their relationship first started, none of this had mattered. There were far more interesting things Will could do with his mouth other than talk about himself. These last few days, his reticence had started to bother her. Sara found herself wondering if he was capable of giving more, and failing that, if she was willing to settle for less.

Even if by some miracle he decided to pour out his heart to Sara, there was still the larger problem of his wife. If Sara was being honest, she was afraid of Angie Polaski, and not just because the woman kept leaving nasty notes on the windshield of Sara's car. Angie lingered in Will's life like a vaporous poison. The joy that Sara felt as Will showed her around his old neighborhood had quickly dissipated when practically every memory he recalled had something to do with Angie. He didn't have to say her name. Sara knew that he was thinking about her.

Which left Sara questioning whether or not there was any space in Will's life for someone other than Angie Polaski.

"There." Sara pulled closed the skin and knotted the loop. "These need to stay in for two weeks. I've got some waterproof Band-Aids at home so you can shower. I'll get you some Tylenol for the pain."

"I've got some at home." He stared at his hands as he rolled down the leg of his pants. "I should probably stay there tonight." He slid on his sock, still not meeting her eyes. "I need to wash some of my shirts. Do the laundry. Check on the dog."

Sara stared openly. Will's jaw was clenched. He was a study in controlled anger. She wasn't sure if this was directed solely at Amanda anymore. "Are you mad at me?"

"No." The answer was short, quick, and obviously a lie.

"All right." Sara turned her back to him as she snapped off her gloves. She tossed them into the trashcan, then started cleaning up the suture kit. Behind her, she could hear Will moving around, probably looking for his shoe. Sara normally had a long fuse, but her bad day had made it considerably shorter. She reached under the bed and grabbed his shoe out of the basket.

She asked, "Do me a favor, sweetheart?"

He took his time answering. "What?"

"Don't talk about what happened tonight, all right?" She tossed the shoe in his general direction. He caught it with one hand, which only served to irritate her more. "Don't tell me what you think about Amanda, or the hammer, or what she was doing at the place where you grew up when she's supposed to be leading a case, and sure as hell let's not talk about whatever she said to you in the basement that has you so freaked out that you're emotionally catatonic. At least, more than usual." Sara stopped for a breath. "Let's just ignore everything. Okay?"

He stared at her for a few seconds, then said, "That sounds like an excellent idea." Will shoved his foot into his shoe. "I'll see you later."

"You bet." Sara looked down at the digital tablet as if she could actually read the words. Her fingers pressed random keys. She felt Will hesitate a moment, then he yanked back the curtain. His shoes snicked on the floor. Sara kept her head down, counting silently. When she reached sixty, she looked up.

He was gone.

"Asshole," Sara hissed. She slid the tablet onto the counter. Earlier, she'd felt tired, but now she was too wired to be anything but furious. She washed her hands. The water was hot enough to scald her skin, but she just scrubbed harder. There was a mirror over the sink. Her hair was a mess. Specks of dried blood dotted her sleeve. This was the first night she'd come straight home in her work clothes. For the last two weeks, she'd been showering at the hospital, changing into a dress or something more flattering, before seeing Will.

Was that part of the problem? Maybe the Amanda thing was another issue. There was an earlier moment on the street when Will had looked down at her. Sara had felt him taking in her scrubs, her hair, with a less-than-impressed expression. Will was always impeccably dressed. Maybe he was thinking that Sara hadn't made much of an effort. Or maybe it went back farther than that. He'd found her crying in her car. Was that what set him off? If so, why had he taken her to the children's home? The fact that he would share something so personal had made Sara feel as if their relationship was finally moving forward.

And here they were again, tripping over their feet as they took giant leaps back.

"Hey, you." Faith stood at the open curtain. Will's partner held her five-month-old daughter on one shoulder and a large diaper bag on the other. "What's going on?"

Sara cut straight to the point. "Do I look bad?"

"You're half a foot taller than me and ten pounds lighter. Do you really want to make me answer that question?"

"Fair enough." Sara held out her hands for Emma. "May I?"

Faith kept the baby on her shoulder. "Trust me, you don't want to be anywhere near this thing. I'm going to have to slap a hazmat sticker on her diaper."

The smell was pungent, but Sara took the baby anyway. It was a nice change to hold a healthy child in her arms. "I guess you're here to see Amanda?" Sara's husband had been a cop. She'd learned the rules long ago. If one of them was in the hospital, they were all in the hospital. "You just missed Will."

"I'm surprised he showed up. He hates this place." Faith took a diaper and some wipes out of her bag. "Do you know what happened to Amanda?"

"She fell on her wrist. She'll be in a cast for a while, but she's fine." Sara laid Emma down on the bed. Faith probably assumed Sara was working a shift. This was one of the problems with Will's myriad secrets—Sara found herself keeping them on his behalf. There was no way to tell Faith what had happened to Amanda without revealing why Sara had been there.

"Right on schedule." Faith indicated a group of older women who were clustered at the nurses' station. Except for a striking African American woman wearing a pink scarf around her neck, they were all dressed in monochromatic pantsuits and sporting the same short haircuts and ramrod-straight spines. "The good old gals," Faith explained. "Mom and Roz are already in with Amanda. I'm

sure they'll be spinning war stories until the crack of dawn."

Sara wiped down Emma. The baby squirmed. Sara tickled her stomach. "How's it going with your mom in the house?"

"You mean do I want to strangle her yet?" Faith sat down on the stool. "I get maybe ten minutes, tops, every morning before Emma wakes up and I have to get her fed and ready and then get myself fed and ready and then my whole day starts and I'm at work and the phone is ringing and I'm talking to idiots who are lying to me and it's not until the next morning when I get that ten minutes to myself again."

Faith paused, giving Sara a meaningful look. "Mom's up at five o'clock every morning. I hear her poking around downstairs and I smell coffee and eggs and then I go down to the kitchen and she's all cheery and chatty and wants to talk about what she's got planned for the day and what she saw on the news last night and do I want her to cook me something for breakfast and what do I want for supper and I swear to God, Sara, I'm going to end up killing her. I really am."

"I have a mother, too. I completely understand." Sara slid a new diaper under the baby. Emma's feet kicked up as she tried to turn over. "What are you doing while Will's working at the airport?"

"I thought you knew."

"Knew what?"

"Amanda assigned him to toilet duty so my days are free to take Mom to her physical therapy appointments." Faith shrugged. "You know it's not the first time Mom or Amanda's bent the rules for each other."

"Amanda's not punishing Will because of his hair?"

"What's wrong with his hair? It looks great."

Yet again, Will's ability to read women was pitch-perfect. "I don't understand that relationship."

"Amanda and Will? Or Will and the world?"

"Either. Both." Sara buttoned up the onesie. She stroked her fingers along Emma's face. The baby smiled, showing two tiny white specks where her first pair of teeth were breaking through the bottom gum. Emma's eyes tracked Sara's fingers as they waved back and forth. "She's starting to be a real person."

"She's been laughing at me a lot lately. I'm trying not to take it personally."

Sara put Emma on her shoulder. The baby's arm looped around her neck. "How long has Will been working for Amanda?"

"As far as I know, he's followed her around his whole career. Hostage negotiation. Narcotics. Special crimes."

"Is that normal to stay with one boss your entire career?"

"Not really. Cops are like cats. They'd rather change owners than change houses."

Sara couldn't imagine Will asking to be transferred along with Amanda. He seldom sang her praises, and for Amanda's part, she seemed to delight in torturing him. Then again, if Will had one overriding characteristic, it was his resistance to change. Which fact Sara should probably take as a warning.

"Okay, my turn for questions." Faith crossed her arms. "Here's the big one: when are you going to grab him by the short hairs and tell him to get a fucking divorce?"

Sara managed a smile. "It's very tempting."

"Then why don't you?"

"Because ultimatums never work. And I don't want to be the reason he leaves his wife."

"He wants to leave her."

Sara didn't state the obvious. If Will really wanted to be divorced, then he would be divorced.

Faith hissed air through her teeth. "You probably shouldn't take advice from a woman who's never been married and has one kid in college and another in diapers."

Sara laughed. "Don't sell yourself short."

"Well, it's not like the good guys are lining up to date a cop, and I'm certainly not attracted to the type of useless asshole who'd want to marry a female police officer."

Sara couldn't argue with her. Not many men possessed the temperament for dating a woman who could arrest them.

"Does Will talk to you?" Faith amended, "I mean, about himself. Has he told you anything?"

"Some." Sara felt unreasonably guilty, as if it was her own fault that Will was so closed off. "We just started seeing each other."

"I've got this long list of questions in my head," Faith admitted. "Like, what happened to his parents? Where did he go when he aged out of the system? How did he manage college? How did he get into the GBI?" She studied Sara, who just shrugged. "Statistically, kids in state care have an eighty percent chance of getting arrested before they turn twenty-one. Sixty percent of them end up staying inside."

"Sounds about right." Sara had seen this scenario play out again and again with her kids in the ER. One day she was treating them for an earache, the next they were handcuffed to a gurney awaiting transport to jail. Will's transcendence of this soul-killing pattern was one of the things that she most admired about him. He had succeeded despite the odds.

Which Sara was fairly certain Will would not want her discussing with Faith. She changed the subject. "Are you working this Ashleigh Snyder case?"

"I wish," Faith said. "Though I don't see there's much hope. It hasn't broken on the news yet, but she's been missing for a while, and those so-called friends of hers who're hogging the camera have no idea."

"How long?"

"Since before spring break."

"That was last week." The ER had seen a resulting spike in alcohol poisoning and drug-induced psychosis. "No one noticed she was gone?"

"Her parents thought she went to the Redneck Riviera, her friends thought she was with her parents. Her roommate waited two days to report her missing. She thought Ashleigh had met a guy and didn't want to get her in trouble."

"So there's no chance she's faking it?"

"There was a lot of blood in her bedroom—on the pillow, the carpet."

"The roommate didn't think that was odd?"

"My son's that age. They're professionally obtuse. I doubt a spaceship landing on his forehead would strike him as odd." Faith returned to their earlier conversation. "Can you look at Will's medical records?"

Sara felt caught out by the question.

Faith added, "His juvenile files are sealed—trust me, I've tried—but there has to be something at Grady from when he was a kid."

A deep blush worked its way up Sara's chest and face. She'd actually considered this once, but common sense had won out. "It's illegal for me to access anyone's records without their permission. Besides—"

Sara stopped talking. She wasn't being completely honest. She'd made it as far as the records department. One of the secretaries had pulled Will's patient chart. Sara hadn't touched the file, but the name on the label listed him as Wilbur Trent. Will's license gave his legal name as William Trent. Sara had seen it the other night when he'd opened his wallet to pay for dinner.

So why had Amanda called him Wilbur?

"Hello?" Faith snapped her fingers. "You in there?"

"Sorry. I zoned out." Sara shifted Emma onto her other shoulder. "I'm just ..." She tried to remember what they'd been talking about. "I'm not going to spy on him." That, at least, was the truth. Sara wanted to know about Will because they were lovers, not because she was writing a salacious exposé. "He'll tell me when he's ready."

"Good luck with that," Faith said. "Meanwhile, if you find out anything good, let me know."

Sara chewed her lip as she stared at Faith. The overwhelming urge to strike a bargain started to well up from deep inside. Amanda showing up at the children's home. The hammer. Will's unexplained anger. His sudden desire to be alone.

Faith was whip-smart. She'd worked as a homicide detective on the Atlanta police force before becoming a special agent with the GBI. She'd been Will's partner for two years. Faith's mother was one of Amanda's oldest friends. If Sara shared what had happened at the children's home tonight, maybe Faith could help Sara put together the clues.

And then Will really would be lost to her forever.

"Faith," Sara began. "I'm glad we're friends. I like you a lot. But I can't talk about Will behind his back. He has to always know I'm on his side."

She took it better than Sara expected. "You're far too healthy to be in a relationship with a cop. Especially Will."

The thought occurred to Sara that they might not even be in a relationship anymore, but she said, "Thank you for understanding."

Faith waved to an older woman who was standing at the nurses' station. No pantsuit—she was dressed in jeans and a flowery blouse—but there was the unmistakable air of a police officer about her. It was the way she looked around the room, noting the good guys, singling out the possible bad ones. The woman waved at Faith, checked the patient board, then escorted herself toward Amanda's room.

"She trained with Mossad after 9/11," Faith provided. "Two kids. Three grandkids. Divorced five times. Twice from the same man. And did it all without ever wearing a pantsuit." Faith sounded reverential. "She's my role model."

Sara cradled Emma so she could look at her face. There was a soft, powdery scent coming off her, a mixture of baby wipes and sweat. "Your mom's a pretty good role model, too."

"We're too different." Faith shrugged. "Mom's quiet, methodical, always in charge, and I'm 'oh my God, we're all going to die.' "

The evaluation was strange coming from a woman who kept a loaded shotgun in the trunk of her car. Sara said, "I feel safe knowing you're with Will." Faith would never know what kind of compliment Sara had paid her. "You're pretty good under fire."

"Once I stop freaking out." She pointed toward Amanda's room. "You could blow up a bomb right now and as soon as the dust cleared, all of them would still be right there, guns drawn, ready to fight the bad guys."

Sara had seen Amanda in some tough situations. She didn't doubt it one bit.

"Mom told me when they joined up, the first question on the polygraph was about their sex lives. Were they virgins? If not, how many men had they been with—was it more than one? Was it less than three?"

"Is that legal?"

"Anything's legal if you can get away with it." She grinned. "They asked mom if she was joining the force so she could have sex with policemen. She told them it depended on what the policeman looked like."

Sara asked, "What about Amanda?" The fall in the basement had her recalling her early days on the force. Maybe there was a reason. "Was she always a cop?"

"Far as I know."

"She never worked for children's services?"

Faith narrowed her eyes. Sara could practically see her detective's brain click on. "What are you getting at?"

Sara kept her attention on Emma. "I was just curious. Will hasn't told me much about her."

"He wouldn't," Faith said, as if she needed reminding. "I grew up with Amanda. She dated my uncle for years, but the idiot never asked her to marry him."

"She never got married? Had kids?"

"She can't have children. I know she tried, but it wasn't in the cards."

Sara kept her gaze on Emma. There was one thing she shared with Amanda Wagner. It wasn't the kind of club you bragged about belonging to.

Faith said, "Can you imagine her as a mother? You'd be better off with Casey Anthony."

Emma hiccupped. Sara rubbed her tummy. She smiled at Faith, wishing—longing—to talk to her, but knowing she could not. Sara had not felt this cut off in a long while.

Of course, she could always call her mother, but Sara wasn't up for a lecture about right and wrong, especially because Sara could clearly see the difference, which made her less the subject of a torrid love affair and more like a woman who had resigned herself to being a doormat. Because that was exactly what Cathy Linton would say: why are you giving a man everything when he won't or can't give you anything in return?

Faith asked, "Was that you or Emma?"

Sara realized she'd grunted. "Me. I just figured out my mother was right about something."

"God, I hate when that happens." Faith sat up straight. "Speaking of ..."

Evelyn Mitchell was standing by the nurses' station. The woman was cut from

the same cloth as her friends: matching pantsuit, trim figure, perfect posture even though she couldn't stand without crutches. She was obviously looking for her daughter.

Faith reluctantly stood. "Duty calls." Her feet dragged the floor as she headed toward the nurses' station.

Sara held up Emma and touched her nose to the baby's. Emma showed both rows of gums, squealing in delight. If there was any question about how good a mother Faith Mitchell was, one need only look at her happy baby. Sara kissed Emma's cheeks. The little girl giggled. A few more kisses and she started snorting. Her feet kicked in the air. Sara kissed her again.

"His *what*?" Faith shouted.

Her voice echoed through the ER. Both mother and daughter stared openly at Sara. From this distance, they could've been twins. Both around the same weight and height. Both with blonde hair and a familiar set to their shoulders. Faith's expression was troubled, and Evelyn's was as inscrutable as usual. The older woman said something, and Faith nodded before heading toward Sara.

"Sorry." Faith held out her hands for Emma. "I need to go."

Sara passed her the baby. "Is everything okay?"

"I don't know."

"Is it Ashleigh Snyder?"

"No. Yes." Faith's mouth opened again, then closed. Obviously, there was something wrong. Faith didn't shock easily, and Evelyn Mitchell wasn't one to casually dole out information.

Sara said, "Faith, you're scaring me. Is Will all right?"

"I don't—" She stopped herself. "I can't—" Again, she stopped. Her lips pressed together in a thin white line. Finally, she said, "You were right, Sara. Some things we have to keep separate."

For the second time that night, a person keeping a secret turned their back on Sara and walked away.

July 11, 1975

FRIDAY

Amanda scanned through her women's studies textbook, marking the paragraphs she needed to know for her evening class. She was sitting in the passenger's seat of Kyle Peterson's Plymouth Fury. The police radio was turned down low, but her ear had been trained long ago to tune out anything but the pertinent calls. She turned the page and started to read the next section.

To understand the far-reaching effects of the sex/gender system, one must first deconstruct the phallic hypothesis in relation to the unconscious.

"Brother." Amanda sighed. Whatever the hell that meant.

The car shook as Peterson turned over in the back seat. Amanda studied his reflection in the visor mirror, willing him not to wake. She'd already wasted nearly an hour this morning slapping away his hands, then another half hour had been consumed with apologies so that he would stop sulking. Thank God the flask in his pocket had been full enough to knock him out or Amanda would've never found time to read her assignment.

Not that she understood a word of it. Some of the passages were downright obscene. If these women were so eager to find out how their vaginas worked, they should start shaving their legs and find themselves husbands.

The radio clicked. Amanda heard the in-and-out of a man's voice. There were pockets all over the city where the radios had little or no reception, but that wasn't the problem. A black officer was calling for backup, which meant the white officers were blocking the transmission by clicking the buttons on their mics. In the next hour, a white officer would call for help and the blacks would do the same.

And then someone with the *Atlanta Journal* or *Constitution* would write an article wondering why there had been a recent spike in crime.

Amanda checked on Peterson again. He'd started snoring. His mouth gaped open beneath his shaggy, untrimmed mustache.

She read the next paragraph, then promptly forgot everything it said. Her eyes blurred from exhaustion. Or maybe it was irritation. If she never read the words "gynecocratic" and "patriarchy" again, it would be too soon. Send Gloria Steinem into Techwood Homes and see if she still thought women could run the world.

Techwood.

Amanda felt the panic rising up like bile. The pimp's hand around her throat. The feel of his erection pressing against her. The scrape of his fingernails as he tried to pull down her hose.

She gritted her teeth, willing her heart to settle. Deep breaths. In and out. Slow. "One ... two ... three ..." She whispered off the seconds. Minutes passed before she was able to unclench her jaw and breathe normally again.

Amanda had not seen Evelyn Mitchell in the four days since the awful ordeal. The other woman hadn't shown up for roll call. Her name wasn't on the roster. Even Vanessa couldn't find her. Amanda found herself hoping that Evelyn had come to her senses and gone back home to take care of her family. It was hard enough for Amanda to force herself out of bed every morning. She couldn't imagine the dread she'd feel leaving her family, knowing the sort of world into which she was thrusting herself.

But then, Evelyn wasn't the only officer who'd disappeared. The new sergeant, Luther Hodge, had been summarily transferred. His replacement was a white man named Hoyt Woody. He was from North Georgia, and his thick hill accent was made all the more unintelligible by the toothpick he kept in his mouth at all times. The tensions around the squad were still there, but they were the usual kind. Everyone was more comfortable with a known entity.

At least Hodge's disappearance wasn't into thin air. Vanessa had made more phone calls, which revealed the sergeant had been transferred to one of the Model City precincts. Not only was it a downward move, it took him out of Amanda's circle. Unfortunately, she hadn't the nerve to go to Hodge's new station and ask him why they'd been sent to Techwood Homes on such a fool's errand.

Not that Amanda wasn't capable of other useless errands. The last few days had been a test of her two warring sides. She longed to put the whole Techwood ordeal behind her, but her curiosity would not let it go. Her sleepless nights were not just filled with fear. They were filled with questions.

Amanda wanted to think that her cop's curiosity had been piqued, but the honest truth was that she was coasting on nothing more than woman's intuition. The whore who was living in Kitty Treadwell's apartment had put the bug in Amanda's ear. Something wasn't right there. She could feel it in her bones.

Which is why Amanda had done some poking around that had exacerbated her already frayed nerves. Stupid poking around that would probably get back to her father and land her in hot water not just with Duke, but with the higher-ups in the police force.

Amanda closed her textbook. And she especially hadn't the stomach to read Phyllis Schlafly's rebuttal to the Equal Rights Amendment. Amanda was sick and tired of being told how to live her life by women who never had to write their own rent checks.

"What's the skinny?"

Amanda jumped so hard she nearly slammed her book into her face. She shushed Evelyn Mitchell, then turned around to check on Peterson.

"Sorry," Evelyn whispered. She put her hand on the door handle, but Amanda slammed down the lock. Evelyn stood outside the car, unmoved. "You know the window is down, right?"

Behind her, Vanessa Livingston giggled.

Reluctantly, Amanda unlocked the door and got out of the car. She whispered, "What do you want?"

Evelyn whispered back, "We're trading. You for Nessa."

"No way." The brass wouldn't care, but Amanda had no intention of ever partnering with Evelyn Mitchell again. She started to get back into the car. Evelyn caught her arm, and Vanessa squeezed past, slipping into the seat and carefully latching the door.

Amanda stood in the empty parking lot, wanting to slap them both.

Evelyn told Vanessa, "We'll be back in a few hours."

"Take your time." Vanessa checked Peterson. "I don't think he's going anywhere."

Evelyn used her finger to swipe the side of her nose, à la Robert Redford in *The Sting*. Vanessa did the same.

"This is ridiculous," Amanda muttered, reaching into the car to retrieve her purse and textbook.

"Oh, cheer up," Evelyn said. "Maybe we'll find some mud for you to stick in."

Evelyn drove her Ford Falcon up North Avenue. The station wagon was now devoid of moving boxes and filled with various baby items. Except for the radio on the seat between them, there was nothing that would indicate a police officer drove this car. The vinyl seat felt sticky under Amanda's legs. As an only child with no cousins, she was seldom around children. Amanda could not help but think that Zeke Mitchell had secreted a vile substance onto the vinyl.

"Pretty day," Evelyn said.

She had to be joking. The noontime sun was so intense that Amanda's eyes were watering. She shielded her eyes from the glare.

Evelyn reached into her purse and slipped on a pair of Foster Grants. "I think I have another pair." She dug around in her bag.

"No, thank you." Amanda had seen the same glasses at Richway. They cost at least five dollars.

"Suit yourself." Evelyn zipped closed her purse. She drove like an old woman, slowing for yellow lights, letting anyone pass who showed the slightest desire. She kept one foot on the gas and one on the brake. By the time they pulled into the Varsity drive-in, Amanda was ready to grab the wheel and push her out of the car.

Evelyn mumbled, "Steady, Freddy." With great concentration, she angled the Falcon into a parking spot close to the North Avenue entrance. The brakes squealed as she pumped the pedal, inching up slowly until she felt the tires bump against the barrier. Finally, Evelyn shifted the gear into park. The engine knocked when she turned off the ignition. The car shook.

Evelyn turned in her seat, facing Amanda. "Well?"

"Why did you bring me here? I couldn't possibly eat."

"I think I prefer when you're not speaking to me."

"Your wish is my command," Amanda snapped back. But then she couldn't help herself. "You almost got me raped."

Evelyn leaned back against the door. "In my defense, both of us were going to be raped."

Amanda shook her head. The woman was incapable of taking anything

seriously.

Evelyn said, "We made it through okay."

"Spare me your positive energy."

Evelyn was silent. She turned back around. She kept her hands in her lap. Amanda stared straight ahead at the menu board. The words jumbled around senselessly. In her head, Amanda listed again all the things she had to do before she could go to sleep tonight. The more she thought about it, the harder the tasks seemed. She was too tired to do any of it. She was too tired to even be here.

"Damn, gal." Evelyn's voice was deep, an approximation of the pimp's baritone. "You a fine-lookin' woman."

Amanda gripped the textbook in her lap. "Stop it."

Evelyn, as usual, was oblivious. "You is fi-ine."

Amanda turned her head away, leaning her chin on her hand. "Please, be quiet."

"Gone get me some'a that hog tush."

"Oh, for God's sakes," Amanda sputtered. "He didn't say that!" Her lips were trembling, but for the first time in four days it wasn't because she was forcing back tears.

"Mmm-hmm," Evelyn goaded, moving her hips obscenely in the seat. "Fine-lookin' woman."

Amanda couldn't stop her lips from curving upward. And then, she was laughing. There was no controlling it, even if she tried. Her mouth opened wide. She felt a lessening of pressure not just from the sound, but from the release of air that had been trapped in her lungs like a poison. Evelyn was laughing, too, which seemed the funniest part of all. Before long, they were both doubled over in their seats, tears streaming down their faces.

"Afternoon, ladies." The carhop was at Evelyn's window. His hat was rakishly tilted to the side. He slapped a number card on their windshield and smiled at them both as if he was in on the joke. "What'll ya have?"

Amanda wiped tears from her eyes. For the first time in days, she was hungry. "Bring me a Glorified Steak and some strings. And a P.C."

Evelyn said, "I'll have the same. Add a fried pie."

"Wait," Amanda called him back. "I'll have a fried pie, too."

Evelyn was still chuckling when he left. "Oh, Lord." She sighed. She tilted the mirror and used the tip of her pinky finger to fix her eyeliner. "Lord," she repeated. "I haven't been able to even think about eating since ..." She didn't have to finish the sentence. Neither of them would have to finish that sentence ever again.

Amanda asked, "What did your husband say?"

"There are some things I don't share with Bill. He likes to think I'm Agent 99, hiding safely behind the scenes while Max Smart does all the real work." She gave a short laugh. "It's not too off the mark. You know, they never even say her name on that dumb show. She's just a number."

Amanda didn't respond. It sounded like a chapter in her women's studies book.

Evelyn waited a beat. "What did your father say?"

"I wouldn't be here if I'd told him." Amanda picked at the edge of her book.

"Hodge got transferred to Model City."

"Where do you think I've been?"

Amanda felt her jaw drop. "They assigned you to Model City?"

"Hodge won't even talk to me. Every morning, first thing, I go into his office and I ask him what happened, who we ticked off, why he sent us to Techwood in the first place, and every day, he tells me to get the hell out of his office."

Amanda couldn't help but be impressed by the other woman's brashness. "You think you're being punished?" she asked. "That can't be true. The brass didn't move me. I was there, same as you."

Evelyn seemed to have an opinion on the matter, but she kept it to herself. "The boys took care of that pimp for us."

Amanda felt her heart go into her throat. "You didn't tell anyone?"

"No, of course not, but you don't have to be Columbo to figure it out—a pimp bleeding on the floor with his winky hanging out and both of us looking like we're about to have heart attacks."

She was right. At least Evelyn had saved them some face by managing to knock him out before the cavalry arrived.

"They let him out of jail long enough to get picked up again. Apparently, he resisted arrest. Up and down Ashby Street. Ended up in the hospital."

"Good. Maybe he learned his lesson."

"Maybe," Evelyn said, sounding doubtful. "He thought I'd just stand there while he raped you, waiting for my turn."

"He's probably done it hundreds of times before. You saw how Jane was with him. She was terrified."

Evelyn nodded slowly. "Dwayne Mathison. That's his name. He's been jammed up a couple of times for roughing up his girls. He runs mostly white women—tall blondes who used to be pretty. Goes by the name Juice."

"Like the football player?"

"Except one's a Heisman winner and the other likes to beat on women." Evelyn tapped her finger against the textbook in Amanda's lap. "This is surprising."

She covered the book with her hands, embarrassed. "It's a required course."

"Still, it's not a bad thing to know what's going on in other places."

Amanda shrugged. "It won't change anything."

"Don't you think it's kind of inevitable? Look at what happened to the coloreds." She indicated the restaurant. "Nipsey Russell used to be a curb man here, and now you can't turn on the TV without seeing his face."

This was true enough. Amanda didn't know which infuriated her father more, seeing Russell on every game show or finding Monica Kaufman, the new black anchor, on the Channel 2 news every evening.

Evelyn said, "Mayor Jackson's not doing such a bad job. Say what you will about Reggie, but the city hasn't burned down. Yet."

The carhop was back with their food. He hooked the tray through Evelyn's window. Amanda reached for her purse.

Evelyn said, "I've got this."

"I don't need you to—"

"Consider it buying your forgiveness."

"It's going to take more than that."

Evelyn counted out the dollar bills and left what seemed like a very generous tip. "What are you doing tomorrow?"

If her Saturday was like any other, Amanda would spend the day cleaning her father's house, then cleaning her own apartment, then while away the evening with Mary Tyler Moore, Bob Newhart, and Carol Burnett. "I hadn't thought about it."

Evelyn handed over her food. "Why don't you come to my house? We're having a barbecue."

"I'll have to check my schedule," Amanda managed, though she didn't think her father would approve. She was actually worried that he'd heard something. Without prompting, he'd seen fit to warn her off Evelyn Mitchell every morning this week. "Thank you for the invitation, though."

Evelyn said, "Well, let me know. I'd love for you to meet Bill. He's just—" Her voice took on a dreamy quality. "He's just the best. I know you'd like him."

Amanda nodded, unsure of what to say.

"You date much?"

"All the time," she joked. "Men just love it when they find out you're a cop." They loved it as they ran screaming for the door. "I'm too busy to date right now, anyway. I'm trying to finish my degree. There's just a lot going on."

Evelyn obviously saw right through her. "Working around jerks like Peterson all day, you forget what a nice, normal guy is like." She paused. "There are some good ones out there. Don't let the Neanderthals get you down."

"Mm-hm." Amanda put a french fry in her mouth, then another, until Evelyn did the same.

They both ate in silence, sticking their cups on the dashboard, balancing the paper containers in their laps. For Amanda's part, the greasy french fries and hamburger were exactly what she needed. The iced chocolate milk was as sweet as a dessert, but she ate the fried pie anyway. By the time she was through, she felt slightly nauseated again, but this time it was overindulgence rather than fear turning her stomach.

Evelyn transferred their empty containers back to the window tray. She put her hand to her stomach and groaned. "*Mamma mia*, that's a spicy meatball."

"I put a new bottle of Alka-Seltzer in my purse this morning."

Evelyn waved over the carhop and ordered two cups of water. "I'm beginning to think you and I are a bad influence on each other."

Amanda's eyelids dipped into a lengthy blink. "This is the first time I've ever wanted to be in the car with Peterson so I could lay down and go to sleep."

"You'd wake up with him on top of you." Evelyn tugged at the back of her hair. She was silent a few seconds, then asked, "Say, why do you think Hodge sent us to Techwood?"

Not for the first time, Amanda felt the danger behind her question. It was clear that someone very high up was pulling strings. Both Evelyn and Hodge had been transferred. There was no telling what would happen to Amanda, especially if anyone found out what she'd been doing.

Evelyn prodded, "Come on, girl. I know you've been thinking about it."

"Well." Amanda tried to make herself stop there, but she continued, "The guy in the blue suit bothers me. And not just because he's a lawyer."

"I know what you mean," Evelyn agreed. "He walked into the station like he

owned it. He yelled at Hodge. You don't get to do that to a cop, even if you're white and in a fancy blue suit."

"Hodge called him by name. That's what he said during roll call: 'Mr. Treadwell, we can talk in my office.' "

"And then they went into the office, and Treadwell started ordering him around right off the bat."

"Evelyn, you're missing the point. Think about what you told me before. Andrew Treadwell, Sr., has friends in high places. He had his picture in the paper with Mayor Jackson. He worked on the campaign. Why would he reach out to a lowly sergeant with no pull who's only been in charge for less than an hour?"

She nodded. "Okay. You're right. Keep going."

"Treadwell-Price specializes in construction law. Andrew Senior is negotiating all those contracts for the new subway system nobody wants."

"How'd you hear that?"

"I went down to the newspaper and looked through some of the back issues."

"They let you do that?"

Amanda shrugged. "My dad worked on that kidnapping case last year." An editor from the paper had been held for a million-dollar ransom. One of Duke's last official duties was transporting the money from the C&S vault to the drop location. "I told them who I was and they let me look through the archives."

"Your father doesn't know you were there?"

"Of course not." Duke would've been livid that Amanda hadn't cleared it with him first. "He'd ask me what I was up to. I didn't want to open that can of worms."

"Phew." Evelyn leaned her head back against the seat. "What you found out is certainly interesting. Anything else?"

Amanda hesitated again.

"Come on, darlin'. You can't be a little pregnant."

Amanda sighed to make her reluctance known. She had a sneaking suspicion she was just stirring up trouble. "The man who was talking to Hodge isn't Treadwell Junior. According to the newspaper, Treadwell Senior has one child, a daughter."

Evelyn sat up again. "Named Kitty? Or Katherine? Kate?"

"Eugenia Louise, and she's at some girls' school in Switzerland."

"So, not shooting up Boy at Techwood."

"Boy?"

"It's what Negroes call heroin. Thank you." The carhop was back with their water. Amanda unscrewed the cap from the bottle of Alka-Seltzer and dropped two tablets into each cup. The fizzing was a welcome sound.

Evelyn said, "So, there's no Treadwell Junior. I wonder who the man in the blue suit was? And why Hodge thought he was Treadwell?" Evelyn smiled. "I'm sure Hodge thinks we all look alike."

Amanda smiled, too. "Blue Suit has to be a lawyer. Maybe he's from the firm and Hodge just assumed his name was Treadwell. But that doesn't make sense, either. We've already established Andrew Treadwell wouldn't send his minion to talk to a brand-new zone captain. He'd go straight to the mayor. The more delicate the situation, the more likely he'd be to let as few people know as

possible.”

Evelyn made the obvious connection. “Which means either Blue Suit was taking initiative to help the boss or he was looking to make trouble.”

Amanda wasn’t so sure about that, but she said, “Either way, Hodge wasn’t telling him what he wanted to hear. Blue Suit was angry when he left. He yelled at Hodge, then stormed out of the building.”

Evelyn circled back to her earlier theory. “Blue Suit pressured Hodge to send us out to check on Kitty Treadwell. Treadwell isn’t a common name. She has to somehow be related to Andrew Treadwell.”

“I couldn’t find a connection in the newspapers, but they don’t keep all the back issues and they’re a bear to search through.”

“Treadwell-Price is in that new office building off Forsyth Street. We could sit outside during lunch. These guys don’t brown-bag it. Blue Suit will have to come out sooner or later.”

“And then what?”

“We show him our badges and ask him some questions.”

Amanda didn’t see that working. The man would probably laugh in their faces. “What if it gets back to Hodge that you’re snooping around?”

“I don’t think he cares so long as I stay out of his office and stop asking him questions. What about your new sergeant?”

“He’s one of the old guard, but he barely knows my name.”

“Probably drunk before lunchtime,” Evelyn said. She was likely correct. Once the older sergeants got past their morning duties, you were hard-pressed to find one behind his desk. There was a reason half the force could be found napping during shift. “We can get together Monday after roll call. They don’t care what we do so long as we’re on the streets. Nessa’s okay with Peterson.”

Amanda was slightly worried about how good Vanessa was being with Peterson, but she let it slide. “Jane wasn’t the only girl living in that apartment. There were at least two others.”

“How do you get that?”

“There were three toothbrushes in the bathroom. All of them well used.”

“Jane didn’t have that many teeth.”

Amanda stared into the fizzing seltzer. Her stomach was too full to laugh at Evelyn’s jokes. “Half of me thinks I’m crazy for wasting so much time tracking down a story off a junkie prostitute.”

Evelyn sounded apologetic. “You’re not the only one who’s been wasting time.”

Amanda narrowed her eyes at the other woman. “I knew it. What’ve you been up to?”

“I talked with a friend I know at the Five. Cindy Murray. She’s a good girl. I described Jane to her. Cindy says maybe she remembers her coming in last week. Lots of girls try to pick up vouchers that don’t belong to them. They have to show two forms of ID—a license, a blood donor card, electric bill, something with their picture and address on it. If Jane is the girl Cindy was thinking of, she tried to pass herself off with someone else’s license. When Jane saw the jig was up, she went bonkers. Started screaming and making threats. Security had to throw her out into the street.”

“What happened to the license?”

"They toss 'em into a box, wait to see if anyone tries to claim them. Cindy says there's at least a hundred licenses already. They tear them in half and throw them away at the end of every year."

"Are the welfare rolls organized by names or by addresses?"

"Numbers, unfortunately. Too many of them have the same last name or live at the same address, so they all get assigned an individual number."

"Social security number?"

"No such luck."

"It's got to be on computers, right?"

"They're in the process of changing over from punch cards to magnetic tape," Evelyn answered. "Cindy says it's a mess. She's basically working with a hammer and chisel while the boys try to figure it out. Which means even if we had access to the information, which they probably won't give us, we'd have to do it all by hand: get the welfare roll number first, then cross-reference the number to the name, then verify the name against the address, then match both against the benefits logs that verify whether the girls have collected their vouchers in the last six months, which we could then use to compare to the names on the licenses." Evelyn stopped for a breath. "Cindy says we'll need a staff of fifty and about twenty years."

"How long until the computers are up and running?"

"I don't think it would matter." Evelyn shrugged. "They're computers, not magic beans. We'd still have to do most of it by hand. Assuming they'd give us access. Does your father know anyone down at the Five?"

Duke would've taken a blowtorch to the Five if they let him. "It wouldn't matter. We can't even start the whole process until we find out Kitty Treadwell's roll number." Amanda tried to think this through. "Jane said three women were missing: Kitty Treadwell, Lucy, and Mary."

"I already checked missing persons in Zones Three and Four," Evelyn provided. "No Kitty Treadwell. No Jane Delray—which I thought I'd check on while I was there. What I did find were a dozen Lucys and about a hundred Marys. They never clean out their files. Some of these girls have died of old age by now. They've been missing since the Depression." She offered, "I can go to the other zones next week. Do you know Dr. Hanson?"

Amanda shook her head.

"Pete. Runs the morgue." She saw Amanda's expression. "No, he's a good guy. Kind of what you'd expect from a coroner, but very nice. I know a gal works for him, Deena Coolidge. She says he lets her do things sometimes."

"What things?"

Evelyn rolled her eyes. "Not what you're thinking. Lab things. Deena's real into that stuff. Likes chemistry. Pete's teaching her how to do the tests and some of the lab work on her own. She's going to Tech at night, too."

Amanda could guess why Dr. Hanson was letting her do these things, and it probably wasn't out of the kindness of his heart. "Did you check the DNF?"

"The what?"

The dead Negro file. Duke had told Amanda about the running list of unsolved black homicides. Amanda offered, "I'll check it."

"Check what?"

She changed the subject. "Do we know if the apartment is in Kitty's name?"

"Oh!" Evelyn seemed impressed. "That's a very good question." She grabbed one of the napkins off the dashboard and wrote herself a note. "I wonder if the number you get assigned for Section Eight housing is the same as the one they give you for collecting welfare vouchers? Do you know anyone at the Housing Authority?"

"Pam Canale." Amanda checked the time. "I need to study for my class tonight, but I can call her first thing Monday."

"You can tell me what you find out when we're staking out Mr. Blue Suit. Also —" She scribbled something else on the napkin. "Here's my number at home so you can let me know about tomorrow. The barbecue."

"Thank you." Amanda folded the napkin in two and stuck it in her purse. There was no lie she could tell Duke that could explain such a long absence. He was always calling her apartment to make sure she was home. If Amanda didn't pick up by the second ring, he hung up and drove over.

"You know," Evelyn began, "I read an article in the paper about this guy out West who's been killing college students."

"These girls aren't college students."

"Still, we've got three missing."

"This isn't Hollywood, Evelyn. There aren't serial killers lurking around Atlanta." Amanda changed the subject back to something more plausible. "I've been thinking about Kitty's apartment. There were three trash bags full of clothes in the bedroom. No woman can afford that many clothes, especially if she's living in the projects." Amanda felt her stomach rumble. She had forgotten about the paper cup in her hand. She downed the seltzer in one swallow and suppressed the resulting belch. "There was a lot of makeup in the bathroom, too. Way too much for one girl. Even a prostitute."

"Jane wasn't wearing any makeup. There was no smeared mascara under her eyes. I can't see her cleaning up with cold cream every night."

"There was cold cream in the bathroom," Amanda recalled, "but suffice it to say, no one was using it. There were used sanitary napkins in the trashcan, but a box of Tampax was on the shelf. So, obviously, someone was staying there who wasn't on the game. Maybe a little sister. Maybe even Kitty Treadwell."

Evelyn put the cup to her lips. "Why do you think that?"

"You can't wear Tampax if you're a virgin. So—"

Evelyn choked on the seltzer. The water spurted from her mouth and nose. She grabbed at the napkins on the dashboard, coughing so hard it sounded as if her lungs were trying to come out of her mouth.

Amanda patted her back. "Are you all right?"

She put her hand to her mouth and coughed again. "Sorry. Went down the wrong way." She coughed a third and fourth time. "What's that?"

Amanda looked out into the street. An Atlanta Police cruiser zoomed by, lights rolling, no siren. The next cruiser was the opposite: siren blaring, lights off.

"What on earth ...," Amanda began.

Evelyn turned up the police radio. All they could hear was the usual chatter, followed by mics being clicked so that the speakers could not be heard. "Idiots," Evelyn mumbled, turning the volume back down. Another cruiser screeched by. "What could it be?"

Amanda was sitting up in her seat, straining to see what was happening. Then

she realized there was an easier way. She tossed her paper cup out the window and pushed open the door. By the time she reached the sidewalk, another car zoomed past, this one a Plymouth Fury like her own.

Evelyn joined her on the sidewalk. "That was Rick and Butch." Homicide. "They're going to Techwood. All of them are going to Techwood."

Neither woman said what they were thinking. They headed toward the station wagon. Amanda edged Evelyn toward the passenger's side, saying, "I'll drive."

Evelyn didn't offer protest. She rode shotgun as Amanda backed up the car, then headed up North Avenue. They turned on Techwood Drive. A police cruiser blew past on Amanda's left as she turned onto Pine.

Evelyn grabbed the dashboard. "My Lord. Why are they in such a hurry?"

"We'll find out soon enough." Amanda pulled up onto the familiar berm. There were already five cruisers and two unmarked Plymouths. Today, no children were playing in the courtyard of Techwood Homes, though their parents had finally made an appearance. Shirtless men in tight jeans stood with cans of beer in their hands. Most of the women were just as scantily clad, but a few looked as if they'd just returned home from office work. Amanda checked her watch. It was past one o'clock. Maybe they'd come home for lunch.

"Amanda." Evelyn's tone held a low tremor. She followed the other woman's gaze to the second apartment block on the left. A group of patrolmen were clustered outside the door. Butch Bonnie pushed past them as he ran out into the courtyard. He fell to his knees and spewed vomit onto the ground.

"Oh, no." Amanda searched in her bag for a tissue. "We can get some water from—"

Evelyn stopped her with a firm hand. "Stay exactly where you are."

"But he—"

"I mean it," she said, her voice taking on a tenor Amanda had not heard before.

Rick Landry exited the building next. He used his handkerchief to wipe his mouth, then tucked it into his back pocket. Had his partner still not been vocally ill, Landry probably would've never noticed Amanda and Evelyn. As it was, he walked right over to them.

"What the hell are you broads doing here?"

Amanda opened her mouth, but Evelyn beat her to a response. "We had a case here earlier this week. Top floor. Apartment C. Prostitute named Jane Delray."

Landry stuck his tongue into his cheek as he stared first at Evelyn, then Amanda. "And?"

"And, obviously something happened here."

"It's Techwood, darlin'. Something happens here all the time."

"Top floor?" Evelyn asked. "Apartment C?"

"Wrong and wrong," Landry said. "Behind the building. Suicide. Jumped off the roof and went splat."

"Fuck!" Butch Bonnie gave a heave that rivaled the sound of a pig rutting in the wild. Landry's gaze faltered. He didn't quite look back at his partner, but he wouldn't look at Evelyn or Amanda, either.

"You." Landry motioned over one of the uniformed patrolmen. "Get all these people outta here. Looks like we're filming a damn Tarzan movie." The cop rushed to disperse the group of onlookers. There were yells and protests.

Evelyn said, "Maybe someone saw—"

"Saw what?" Landry interrupted. "They probably didn't even know her. But, give 'em another minute, they'll all be wailin' and howlin' and flappin' their gums about what a tragedy it is." He shot Evelyn a look. "You should know better than that, Mitchell. Never let 'em crowd up. They get too emotional and pretty soon you're callin' in SWAT to thin 'em out."

Evelyn spoke so quietly that Amanda could barely hear her. "We'd like to see the body."

"We what?" Amanda's voice trilled around the words.

Landry grinned. "Looks like Ethel ain't up for this, Lucy."

Evelyn didn't back down. She cleared her throat. "We're working a case, Landry. Same as you."

"Same as me?" he echoed, incredulous. He glanced back at Butch, who was sitting back on his heels, chest heaving. Amanda could see the glint of the revolver he kept on his ankle. "You girls need to toddle on back and—"

"She's right." Amanda heard the words clear as a bell. They were spoken in her own voice. They had come out of her own mouth.

Evelyn seemed just as surprised as Amanda.

"We're working a case," Amanda told him. That was *exactly* what they were doing. They'd just spent the last half hour in the car talking it through. Something was going on with these women—Kitty, Lucy, Mary, and now possibly Jane Delray. Right now, Amanda and Evelyn were the only two officers on the entire force who even knew—or apparently cared—that they were missing.

Landry lit a cigarette. He let out a stream of smoke. "Same as me, huh?" he repeated, but this time he was laughing. "You skirts working homicide now?"

Evelyn shot back, "You just said it was a suicide. What are you doing here?"

He didn't like that. "You want some balls, Mitchell, you can always suck on mine."

Amanda looked down at the ground so her expression wouldn't give her away.

"I'm fine with my husband's, thank you." Evelyn reached into her purse and pulled out her Kel-Lite. "We're ready when you are."

Landry ignored her, telling Amanda, "Come on, gal. This ain't no place for you. That body's a mess. Guts all over the place. Nasty stuff. Too nasty for a lady to handle." He tilted his chin toward Butch, not stating the obvious. "Go on, get back in your car and scoot off. Nobody'll think nothin' about it."

Amanda felt her stomach start to unclench. He was giving them an out. A graceful exit. No one would know they had asked to see the body. They could leave with their heads held high. Amanda was about to take him up on the offer, but then Landry added, "God knows, I don't want your old man coming after me with his shotgun for scaring his baby girl."

There was an odd tingling in Amanda's spine. She felt as if every vertebra was locking into place. She spoke in a shockingly certain tone. "You said the victim is behind the building?"

Evelyn appeared just as surprised as Landry when Amanda started walking toward the apartment building. She kept pace with Amanda, whispering, "What are you doing?"

"Keep walking," Amanda begged her. "Please keep walking."

"Have you ever seen a dead body?"

"Never close up," Amanda admitted. "Unless you count my grandfather."

Evelyn muttered a curse. She spoke in a hoarse whisper. "Whatever you do, don't get sick. Don't scream. For God's sake, don't cry."

Amanda was ready to do all three and she hadn't even seen the body yet. What in the name of God was she thinking? Landry was right. If Butch Bonnie hadn't been able to handle it, there was no way in hell either of them would be able to.

"Listen to me," Evelyn ordered. "If you break, they'll never trust you again. You might as well join the typing pool. You might as well slit your wrists."

"I'm okay," she said, then because she knew Evelyn needed to hear it, she told her, "You're okay, too. You're absolutely okay."

Evelyn's heels kicked up dust as she walked beside Amanda. "I'm okay," she repeated. "You're right. I'm okay."

"We're both okay." So much sweat was dripping down Amanda's back that it was pooling into her underwear. She was glad she was wearing a black skirt. She was glad she had taken that Alka-Seltzer. She was very glad that she wasn't alone as she walked into the dark building.

The vestibule was cast in more shadow than Amanda remembered. She glanced up the stairwell. One of the panes in the skylight had been broken. A piece of wood was nailed in its place. They both stopped at the metal exit door at the end of the hall, waiting for Landry.

He put his hand on the door but didn't open it. "Lookit, girls, playtime is over. Go back to taking reports on poor little sluts got mixed up with the wrong fella and cried wolf."

"We're working a case," Evelyn told him. "It might have something to do with —"

"Whore took a long walk off a short plank. You seen this dump. I'm surprised everybody here don't jump off the roof."

"We still—"

He said, "Just turn around and walk back. This has gone far enough."

"I was—"

"Stop!" Landry banged his fist against the door. "Just shut your fucking mouth!" he shouted. "I told you to leave and you'd better goddamn leave."

Evelyn was visibly startled, but she tried, "We just—"

"You want me to make you?" He snatched the Kel-Lite out of Evelyn's hand and jabbed it into her chest. "You like that?" He jabbed her again, then again, until her back was to the wall. "Not so mouthy now, are you?"

Amanda tried, "Rick—"

"Shut up!" There was a flash of white skin as he jammed the flashlight up Evelyn's skirt and pressed it between her legs. He warned, "Unless you want that for real, you better do as I damn well say. You hear me?"

Evelyn didn't speak. She could only nod. Her hands shook as they went up in surrender.

"Don't fuck around with me," Landry warned. "You got that?"

"She's sorry," Amanda said. "We're both sorry. Rick, please. We're sorry."

Slowly, he pulled the flashlight out from under Evelyn's skirt. With one hand, he flipped it around and held out the handle to Amanda. He told her, "Get her

the hell out of here.”

Which is exactly what Amanda did.

Present Day

MONDAY

The cabdriver gave Will a dubious look as he stopped in front of 316 Carver Street. "You sure this is the place, man?"

"I'm sure." Will checked the meter and handed him a ten. "Keep the change."

The guy seemed reluctant to take the money. "I know you're a cop and all, but that don't make much matter after dark. You feel me?"

Will opened the door. "I appreciate the warning."

"You sure you don't want me to wait?"

"No, but thank you." Will got out of the car. Still, the man dawdled. It wasn't until Will walked toward the side of the building that the cab slowly pulled away.

Will watched the taillights disappear down the street. Then he turned and picked his way past the tall weeds and brambles as he headed to the rear of the children's home. Between the moon and the streetlights, he had a pretty clear path to the back of the house. He stepped around syringes and condoms, broken glass and piles of trash.

He remembered Sara's earlier warning about all the dangers inside the house. She'd been full of observations tonight. And pretty pissed off. Will couldn't blame her. He was pretty pissed off himself. He was actually furious.

Hell, he was still furious.

Will's fists clenched as he rounded the house. He knew he was in an almost delirious state of denial about what was really bothering him. His father out of prison. That monster breathing free air. Will pushed this back down, just as he'd been pushing it down since he first found out.

The entire time Sara was stitching up his ankle, the only thing Will could think about was going into Amanda's hospital room and beating the truth out of her. Why did the parole board let his father out of prison? Why did Amanda find out before Will? What else was she hiding from him?

She had to be hiding something. She always hid something.

And she would die before she let Will in on it. She was tougher than any man Will had ever known. She wasn't exactly a liar, but she did things with the truth that made you think you were losing your mind. Will had given up on trying to be direct with Amanda a long time ago. Fifteen years of studying her personality had revealed nothing but the fact that she lived for subtleties and riddles. She delighted in tricking him. For every question Will had, she'd have another question, and pretty soon they'd be talking about things that would probably

make him wish he hadn't gotten out of bed this morning. Or this year. Or ever in his life.

Why was she at the children's home tonight? What was she looking for? How much did she know about his father?

Will could already guess Amanda's answers. She was out for an evening drive. Who didn't enjoy a leisurely romp through the ghetto when they were supposed to be working a kidnapping case? She saw Will and Sara inside the house and wondered why they were there. Is it wrong to be curious? Of course she knew about his father. She was his boss. It was her job to know everything about Will.

Except for one thing. The old broad had knocked her head hard enough to lose her legendary control.

"I told Edna to shore up these steps a million times."

Edna, as in Mrs. Edna Flannigan.

Amanda was in the middle of a high-profile case. The press was all over her. The director of the GBI was probably breathing down her neck. Yet, she'd stopped everything, grabbed a hammer, and headed here. There was only one way to get an honest answer about what she'd been up to, and Will was going to tear apart the children's home with his bare hands if that's what it took to find it. And then he was going to throw it right back into Amanda's face.

He stared at the back of the house. There had been a deck here at one time, but now there was only a gaping hole where a basement window used to be. The paramedics hadn't been able to take Amanda out through the interior doorway. Instead, they'd kicked out the plywood covering the basement windows and chipped away the brick to enlarge one of the openings.

Will looked up at the streetlight. Moths fluttered around, creating a strobe. He looked back at the window opening.

In retrospect, there were better ways to do this. Will could've asked the cabdriver to drop him at home, which was less than a mile away. There were lots of tools in Will's garage. Two sledgehammers, several pry bars, even a jackhammer he'd picked up secondhand at the Habitat Store. They were all well worn and well used. Will had bought his house for back taxes on the courthouse steps. It had taken him three years and every spare dime to turn it back into a home.

The hardest part was convincing the drug addicts that the house was under new ownership. The first six months, Will had to sleep with his shotgun beside his sleeping bag. When he wasn't tearing down walls and soldering copper pipe, he was going to the door and telling whoever had knocked that they would have to find somewhere else to smoke crack.

Which was actually good preparation for what Will was about to do.

He climbed in through the opening. The strobing streetlight illuminated most of the basement. Will used his cell phone to supplement its reach, picking his way past the broken stairs. Amanda Wagner was the very definition of preparedness. Will couldn't imagine her going into the dark basement without her Maglite. He spotted the familiar metallic blue casing over by a set of empty shelves. He pressed the button. The flashlight was small enough to fit in his pocket, but the LCDs glowed like a headlamp on an old Chevy.

Will hadn't exactly been honest with Sara. He'd spent his fair share of time down in the basement with Angie. Of course, he hadn't been on his elbows and

toes taking measurements, but his memory of the place had somehow reduced it to a shoebox when in fact it was as large as the upper floors.

Will ran his hand along the exterior walls. Smooth plaster was interrupted every sixteen inches by bumps from the studs underneath. A dividing wall split the center of the room. This construction was newer. The Sheetrock was edged with black mold. Chunks were missing at the bottom. Pairs of oddly spaced, yellow pine two-by-fours showed at the base like legs below a petticoat.

There was a small room in the back with a sink and toilet, probably for the help. The walls were exposed lumber with knotty pine paneling on the outside. Will checked behind the fixtures. With his foot, he kicked apart the P-trap under the sink. Nothing was in the drain.

He took off the lid on the toilet tank and found it empty. The bowl was filled with black water. He glanced around for something to search with other than his hand. The old knob-and-tube wiring hung limply from the joists. He pulled out a long section, folded it in lengths until it was stiff enough, and checked the bowl. Other than a noxious odor, there was nothing.

Overhead, the flashlight picked up spiderwebs and termite damage in the floor joists as he walked around the room. The wooden storage shelves were empty. The coal chute was filled with black dust along with a couple of syringes and a used condom. He used the Maglite to examine the flue. Bird droppings. Scratches. An animal had been trapped inside at some point. Will closed the metal door and twisted the handle to lock it into place.

He took off his suit jacket and hung it from a nail in one of the joists. His Glock stayed on his belt where it was handy. He found Amanda's hammer by the stairs. It had never been used. The price tag was still on. Midtown Hardware. Forty bucks.

Will slipped the Maglite into his back pocket. The streetlight was enough for now. He studied the hammer. Forged blue steel with a smooth face and nylon end cap. Shock-reduction grip. It was a bricklayer's tool, not something a framer would use. Will assumed Amanda had bought it for form, not function. Or maybe she'd picked it off the shelf because the blue matched her flashlight. Either way, there was a well-balanced heft to the tool. The claw was sharp and busted cleanly through the plaster when Will slammed it into the exterior wall.

He pulled back the hammer and pounded it into the wall again, enlarging the hole. He punched out a chunk of plaster. It crumbled between his fingers. There was horsehair in the mix, tiny, silk strands that had held together the clay and limestone for almost a century.

Will chipped away a large enough section to reach his hand behind the lath. The wood was rotted, still wet from rain that had poured through the foundation. He should probably be wearing gloves and goggles, or at least a mask. There was undoubtedly mold behind the plaster, maybe fungus from dry rot. The odor inside the wall was dank, the way houses smelled when they were dying. Will used the claw hammer to pry away another chunk of plaster. Then another.

Slowly, he made his way around the perimeter of the basement, pulling down the plaster chunk by chunk, row by row. Then removing the lath, then brushing out the shredded newspapers that had been used for insulation, then moving on to the next section.

He gripped Amanda's Maglite between his teeth when the streetlight couldn't reach the darkest corners. A white powder permeated the air. His eyes watered from the grit. His nose started to run from the dust and mold. The work wasn't difficult, but it was tedious and repetitive, and the temperature of the basement seemed to rise with every step as Will worked his way around the room. He was sweating profusely by the time he pounded off the last chunk of plaster. Again, the lath came apart in his hand, like wet paper. He used the claw hammer to pull out the rotted wood. As he had done with every section thus far, Will shone the flashlight onto the bare opening.

Nothing.

He pressed his palm to the cold wall. There was only a thin layer of brick holding back the dirt around the foundation. Will had broken through some sections to check anyway, then stopped for fear he might cause a cave-in. He took his phone out of his pocket and looked at the time. Two minutes past midnight. He'd been doing this for three hours.

All for nothing.

Will pushed away from the wall. He coughed and spit out a wad of plaster.

Three hours.

No scribbled notes, no hidden passages. No severed hands or bags of magic beans. As far as he could tell, nothing had been disturbed inside the walls since the house had been built. The wood was so old he could see the hatch marks where the axes had hewn down the studs from larger trees.

Will coughed again. The dust would not clear in the airless room. He used the back of his hand to wipe sweat off his forehead. His muscles were aching from the constant hacking of the hammer. Still, he started on the dividing wall down the center of the room. In many ways, the Sheetrock was harder to take down than the plaster. The paper was damp, but the gypsum was soaked through. The wall came down in tiny pieces. The pink insulation was filled with crawling bugs Will tried not to get in his mouth and nose. The studs were rotting from the floor up.

Another forty minutes went by.

Again, there was nothing.

Which meant that the nagging question that had been bouncing around Will's brain for the last two hours probably had to be asked: Why hadn't he started out on the floor?

Amanda had bought a bricklayer's hammer. The basement floor was comprised entirely of paved brick. Will recognized the Chattahoochee Brick Company logo on some of the pieces. It was similar to the brick in his own home—fired from red Georgia clay in an Atlanta manufacturing plant that had been turned into loft apartments during the financial boom times.

Will gripped the hammer in his hand. He'd thought Amanda had bought it because it was blue. He could hear her grating voice in his head: *I thought you were a detective.*

Will hadn't exactly been tidy as he'd destroyed the basement. There wasn't an inch of floor that was clean. He put his back to the corner and looked out into the room. Without the wall down the center, it was easy to plan the grid pattern. Each brick was approximately eight by four inches. He could clear out five-by-nine rows, which would roughly be three-by-three-foot sections. In a fifteen-

hundred-square-foot room, that would take approximately eleven billion years.

He kicked away debris with his foot, then got down on his knees to start on the first section. There was no pleasure in knowing that he'd devised a logical plan for tearing up the basement floor. Will swung the hammer in tight arcs, using the claw to pry up pieces of brick, squinting his eyes to keep out flying shards. Of course the brick didn't come up easily. It was too late for easy. The clay was old. The firing technique back in the thirties wasn't exactly scientific. Immigrants had probably worked sunup to sundown, backs and knees bent as they filled wooden forms with clay that would be air-dried, then fired in a kiln.

The first row of bricks crumbled under the hammer's claw. The edges were weak. They would not hold the center. Will had to use his bare hands to scoop out the pieces. Finally, by the third row, he had found a more successful system. He had to use precision with every swing of the hammer in order to wedge the claw into the cracks. Sand was packed into the joints. It got into Will's eyes, flew up into his mouth. He clenched his teeth. He thought of himself as a machine as he worked back and forth across the room, clearing each section brick by brick, digging a few inches into the dirt to see what was underneath.

He was a third of the way through when the futility overwhelmed him. He kicked away the debris covering the next section, then the next. He used Amanda's Maglite to study each crack and crevice. The bricks were tight. Nothing had disturbed them—not in Will's lifetime, or the building's lifetime, or at any time at all.

Nothing. Just like the walls. There was nothing.

"Dammit!" Will flung the hammer across the room. He felt a tearing in his bicep. The muscle spasmed. Will clutched his arm. He stared into the loam, the useless fruits of his labor.

Will thought about his revenge fantasies from the Grady ER. His mind flashed up an image of Amanda—terrified, willing to answer any question he asked. He'd been in plenty of fights during his lifetime, but he'd never used his fists on a woman. Amanda was probably sleeping like a baby back in her hospital bed while Will was chasing ghosts that he wasn't even sure he wanted to find.

He clenched his hands. There were tiny rips up and down his fingers—like paper cuts, only deeper. His sutured ankle felt like it was on fire. He tried to stand, but his knees wouldn't hold him. He forced himself up to standing. This time he stumbled. He grabbed onto one of the studs. A splinter dug into his palm. He screamed just to let out some of the pain. There was not a muscle in his body that did not ache.

All for nothing.

Will took his handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped his face. He grabbed his jacket off the nail. The streetlight was no longer strobing when he pulled himself out of the basement. The air was so crisp that he started coughing. He spit out more chunks of plaster. Will went to the faucet in the middle of the yard. It was the same one he'd used as a kid during the summer months when Mrs. Flannigan locked them all out of the house and told them not to come back until suppertime. The pump handle was nearly rusted through.

Carefully, Will moved the lever up and down until a thin stream of water came out of the spigot. He put his mouth to the water and drank until he felt knives in his stomach. Then he put his head under the stream and washed off

the grime. His eyes stung from the water. There were probably chemicals in there that he didn't want to know about. A tannery had operated down the street when he was growing up. Will had probably drunk enough benzene to fill a cancer ward.

Another souvenir from his childhood.

He pushed himself up, using the pump for leverage. The handle snapped off. Will could only shake his head. He tossed the handle into the yard and started the long walk home.

Will sat at his kitchen table, hands clutching a blue file folder. His eyes wouldn't stay open. He was punch-drunk from exhaustion. He hadn't bothered to go to bed. By the time he got home, it was already three in the morning. He had to leave by four to get to the airport in time for the business travelers. He'd taken a shower. He'd cooked a breakfast he couldn't eat. He'd walked the dog around the block. He'd shined his scuffed shoes. He'd put on a suit and tie. He'd used Bactine on the thousands of tiny cuts and blisters on his hands. He'd wiped away the weird pink fluid seeping through the Band-Aid on his ankle.

And now he couldn't make himself get up from the table.

Will picked at the edge of the file folder. His mother's name was neatly typed on the label stuck to the tab. Will had seen the letters so many times that they were burned into his retinas. He was twenty-two years old before he finally gained access to her information. There was a lot of paperwork that had to be filled out. He'd had to go down to the courthouse. There were other things, too, all of which involved navigating the juvenile justice system. The biggest obstacle was Will. He'd had to get to a point in his life where the prospect of going before a judge didn't bring on a cold sweat.

Betty came in through the dog door. She gave Will a curious look. The dog was adopted, an embarrassingly tiny Chihuahua mix that had come to Will through no fault of his own. She put her front feet on his thigh. She looked perplexed when Will didn't lean back to let her into his lap. After a while, she gave up, circling the floor three times before settling down in front of her food bowls.

Will let his gaze fall back to the file, his mother's name. The black typed letters were sharp on the white label. Not that it was white anymore. Will had rubbed his fingers along her name so many times that he'd yellowed the paper label.

He opened the file. The first page was what you'd usually find in a police report. The date was followed by the case number at the top. Then there was the section for the more salient details. Name, address, weight, height, cause of death.

Homicide.

Will stared at his mother's picture. Polaroid. It was taken years before her death. She was thirteen, maybe fourteen. As with the label, the photo was yellowed from being handled so much. Or maybe age had broken down the processing chemicals. She was standing in front of a Christmas tree. Will had been told the camera was a gift from her parents. She was holding up a pair of socks, probably another gift. There was a smile on her face.

Will wasn't the type of man to stare in the mirror, but he'd spent plenty of

time examining his features one by one, trying to find similarities between himself and his mother. They had the same almond shape to their eyes. Even in the faded photo, he could see the color was the same blue. His blond hair was sandy, shaded more toward brown than his mother's almost yellow curls. One of his bottom teeth was slightly crooked like hers. She was wearing a retainer in the photo. The tooth had probably been pulled back into line by the time she was murdered.

Will lined up the photo to the edge of the front page, making sure to keep the paper clip in the same spot. He turned to the second page. His eyes couldn't focus on the words. The text jumped around. Will blinked several times, then stared at the first word of the first line. He knew it by heart, so it came easy to him.

"Victim."

Will swallowed. He read the next words.

"... was found at Techwood Homes."

Will closed the file. There was no need to read through the details again. They were ingrained in his memory. They were a part of his waking existence.

He looked at his mother's name again. The letters weren't so crisp this time. If his brain hadn't filled in the words, he doubted he'd be able to make them out.

Will had never been much of a reader. The words moved around the page. The letters transposed. Over the years, he'd figured out some tricks to help him pass for more fluent. A ruler under a line of text kept one row from blending in with another. He used his fingers to isolate difficult words, then repeated the sentence in his head to test for sense. Still, it took him twice as long as Faith to fill out the various reports that had to be submitted on a daily basis. That a person like Will had chosen a career that relied so heavily on paperwork was something Dante could've written about.

Will was in college by the time he figured out that he had dyslexia. Or, rather, he had been told. It was the fifteenth anniversary of John Lennon's death. Will's music appreciation professor was talking about how it was believed that Lennon had dyslexia. In great detail, she described the signs and symptoms of the disorder. She could've been reading from the book of Will's life. In fact, the woman had basically delivered a soliloquy directly to Will on the gift of being different.

Will had dropped the class. He didn't want to be different. He wanted to blend in. He wanted to be normal. He'd been told most of his school life that he didn't fit into the classroom structure. Teachers had called him stupid. They'd put him in the back of the room and told him to stop asking questions when he would never understand the answers. Will had even been called to the principal's office his junior year and had been told that maybe it was time for him to drop out.

If not for Mrs. Flannigan at the children's home, Will probably would have left school. He could vividly remember the morning she'd found him in bed rather than waiting outside for the school bus. Will had seen her slap other kids plenty of times. Nothing bad, just a smack on the bottom or across the face. He'd never been hit by her before, but she slapped him then. Hard. She had to stand on her tiptoes to do it. "Stop feeling sorry for yourself," she'd commanded. "And get your ass on that bus before I lock you in the pantry."

Will could never tell this story to Sara. It was yet another part of his life she

would never understand. She would see this as abuse. She would probably say it was cruel. For Will, it had been exactly what he needed. Because if Mrs. Flannigan hadn't cared enough to climb those stairs and push him out the front door, no one else would have bothered.

Betty's ears perked up. Her tags jingled on her collar as she turned her head. A low growl came out of her throat. Will heard a key in the front door lock. For just a second, he thought it might be Sara. He was overwhelmed by a feeling of lightness. And then he remembered that Sara didn't have a key to his house. And then the darkness came back when he remembered why. Sara didn't need a key. They didn't spend much time here. They always stayed in her apartment because at Will's, there was the constant threat of Angie walking in on them.

"Willie?" Angie called as she made her way through the living room. She paused at the open kitchen doorway. Angie had always embraced her feminine side. She favored figure-hugging skirts and shirts that showed her ample cleavage. Today, she was wearing a black T-shirt and jeans that hung low on her hips. She had lost weight in the three weeks since he'd last seen her. The pants were loose, but not on purpose. Will could see a black thong peeking over the top of the waistband.

Betty started growling again. Angie hissed at the dog. Then she looked at Will. Then she looked at the light blue file folder in his hand. She asked, "Reading up, baby?"

Will didn't answer.

Angie walked to the refrigerator and took out a bottle of water. She unscrewed the cap. She took a long swig as she studied Will. "You look like shit."

He felt like shit. All he wanted to do was put his head down on the table and sleep. "What do you want?"

She leaned back against the counter. He should've been surprised by her words, but then, nothing Angie said ever really surprised him. "What are we going to do about your father?"

Will stared down at the file. The kitchen was quiet. He could hear the whistling sound of Betty's breathing, the tinkle of the tags on her collar as she settled back down.

Angie had never been good at waiting him out. "Well?"

Will didn't have an answer for her. Eighteen hours of thinking about it pretty much nonstop hadn't brought any solutions. "I'm not going to do anything."

Angie seemed disappointed. "You need to call your girlfriend and ask for your balls back."

Will glared at her. "What do you want, Angie?"

"Your father's been out for almost six weeks. Did you know that?"

Will felt his stomach clench. He hadn't bothered to look up the details in the state database, but he'd assumed the release was recent, in the last few days, not almost two months ago.

She said, "He's sixty-four now. Diabetic. Had a massive heart attack a few years ago. Old people are expensive to take care of."

"How do you know all this?"

"I was at his parole hearing. Thought I'd see you there, but no." She raised an eyebrow, waiting for him to ask the obvious question. When Will didn't, she

volunteered, "He looks good for his age. Been keeping in shape. I guess the heart attack scared him." She smiled. "You've got his mouth. The same shape to your lips."

"Is there a point to this?"

"The point is, I remember our promise."

Will looked down at his hands. He picked at a torn cuticle. "We were kids back then, Angie."

"Put a knife in his throat. Jam a crowbar in his head. Shoot him up with H and make it look like an accident. That was your favorite one, right?" She leaned down, inserting herself in his line of sight. "You pussin' out on me, Wilbur?" He moved away from her. "Do I need to remind you what happened to your mother?"

Will tried to clear his throat, but something got stuck.

Angie dragged over a chair and sat a few inches away from him. "Listen, baby, you can have all the fun you want with your little doctor friend. You know I've had my share. But this is business. This goes back to you and me and a promise we made to each other." She waited another beat, then said, "What happened to your mother, what happened to you—all because of that bastard—we can't just let that go, Will. He has to pay."

Will's cuticle started to bleed, but he couldn't stop picking at the skin. Angie's words stirred up something familiar inside of him. The anger. The rage. The need for revenge. Will had spent the last ten years of his life trying to let that go, and now Angie was shoving it back in his face.

He told her, "You're not in a position to talk to me about broken promises."

"Ashleigh Snyder."

Will's head jerked up, surprised to hear her mention the missing girl.

Angie smiled as she tapped her finger on his mother's file. "You're forgetting that I know everything, baby. Every detail. Every last drop. You think he's changed his ways? You think he's too old to get around? Let me tell you, honey, he's been busy inside. He could outrun you, out-jump you, out-kill you. Just looking at him made me scared, and you know I don't scare easy."

Will looked at her finger. The nail polish was chipped.

"Are you listening to me, Will?"

He waited for her to stop touching his mother's file.

Slowly, she moved her hand away.

Angie had helped him fill out the paperwork to get the documents. Angie had been the first to show him his mother's photograph. Angie had read the autopsy report aloud when Will, so upset he could barely function, was unable to make sense of it. Lacerations. Abrasions. Scratches. Tears. Wounds. The indescribable rendered in cold, medical language. Like Will, Angie knew every word. She knew every awful thing. She knew the pain and the misery, just like she knew when she finished telling Will what had happened to his mother, he had been so violently ill that he'd started coughing up blood.

She said, "He's holed up at the Four Seasons on Fourteenth. I guess his money earned some interest over the years."

"You've been watching him?"

"I've got a friend in security keeping an eye on him for me." She pursed her lips. "It's not a bad life. Five-star hotel. He uses the gym every morning. He

orders room service. He goes for walks. He hangs out at the bar.”

Will pictured every single tableau. The thought of this man living such an easy life put a fist in his stomach.

“It’s all right,” she soothed. Will couldn’t stop looking at the file. His hands were gripping the edge. “It’s me, baby. You don’t have to pretend with me.”

He flinched as Angie’s fingers traced down his neck, his back. Her fingernails lined up with the scars that mottled his skin. “You can talk to me about it. I was there. I know what went down. I’m not going to judge you.” Will shook his head, but she kept touching him, her hand going to the front of his chest, tips of her fingers finding the perfectly round circles where the tip of a burning cigarette had seared into his flesh. Her mouth was at his ear. “You think this would’ve happened to you if your mother had been around? You think she would’ve let them hurt her baby boy?”

This was what they had talked about for hours, days, weeks, years. The things that had been done to them. The things they would do to pay those people back. Childhood revenge fantasies. That’s all they were. And yet, it felt so good to give in to them now. So nice to enjoy the fantasy of doing to that bastard what the state had refused to do.

“Let me take care of it,” Angie said. “Let me make it all better for you.”

Will was so tired. He felt incapacitated. Every inch of his body was sore. His brain was filled with static that wouldn’t go away. When Angie pressed in closer, all he could think was how good it felt to be near another person. This was what being with Sara had done to Will. She’d taken away his ability to be alone. She’d broken through his solitude. She’d dragged him into a world where he didn’t just want things—he needed them. He needed to be touched. He needed to feel her arms around him.

“Poor baby,” Angie said. She kissed his ear, his neck. Will felt a familiar stirring in his body. When she slipped her hand inside his shirt, he didn’t stop her. When her mouth found his, he didn’t stop her. His hand went to her breast. She pressed closer against him.

But she tasted like nothing. Not mints or honey or those little sour candies Sara liked. Angie’s hands rested on his shoulders, palms flat, not wrapped around the back of his neck. Not pulling him closer. Pushing him away.

Will tried to kiss her again. Angie moved back out of his reach, just as he knew she would. That’s how she worked. Once she got something, she didn’t want it anymore.

Will breathed out a heavy sigh. “I don’t love you.” He corrected, “I’m not in love with you.”

She crossed her arms as she sat back in the chair. “Am I supposed to be hurt by that?”

Will shook his head. He didn’t want to hurt her. He just wanted her to stop.

“Get real, baby. Sara may be all lovey-dovey now and telling you she wants to know all about you, but what’s she really gonna do with that knowledge?”

He couldn’t answer the question, but he knew one thing for certain. “She won’t use it against me.”

“That’s sweet, but tell me this: how’s she gonna go to sleep beside you every night knowing your father’s DNA is swirling around inside you? Nature trumps nurture, baby. Sara’s a doctor. Eventually she’s gonna start to wonder what

you're really capable of." She leaned closer. "Think about the terror you're gonna see in her eyes."

Will stared at her. There was a nasty twist to her mouth, a hollow look to her eyes. She wasn't just thinner. She was almost gaunt. For as long as Will had known her, Angie had always worn her makeup heavy—not because she needed to, but because she wanted the cover. Thick black eyeliner around her eyes. Dark brown eye shadow with a sparkle of glitter. Deep red lipstick. Blush on her high cheekbones. Her curly brown hair draped along the sides of her face. Her lips were a perfect bow tie. She was tall and thin with breasts that spilled out of the tight shirts she favored. She was the sort of woman that made men cheat on their wives. Literally. Angie loved taking things away from other people. She was a temptress. She was a siren. She was a thief.

She was also high as a kite. Her pupils were blown wide open.

He asked, "Are you taking pills again?" He tried to take her hand, but she jerked away. "Angie?"

She pushed herself up from the table and went back to the sink.

Will sat back in the chair. "What are you doing, Angie?"

She didn't answer him. Instead, she stared out the kitchen window. Her shoulder blades were sharp. The skull and crossbones tattoo she'd gotten when she was eighteen had faded to a light blue.

Will put his hand in his pocket. He felt the cold metal of his wedding ring. Sara kept her husband's wedding ring in a small wooden box on the mantel over the fireplace. Her ring was in there, too. They were tied together with a white ribbon, resting on a pillow of blue satin.

Will repeated, "What are you doing, Angie?"

Her shoulders went up. "I guess this is what happens to me without you."

"You've been without me lots of times."

"We both know this is different."

He couldn't argue with the truth. "Please stop hurting yourself."

"I will when you stop fucking your girlfriend."

Angie walked out of the kitchen. She picked up her purse where she'd dropped it on the couch. She turned around at the front door and blew him a kiss.

And then she was gone.

Will pressed his forehead to the table. The Formica was cold against his skin. Betty's paws tapped on his leg again. He let her into his lap. Her fur was wiry under his hand. She licked his fingers.

Angie's mother had killed herself with drugs. It was a twenty-seven-year-long suicide. That was what brought Angie to the children's home. Deidre Polaski had spent more than half of Angie's life in a vegetative coma, warehoused in a state hospital. She'd finally died a few months ago. Maybe that's what had gotten Angie back on the pills. Maybe she needed an escape.

Or maybe Will was to blame.

Three weeks ago in this very kitchen, Angie had put Will's gun in her mouth. She'd threatened to kill herself before. It was her go-to strategy when nothing else was working. Will thought about the wedding ring in his pocket. Maybe he was keeping it for the same reason Sara kept her husband's. Will had been mourning Angie for years. The only difference was that she hadn't died yet.

His phone rang. Not his cell, which was charging on his desk, but the landline. Will lifted his head from the table, but couldn't make himself stand. Maybe it was Sara calling. Though Will was pretty sure it was his responsibility to call her, not the other way around. He had stormed out last night. He had pissed her off. He had kissed Angie.

Will put his hand to his mouth. There was lipstick on his fingers. Jesus Christ, what had he done? Sara would be devastated. She would—Will didn't even want to think about what she would do. It would be the end of them. It would be the end of everything.

The phone stopped ringing. The house was completely silent. He could feel his heart jackhammering in his chest. There was no saliva left in his mouth. Betty stirred in his lap.

What the hell had he done?

His cell phone started chirping. Will had never seen himself as a coward, but the lure to just sit there and do nothing was strong. Unfortunately, he didn't have the willpower.

Will put Betty on the floor. He felt like he was dragging through quicksand as he walked into the living room. He picked up his cell phone, expecting to see Sara's number, but there was Amanda's instead.

He considered for a moment not answering the call, but if the last twenty-four hours had taught him anything, it was that Amanda always knew how to track him down.

Will grabbed his car keys and flipped open the phone. "I'm on my way to the airport."

"Stay where you are." Amanda's tone was off. "We found a body. Faith is on her way to pick you up."

Will braced his hand on the desk. His head started pounding. "Where?"

Amanda hesitated, something Will had never heard her do before. "Faith will loop you in on the details."

"Where?"

"You know where." Will made her say it. "Techwood."

November 15, 1974

MARY HALSTON

Mary had been robbed at the Union Mission last night, which was not unusual, but still annoyed her. It wasn't money that was stolen—her pimp kept all of that—but a locket that her high school boyfriend had given her. Jerry. He'd gone to Nam straight out of school. He'd held his own against Charlie, but got hooked on H so bad that he couldn't pass the drug test to get back into the U.S. Took him six more months of rotting in the jungle before he could get clean, then the minute the plane touched down, he grabbed Mary and a bag of H, and another six months later, Jerry was dead with a needle in his arm and Mary was face down in an alley gritting her teeth, praying for it to be over fast.

She preferred not to look at their faces. Their beady eyes. Their wet lips. Their brown teeth. She felt like their images were etched into a part of her brain that she would be able to access one day and then—puff. She would ignite like a Roman candle and flame out forever.

Mary had read a crazy book one time about scientists slicing off your retinas and sticking them into a big TV that showed everything you'd ever seen in your entire life. The book was a gas, but creepy, because Mary didn't want to think about her life. Strange she'd read the thing in the first place. Mary's speed was more the Dana Girls and Nancy Drew. She'd been on a sci-fi kick after watching *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Not really watching it, because Jerry's hands were down her pants the entire time, but she got the gist of the movie: human beings were totally screwed by 2001.

Not that she would live to see it happen. Mary was nineteen years old. When she wasn't sleeping on a cot at the Union Mission, she was trolling the streets for trade. She'd lost some teeth. Her hair was coming out in clumps. She wasn't good enough to stand on the street corners. She had to walk around during the day looking for lawyers and bankers who turned her around and smashed her face into the wall while they did their business. It kind of reminded her of the way you held a kitten. Grab it by the back of the neck and it goes limp. None of these assholes were limp, though. That was for damn sure.

Mary darted into an alley and sat down by the Dumpster. Her feet hurt. There were blisters on her heels because her shoes were too tight. Not really her shoes. Mary wasn't just a victim at the Union Mission. She took what she needed, and she'd needed shoes. White patent leather. Chunky heel. They were very stylish, the sort of thing Ann Marie might wear to an audition on *That Girl*.

She heard heavy footsteps making their way toward her. Mary looked up at

the man. It was like staring up at a mountain. He was tall with broad shoulders and a pair of hands that could easily snap her neck.

He said, "Good morning, sister."

And that was the last thing she heard.

July 12, 1975

SATURDAY

Amanda had never been particularly adept at lying, especially where her father was concerned. Since childhood, Duke could look at her a certain way and Amanda would burst into tears, pouring out her soul no matter the consequences. She couldn't even begin to predict how angry he would be if he found out Amanda was spending the afternoon at Evelyn Mitchell's house. It reminded her of all those stories from the Nixon scandal. The cover-up always brought you down.

And this one was a doozy. Not only had Amanda completely fabricated a church function, she'd dragged Vanessa Livingston into the mix, exacting a promise that the other woman would support the story no matter what. Amanda could only hope that Duke was too wrapped up in his court case to dig too deeply into her story. He'd been on the phone with his lawyer all morning. The state supreme court's decision for Lars Oglethorpe had shifted the winds at police headquarters. Duke had barely registered Amanda's presence as she cleaned his house and ironed his shirts.

All she wanted to do now was see Evelyn with her own two eyes to make certain the other woman was all right. After leaving Techwood yesterday, neither of them had said a word to each other. Evelyn had dropped off Amanda at the station and driven away without even saying goodbye. What Rick Landry had done to her in the hallway seemed to be stuck in her throat.

Amanda pulled out onto Monroe Drive. She wasn't often on this side of Piedmont Heights. In her mind, she still thought of it as barren farmland, though the area had been given over to industry some time ago. As a child, she'd visited Monroe Gardens with her mother, where they'd peruse the nursery for hours picking out pansies and roses to plant in the backyard. The land had been turned into office buildings for the Red Cross, but she could still recall the rows of daffodils.

She took a left onto Montgomery Ferry. Plaster's Bridge narrowed the road to one lane. The Plymouth's tires bumped over the rutted concrete. A cold sweat came on as she passed Ansley Golf Club, even though she knew her father wasn't playing today. She followed the dogleg to Lionel Lane and went right on Friar Tuck, which cut straight through the heart of Sherwood Forest.

Evelyn's house was one of those ranch-style homes they'd built by the thousands for returning veterans. One story with a carport on the side, just like the house next door, which in turn was an exact duplicate of the next house, and

the next.

Amanda parked on the street behind Evelyn's station wagon and checked herself in the rearview mirror. The heat had done her makeup no favors. Her hair was flat and lifeless. She had planned on washing it today, but the thought of sitting under the dryer was nauseating and she couldn't let her hair dry naturally because it would sour.

She cut the engine and heard the whir of a circular saw. The driveway was taken up with a black Trans Am and a convertible Ford Galaxie like Perry Mason used to drive. As she approached the house, Amanda saw that a shed was being built on the open side of the carport. The wall supports and roof were up, but little else. There was a man in the carport leaning over a piece of plywood resting on a pair of sawhorses. He was dressed in cutoff jeans and no shirt. The logo on his orange sun visor was easily recognizable, though it wasn't until Amanda was halfway up the drive that she could make out the Florida Gator.

"Hello!" he called, setting down the saw. Amanda guessed this was Bill Mitchell, though she realized that somewhere in the back of her mind she had imagined a more glamorous man. He was plain looking, about Evelyn's height with wispy brown hair and a bit of a belly. His skin was bright red from the sun. There was a welcoming smile on his face, though Amanda felt immensely uncomfortable talking to a man who wasn't fully clothed.

"Amanda." He held out his hand as he walked toward her. "I'm Bill. So pleased to meet you. Ev's told me a lot about you."

"You as well." Amanda shook his sweaty hand. Sawdust was stuck to his chest and arms.

"Let's get out of this sun. It's a scorcher." He cupped his hand to her elbow as he led her into the shade of the carport. Amanda saw a picnic table laid out in the backyard. The Weber was already belching smoke. She felt a brief flash of guilt. She'd been so worried about Evelyn's state of mind that she'd forgotten this was a party. She should've brought a hostess gift.

"Bill?" Evelyn came into the carport holding a jar of mayonnaise. She was barefoot, dressed in a bright yellow sundress. Her hair was perfect. She wasn't wearing any makeup, but she didn't seem to need any. "Oh, Amanda. You made it." She handed the mayonnaise to her husband. "Sweetheart, put a shirt on. You're red as a lobster."

Bill rolled his eyes at Amanda. He popped open the jar before handing it back to his wife.

Evelyn asked Amanda, "Did you meet Kenny? Bill, where's Kenny?" She didn't give him time to answer. "Kenny?"

"Under here," a deep voice called from beneath the shed. Amanda saw a pair of hairy legs, then cutoff jeans, then a man's naked torso as Kenny pushed himself out from beneath the plywood floor. He smiled at Amanda, said, "Hello," then told Bill, "Looks like we could use some more bracing."

Evelyn explained, "They're building a shed so we have a safe place to keep my gun."

"And potting soil," Kenny added. He held out his hand to Amanda. "Kenny Mitchell. I'm this character's brother."

Amanda shook his hand. It was warm. The palms were rough. She felt herself blushing in the heat. Kenny Mitchell was the most beautiful man she'd ever seen

outside of a Hollywood movie. His chest and stomach rippled with muscles. His mustache was trimmed above what could only be called sensual lips.

He said, "Ev, you didn't tell me your friend was so pretty."

The blush ignited into a raging fire.

"Kenny!" Evelyn chastised. "You're embarrassing her."

"Sorry, ma'am." He winked at Amanda as he dug into his pocket and pulled out a packet of cigarettes. Amanda forced herself not to look at the trail of hair that started at his navel and worked its way down.

Evelyn said, "Kenny's a pilot with Eastern. He looks like that hunk from the Safeguard commercials, doesn't he?" She motioned for Amanda to follow her into the house. "We'll leave the boys to it."

Bill stopped them, telling Amanda, "Thanks for taking care of my girl yesterday. She's an awful driver. Too busy checking her makeup to look at the road."

Evelyn spoke before Amanda could. "I told him about almost hitting that man in the street." She put her hand to her chest, the exact spot where Rick Landry had jabbed her with the Kel-Lite. "The steering wheel left a terrible bruise."

"You should be more careful." Bill patted his wife on her bottom. "Now, get inside before I ravage you."

Evelyn kissed his cheek. "Be sure to drink plenty of Coke. You don't want to get dehydrated in this heat." She hugged the mayonnaise jar to her stomach as she walked across the carport. Amanda followed her into the house. Her plan was to ask Evelyn why she had lied to her husband, but the cool temperature inside left her momentarily speechless. For the first time in months, Amanda wasn't sweating.

"You have air-conditioning?"

"Bill bought it when I got pregnant, and neither one of us can give it up." Evelyn put the jar on the counter by a large Tupperware bowl that was already filled with chopped potatoes, eggs, and peppers. She stirred in the mayonnaise, saying, "Potato salad is the only thing I can make. I'm not a fan, but Bill loves it." The smile on her face seemed almost rapturous. "Isn't he wonderful? He's a perfect Libra."

Bill was a very happy Libra, judging by Evelyn's beautiful home. The kitchen was extremely modern—white laminate countertops with matching avocado green appliances. The chrome handles on the cabinets gleamed in the sunlight. The linoleum had a subtle flower pattern. The Perma-Prest ruffled curtains on the window filtered a soft light. There was a room off the kitchen with a washer and dryer. A pair of toddler's jeans hung from the indoor clothesline. It was the sort of thing Amanda thought only existed in magazines.

Evelyn put the potato salad in the refrigerator. "Thanks for not telling Bill about—" She put her hand to her chest. "He would only worry."

"Are you all right?"

"Oh." She sighed, but she didn't add more. She put the mayonnaise by the salad, but stopped shy of shutting the refrigerator door. "You want a beer?"

Amanda had never tasted beer in her life, but obviously Evelyn needed something. "All right."

Evelyn took two cans of Miller out of the door. She pulled the rings and tossed them into the trashcan. She was handing Amanda one of the cans when the

circular saw started up again. "In here." Evelyn waved for Amanda to follow her through the dining room, then into a large foyer.

The living room was a step down. The temperature was almost frigid, courtesy of the large air-conditioning unit mounted into one of the windows. Amanda felt the sweat on her back start to chill. Her shoes sank into the lush ochre-colored carpet. The ceiling was beautifully textured. There was a chintz green and yellow sofa. Matching wingback chairs framed the sliding glass doors. The hi-fi was softly playing a track from McCartney. One wall was taken up entirely with books. A console television the size of a baby carriage served as a centerpiece. The only thing out of place was the large tent in the middle of the room.

"We sleep in here because of the AC," Evelyn explained, taking a place on the couch. Amanda sat down beside her. "We had the unit in the bedroom, but that wasn't fair to Zeke, and his crib is too big to fit in our room, so ..." She took a healthy drink of beer.

Amanda grasped at conversational straws. She was awful at small talk. "How old is he?"

"Almost two." Evelyn groaned, and Amanda gathered this was a bad thing. "When he was little, Bill would stick him in the bottom drawer of the bureau and shut it when we needed privacy. But now that he's walking around—" She indicated the tent. "Thank God he's a heavy sleeper. Though you wouldn't know it this morning. He was screaming his head off. Bill took him off to his mother's before I started screaming, too. I'll change the record over." She got up and walked to the stereo. "Have you heard what John Lennon's doing?"

It sounded like he'd put a cat in a bag and swung it around a small room, but Amanda mumbled, "Yes. It's very interesting."

"I think Bill loaned the album to Kenny." She started thumbing through the records, talking to herself. Or maybe she was talking to Amanda. It didn't seem to matter that Evelyn wasn't getting a response. "Simon and Garfunkel?" she asked, but she was already putting on the record.

Amanda stared at the cocktail table, trying to think of a good excuse to leave. She could not remember a time in her life when she'd ever felt so out of place. She wasn't used to socializing, especially not with strangers. There was church, work, school, and her father. Not much else fit between. Evelyn was obviously fine after yesterday's experience. She had her husband and her brother-in-law. She had her living room sex tent and her beautiful home. She had her *Cosmo* magazine on the cocktail table where anyone could see it.

Amanda felt her cheeks burning again as she scanned the lurid headlines. It would be just her luck that lightning would strike them both right now and her father would find her in Evelyn Mitchell's house with a can of beer in her hand and a *Cosmopolitan* magazine in front of her.

Evelyn sat back down on the couch. "You okay?"

Amanda said, "I should leave."

"But you just got here."

"I just wanted to make sure you were okay after what Rick—"

"You smoke?" She reached for a metal box on the cocktail table.

"No, thank you."

"I gave them up when I got pregnant with Zeke," Evelyn admitted. "For some reason, I couldn't stand the taste anymore. Funny, I used to love it." She

returned the box to its place. "Please don't leave, Amanda. I'm so glad you're here."

Amanda felt embarrassed by the statement. And trapped. Now she couldn't leave without being rude. She returned to the subject of Evelyn's child because that seemed the only safe topic. "Is Zeke a family name?"

"It's Ezekiel. I tried not to let Bill shorten it, but ..." Her voice trailed off. "Bill's only criteria for picking a name was asking how it would sound coming out of the stadium speakers when he's playing for Florida." Instead of laughing at her joke, she went uncharacteristically quiet. She studied Amanda.

"What is it?"

"Are we still going to do our thing?"

Amanda didn't have to ask what thing. They were going to stake out the office building to find Mr. Blue Suit. Amanda was going to make a call to the Housing Authority. Evelyn was going to check missing persons reports at the other zones. Yesterday, this had seemed like a solid plan. From this distance, it appeared amateur and dangerous. "Do you think we should go through with it?"

"Do you?"

Amanda could not answer her. After what had happened with Rick Landry, she was scared. She was also worried about all the snooping around she'd done thus far. They had both made calls to people they had no business talking to. Amanda had spent a full morning reading back issues of the *Journal* and the *Constitution*. If Duke was right about getting his job back, the first thing he'd do was find out what Amanda had been up to. And he would not be happy.

Evelyn began, "You know, I was thinking ..." She put her hand to her chest. Her fingers picked at one of the pearl buttons. "What Landry did to me. What Juice tried to do to you. It's funny how, black or white, they go straight for what's between our legs. That's the sum total of our worth."

"Or lack of it." Amanda finished the beer. She felt lightheaded.

Evelyn asked, "Why did you sign up for the job? Was it your dad?"

"Yes," she answered, though that was only partly true. "I really wanted to be a Kelly girl. Work in a different office every day. Go home to a nice apartment." She didn't completely sketch out the fantasy. There would be a husband there, maybe a child, someone she could take care of.

Amanda admitted, "I know it sounds flighty."

"It sounds better than my reason." Evelyn sat back against the arm of the couch. "I used to be a mermaid."

"A what?"

She laughed, seemingly delighted by Amanda's surprise. "Ever hear of Weeki Wachee Springs? It's about an hour outside Tampa."

Amanda shook her head. She'd only been to the Florida Panhandle.

"They gave me the job because I could hold my breath for ninety seconds. And these." She indicated her breasts. "I swam all day." She floated her arms up through the air. "And drank all night." Her arms went down. She was smiling.

All Amanda could think to say was, "Does Bill know?"

"Where do you think we met? He was visiting Kenny at McDill Air Force Base. It was love at first sight." She rolled her eyes. "I followed him to Atlanta. We got married. I was bored staying home all day, so I decided to try for a job with the state." She smiled, as if in anticipation of a funny story. "I went downtown to

the courthouse to fill out an application. I'd seen an ad in the paper that the tax commissioner was hiring, only I went into the wrong room. And there was this man in a patrol uniform. Such an ass. He took one look at me and said—"she puffed out her chest, " 'Little gal, you gots the wrong place. This here room is for the po-lice, and I can tell just by lookin' at ya that you ain't got it in ya.' "

Amanda laughed. She was a very good mimic. "What did you do?"

"Well, I was furious." Evelyn straightened her shoulders. "I said, 'No, sir, you're the one who's wrong. I'm here to join the police, and I have every right to take the test.' " She sank back down. "I assumed I wouldn't pass, but a week later, they called me to come back in for the interview. I wasn't sure whether or not I should go. I hadn't even told Bill. But I showed up for the interview, and I guess I passed that, because they told me to report to the academy the following week."

Amanda couldn't imagine such brazenness. "What did Bill say?"

"He said, 'Have fun and be careful.' " She held out her hands in an open shrug. "And that's how I became a police officer."

Amanda shook her head over the story. At least it was better than Vanessa's, who'd seen a sign on the bulletin board inside the jail, where she was being processed for a DUI.

Evelyn said, "I wasn't sure I could go back after Zeke." She took a deep breath. "But then I thought about how good it feels when I roll up on a call and a woman sees that I'm in charge, and she sees that her boyfriend or husband or whoever's been whaling on her has to answer *my* questions. It makes me feel like I'm doing something. I guess it's how the coloreds feel when a black cop shows up. They feel like they're talking to somebody who understands them."

Amanda had never thought about it that way, but she supposed it made sense.

"I want to do this. I really want to do it." Evelyn took her hand. There was an urgency to her tone. "Those girls. Kitty, Mary, Lucy, Jane—rest her soul. They aren't very different from us, are they? Someone along the way decided that they don't matter. And that made it true. They *don't* matter. Not in the scheme of things. Not when the Rick Landrys of the world can say a Jane Delray committed suicide and the only problem is who's gonna clean up the mess."

Amanda didn't respond, but Evelyn had gotten good at reading her moods.

"What is it?"

Amanda told her, "It wasn't Jane."

"What do you mean? How do you know that?"

"I type all of Butch's reports. It wasn't Jane who jumped off the building. The woman's name is Lucy Bennett."

Evelyn looked confused. She took a moment to process the information. "I don't understand. Did someone identify her? Did her family come forward?"

"They found Lucy's purse in apartment C on the fifth floor."

"That's Jane's place."

"Butch's notes say that the victim was the only inhabitant. Her purse was on the couch. He found her license and made a positive ID."

"Did they do fingerprints?"

"Lucy doesn't have a record. There are no fingerprints to match up."

"That doesn't add up. She's a whore. They all have records."

"No, it doesn't add up." Unless she was new to the game, there was no way

Lucy Bennett had avoided an arrest. Some of the girls voluntarily gave themselves up to spend the night in jail. It kept them safe when their pimps were mad.

"Lucy Bennett. Her license was in her purse?" Evelyn thought it through. "There's no way Jane would leave a license lying around like that. She said those girls have been missing for months, Lucy for a full year. Jane was trying to get their government vouchers. Either Lucy's license is in Jane's possession or it's in a cardboard box at the Five."

Amanda had already considered this. "Butch always gives me evidence receipts so I can note them in the report." The purse had been taken to central lockup, where the desk sergeant catalogued every item that went into storage. "According to the receipt, Lucy's purse didn't have a license."

"The desk sergeants never lie about that. It's their ass if something goes missing."

"Right."

"Was there cash in the wallet?"

Amanda was relieved not to be the naïve one for a change. Every purse or wallet homicide checked into lockup was miraculously absent any cash.

"Never mind," Evelyn allowed. She repeated the girl's name. "Lucy Bennett. All this time I assumed it was Jane."

"Does the name mean anything to you? Do you remember a Lucy Bennett from any of the missing persons reports?"

"No." Evelyn chewed her lip. She stared blankly at Amanda. Finally, she said, "Do you mind if I introduce you to someone?"

Amanda felt a familiar sense of dread. "Who?"

"My neighbor." She got off the couch. She took Amanda's beer can and put it beside hers on the table. "She's worked with APD for years. Her husband's been banished to the airport. Drinks too much. A real piece of work." She walked toward the sliding glass door. Amanda had no choice but to follow her. Evelyn kept up her chatter as she walked across the backyard. "Roz is a bit grumpy, but she's a good gal. She's seen her share of dead bodies, believe you me. Does it bother you that she's Jewish?"

Amanda couldn't figure out which tangent to start with. "Why would it bother me?"

Evelyn hesitated before she continued her trek across the yard. "Anyway, Roz is a crime scene photographer. She develops all the photos at her house. They won't have her at headquarters because she's too mouthy. I think she's been doing the job for ten years now. I'm sure your father's mentioned her?"

Amanda shook her head when Evelyn glanced back.

Evelyn continued, "I saw her earlier this morning and she was already in a state." They made their way past a green Corvair parked in the carport. The home was set up similar to Evelyn's, except there was a screened porch between the carport and house.

Evelyn lowered her voice. "Don't say anything about her face. Like I said, her husband's a real piece of work." She pushed open the screen door and tapped her fingers on the kitchen window. "Hello?" she called, her tone upbeat. "Roz? It's Ev again." After a few seconds without a response, she told Amanda, "I'll go around to the front."

"I'll be here." Amanda rested her hand on the washing machine that took up half the porch. Her sense of discomfort started to amplify as she thought about what she was doing. Amanda had never been inside a Jew's home before. She didn't quite know what to expect.

Evelyn was right; Amanda didn't get out much. She hadn't been to a party in years. She didn't drop in on neighbors. She didn't sit around plush living rooms listening to records and drinking alcohol. There were very few dates in her past. Any boy who wanted to ask her out had to go through Duke first. Not many had survived his scrutiny. There was one boy in high school who'd managed to persuade Amanda to go all the way. Three times, and then she couldn't take it anymore. She'd been so terrified of getting pregnant that the whole ordeal was only slightly more pleasant than getting a tooth drilled.

Evelyn was back. "I know she's here." She knocked on the kitchen door this time. "I don't know why she isn't answering."

Amanda looked at her watch, praying she could think of a good excuse to leave. Standing next to Evelyn Mitchell only heightened her sense of mortification. She felt like an old maid. The clothes Amanda was wearing—a black skirt, short-sleeved white cotton shirt, heels and pantyhose—exemplified the difference. Evelyn looked like a carefree flower child. Kenny must have taken one look at Amanda and pegged her for exactly what she was: a square.

"Hello?" Evelyn knocked on the door again.

From inside the house, a voice called, "Hold your horses, for God's sakes."

Evelyn grinned at Amanda. "Don't let her get to you. She can be nasty."

The door swung open. An older woman dressed in a brown housecoat and slippers glared at them. Her face was a mess: broken lip, blackened eye. "Why'd you knock on the front door, then run around to the side?"

Evelyn ignored her question. "Roz Levy, this is my friend Amanda Wagner. Amanda, this is Roz."

Roz narrowed her eyes at Amanda. "Duke Wagner's girl, right?"

Normally, people said this with respect. There was something close to hate in the woman's voice.

Evelyn said, "She's a good gal, Roz. Give her a break."

Roz was unmoved. She asked Amanda, "You know they call you Wag, right? Always waggin' your tail, tryin' to please."

Amanda felt sucker-punched. Her stomach dropped.

"Oh, hush up, Roz." Evelyn grabbed Amanda's arm and pulled her inside the house. "I want Amanda to see the photos you showed me."

"Doubt she can handle it."

"Well, I think you'll be surprised. Our gal can handle more than you think." She squeezed Amanda's arm as she dragged her through the kitchen.

The house was nothing like Evelyn's. There was no coolness from a running air conditioner. As a matter of fact, it felt as if all the air had been pulled out. Heavy brown curtains lined all the windows, blocking the sun. The living room was sunken, three steps down, and decorated in more dark browns. Evelyn pulled Amanda past a large couch that stank of body odor. Beer cans were on the floor beside a reclining chair. Cigarette butts spilled from the ashtray. Three steps back up. Evelyn forced Amanda to walk down the hallway. She only let go when they were in Roz Levy's spare bedroom.

As with the rest of the house, the room was dark and airless. The closet door hung open. A red lightbulb hung from a cord over various trays and chemicals. A rumpled daybed held cameras of all shapes and sizes. The desk was overflowing with paperwork. There were tennis rackets and roller skates in small piles around the room.

"She does yard sales," Evelyn explained. "The first time Bill met her, he said she reminded him of the guy who works for Baroness Bomburst in *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*." She saw Amanda's expression and said, "Sweetie. Don't be upset. She says awful things sometimes. That's just her way."

Amanda crossed her arms, feeling exposed. Wag. She'd never heard the nickname before. She knew that people around the station considered her a goody-two-shoes. Amanda had come to terms with the reputation. There were worse things they could call her. She wasn't trim. She wasn't bad at her job. She was helpful. Courteous.

They called her Wag because she was always trying to please people.

Amanda's throat worked as she tried to swallow back tears. She *did* try to please people. Please her father by doing everything he told her to. Please Butch by typing his reports. Please Rick Landry by taking Evelyn away from Techwood. Why had Amanda done that? Why hadn't she told Landry to stop? He had practically assaulted Evelyn with her own flashlight. She was bruised on her chest and God only knew where else. And Amanda's response had been to grab her and run away like a puppy with its tail between its legs.

Wagging her tail.

Roz Levy finally deigned to join them. Amanda saw the reason for her delay when she entered the room. She'd stopped to get a Tab.

"So." Roz pulled the ring from the can. She dropped it into a mason jar on the desk. "You gals playing cops and robbers today?"

"I told you we're working a case." Evelyn's voice was surprisingly terse.

"Look at this one," Roz told Amanda. "Thinks they're gonna let her work homicide one day."

Amanda said, "Maybe they will."

"Ha." She didn't really laugh. "Women's lib, right? You can do anything you want so long as you do exactly as you're told."

Evelyn snapped, "We're out there on the streets every day just the same as they are."

"You gals just watch. Think you're hot shit because they let you go to the academy, gave you a badge and a gun. Mark my word. They only let you climb high enough so it breaks your back when you fall." She took a sip of her Tab. Her next words were addressed to Amanda. "You think your old man's gonna win his case?"

Amanda said, "If you're curious, you should ask him yourself."

"I already got one black eye, thank you very much." She put the Tab to her forehead. The can was cold. Sweat dripped down the sides. She glared at Amanda. "What's your problem?"

"Nothing. I'm just starting to understand why your husband beats you."

Evelyn gasped.

Roz glared at her. "That so?"

Amanda bit her tongue to stop the apology that wanted to come. She forced

herself to stare the woman straight in the eye.

Roz gave a sharp laugh. "Ev's right. You're tougher than you look." She drank from the can, wincing as the liquid went down. There were yellowed bruises around her neck. "Sorry about before. I've been having hot flashes all morning. Turns my bitch on."

Amanda looked at Evelyn, who shrugged.

"The change. You'll find out for yourselves soon enough." Roz went inside the closet and started going through a stack of photos. "Shit. I left them in the kitchen."

Amanda waited until she left the room. "Tell me what she's talking about?"

"I think it's something old Jewish women get."

"Not that. Have you heard other people calling me that name? Wag?"

Evelyn had the grace not to look away. It was Amanda who couldn't hold her gaze. She stared into the closet, the stacks of photographs showing gory scenes in sharp Kodachrome.

"Photos," Amanda mumbled. Now it made sense. That's why Evelyn had brought her here. "Roz was the crime scene photographer at Techwood yesterday."

"The pictures are bad. Really bad. Jane—I mean Lucy—jumped from the top floor."

"The roof," Amanda provided. She had all the details from Butch's report. "There's an access ladder at the end of the hall. It goes up to a trapdoor in the roof. Lucy managed to bust off the padlock. Butch thinks she used a hammer. They found one on the floor at the bottom of the ladder. Lucy went to the roof and jumped."

"Where would she get a hammer?"

"There weren't any tools lying around the apartment," Amanda remembered. "Maybe the repairmen used it for the broken skylight?"

"I suppose you'd need a hammer for that." Evelyn sounded dubious. "Can a hammer bust a padlock?"

"Hammer?" Roz Levy was back. She held a manila envelope in her hand. "Those jackasses think she banged open the roof access with a hammer? Why not just jump out the window? She's on the top floor. They think she's so stoned she doesn't take the easy way out?" She started to open the envelope, but stopped. Her eyes drilled into Amanda. "If you throw up on my carpet, you're going to have to clean every inch. I don't care if you have to use a toothpick."

Amanda nodded, even as she felt a wave of nausea building. Her stomach was already sour. She dreaded to think what the beer would taste like coming back up.

"Are you sure?" Roz asked. "Because I'm not cleaning up after you. It's bad enough I have to clean up after that jackass I married."

Amanda nodded again, and the older woman pulled out the photographs. They were image side down.

Roz said, "A fall that high, you land on your feet, your intestines squirt out your ass like icing from a pastry bag."

Amanda pressed her lips together.

"Your ears bleed. Your face rips off your skull like a mask. Your nose and mouth and eyes—"

"Oh, for goodness sakes." Evelyn snatched the photos from Roz's hand. She showed them to Amanda one by one. "Breathe through your mouth," she coached. "Nice and easy. In and out."

Amanda did just that, taking in gulps of stale air. She expected to faint. Honestly, she expected to end the afternoon on her hands and knees with a toothpick cleaning Roz Levy's shag carpet. But neither of those things happened. The photos were unreal. What had happened to Lucy Bennett was too horrific for Amanda's brain to accept that she was still looking at an actual human being.

Amanda took the photos from Evelyn. They were in vivid color, the flash so bright that every single detail was on display. The girl was fully clothed. The material of her red-checkered cotton shirt was stiff, glued to her skin. Her skirt was hanging down, the waistband broken. Amanda assumed this was subsequent to the fall, as was the girl's missing left shoe.

She studied Lucy Bennett's face. Roz had been right about a lot of things, but none more so than what jumping from a five-story building did to the skin on your skull. Lucy's flesh looked to be dripping from the bone. Her eyes bulged from their sockets. Blood poured from every opening.

It looked fake, like something out of a horror movie.

Evelyn asked, "You okay?"

Amanda said, "Now I see why you thought this was Jane Delray." Except for the bleached blonde hair, the Halloween mask of her face could've belonged to any girl walking the street. The track marks up her arms were the same. The open wounds on her feet. The red pricks along her inner thigh.

Evelyn said, "I wonder if she has family."

Roz stated the obvious. "Everyone has family. Whether they admit it or not is an entirely different question."

Amanda ran through the pictures again. There were only five of them. Three were of the girl's face—left, right, center. One showed a close-up of her mangled body, probably taken from a ladder. The last was a more widely framed shot with the Coca-Cola building on the horizon. Lucy's hand was turned out, her wrists exposed.

Amanda asked Roz, "Do you have any more photos?"

The older woman smiled. One of her upper teeth was missing. "Look at the bloodlust. Who would've guessed it?"

Amanda made her request more specific. "Do you have any close-ups of her wrists?"

"No. Why?"

"Does that look like a scar to you? There, along her wrist?" She showed Evelyn the photo.

Evelyn squinted, then shook her head. "I can't tell. What are you getting at?"

"Jane had scars on her wrist."

"I remember." Evelyn studied the photo more carefully. "If this is Lucy Bennett, why would she have scars on her wrists like Jane Delray?"

"Whoring's not exactly something to live for." Still, Roz opened one of her desk drawers and found a magnifying glass. Each woman took turns holding the glass to the picture.

Finally, Evelyn said, "I still can't tell. It looks like a scar, but maybe it's the light?"

"That's my fault." Roz sounded uncharacteristically apologetic. "My flash was acting up and Landry was pushing me to hurry so he could clock in to his other job."

Amanda supplied, "Butch didn't say anything in his notes about scars."

"That idiot wouldn't." Contrary to her words, Roz Levy seemed delighted. "All right, Wag. Time to see what you're really made of."

Another wave of dread washed over Amanda. She felt as if she was on a roller coaster.

Evelyn said, "Roz, there's no need to—"

"Shut your pie hole, blondie." Roz cackled like a witch. "Pete's cutting up your dead whore this afternoon. You hotshot lady dicks want, I can make a call and get you a ringside seat to the autopsy."

Amanda knew some of the patrolmen used the morgue as their crack, or on-duty hiding place, especially during the summer. It was easier to sleep in an air-conditioned building, so long as you didn't mind laying up next to a dead body.

She'd been to the Decatur Street building many times to pick up reports and drop off evidence, but she'd never before been into the back. Just the thought of what went on there gave Amanda the heebie-jeebies. Still, she kept her mouth closed as Evelyn led her deep inside the building, even though every step felt as if it was ratcheting down a clamp around her rib cage.

The two beers Amanda drank on the drive over were not helping matters. Instead of relaxed, she felt both lightheaded and extremely focused. It was a miracle she hadn't driven her Plymouth up a telephone pole.

"Do you know Deena?" Evelyn asked, pushing open a swinging door. They were in a small lab. Two tables were shoved into opposite corners in the back of the room. There was a microscope on each. Various medical tools were laid out beside them. A large window took up the back wall. The hospital-green curtains were pulled back to show what must be the autopsy room. Yellow tile ran along the floor and up to the ceiling. There were two metal sinks. Two scales that seemed more appropriate for a grocer's produce section.

And a body. A green drape covered the figure. A large light like a dentist used was overhead. One hand dropped down beside the table. The fingernails were bright red. The hand was turned inward. The wrist did not show.

Evelyn said, "I hate autopsies."

"How many have you seen?"

"I don't actually look at them," she confessed. "You know how you can blur your eyes on purpose?"

Amanda nodded.

"That's what I do. I just blur my eyes and say 'mm' and 'yes' when they ask questions or point out something interesting, and then I go to the bathroom afterward and throw up."

That seemed like as good a plan as any. They heard footsteps in the hallway behind them.

Evelyn said, "Deena's got a bad scar on her neck. Try not to stare."

"A what?" Evelyn's words got jumbled up in Amanda's brain, so they didn't make sense until a striking black woman came through the door. She was wearing a white lab coat over blue jeans and a flowing orange blouse. Her hair

was in full Afro. Blue eye shadow adorned her eyelids. The skin around her neck was marred as if by a noose.

"Hey, Miss Lady," Deena said, setting down a tray on one of the tables. There were slides laid out, splatters of white and red sandwiched between the glass. "What are you doing here?"

Evelyn said, "Roz called in a favor for me."

"Why you still talkin' to that nasty old Jew?" She smiled warmly at Amanda. "Who's your pretty friend?"

Evelyn looped her arm through Amanda's. "This is Amanda Wagner. She's my partner now."

The smile dropped. "Any relation to Duke?"

For the first time in her life, Amanda felt the compulsion to lie about her father. Maybe if they'd been alone, she would have, but she confessed, "Yes. I'm his daughter."

"Hm." She shot Evelyn a look and turned back around to her slides.

"She's all right," Evelyn said. "Come on, Dee. Do you think I'd bring someone here who'd—"

The woman spun back around. Her lip trembled with rage. "You know how I got this?" She pointed to the ugly scar on her neck. "Working at the cleaners down on Ponce, pressing Klan robes nice and stiff for people like your daddy."

Evelyn tried, "That's hardly her fault. You can't blame her for her father's—"

Deena held up a hand to stop her. "One day, my mama got her arm caught in one'a the machines. Ain't no way to turn 'em off. Mr. Guntherson's too cheap to pay for an electrician. I grab the cord and it swings back on my neck. Live wires. Boom, there's an explosion—one'a them transformers gives out. Shut down the whole block for two days. Saved my life, but not my mama's."

Amanda didn't know what to say. She'd been to that same dry cleaners many times, had never given a thought to the black women working in the back. "I'm sorry."

Evelyn said, "She can't control what her father does."

Deena leaned back against the table. She crossed her arms. "You remember what I told you about my scar, Ev? I said I'd cover it up the day it don't matter anymore." She glared at Amanda. "It still matters."

Evelyn stroked Amanda's back. "This is my friend, Deena. We're working a case together, trying to find some missing women." Her words were rushed. "Kitty Treadwell. Someone named Mary. They might be connected to Lucy Bennett."

"You check the dead nigger file?" She was talking to Amanda. "That's what y'all call it, right? The DNF? Got one at every station house. Ain't that right, Wag?"

Amanda was too embarrassed to look at her. She told Deena, "I think you probably know that I lost my mother, too." What had happened to Miriam Wagner was common knowledge around the force. With enough whiskey in him, Duke relayed the story with a heady machismo. Amanda said, "You're not the only one here with scars."

Deena tapped her fingers on the table. The staccato started strong, then died down to nothing. "Look at me."

Amanda forced herself to look up. It had been so easy with Roz, but with the

old Jew, there had been a sense of righteousness. Now, there was only guilt.

Deena studied her for a bit longer. The anger that had burned so hotly in her eyes started to fade. Finally, she nodded. "All right," she said. "All right."

Evelyn slowly exhaled. She had a tight smile on her face. As usual, she tried to smooth things over. "Dee, did I tell you what Zeke did the other day?"

Deena turned back to the trays. "No, what'd he do?"

Amanda didn't listen to the story. She stared back into the morgue. Her mind was still clouded from the beer, or maybe just the traumas of the day. She felt as if something was shifting inside of her. The last few days had called into question the previous twenty-five years of her life. Amanda wasn't sure whether or not this was a good thing. Truthfully, she wasn't sure about anything anymore.

"Hello-hello!" a man's voice boomed from inside the morgue.

"That's Pete," Evelyn supplied.

The coroner was pudgy, with a ponytail and beard that looked days past washing—as did his tie-dyed T-shirt and faded, torn blue jeans. His white lab coat was tight through the sleeves. A cigarette dangled from his lip. He stood at the window, showing his yellow teeth. Amanda was not one to believe in vibes, but even with a thick piece of glass between them, she could almost feel the creepiness radiating off Pete Hanson's body.

He said, "Deena, my love, you're looking beautiful as ever this afternoon."

Deena laughed even as she rolled her eyes. "Shut up, fool."

"Only a fool for you, my dear."

Evelyn supplied, "They do this all the time."

"Oh." Amanda tried to pretend she heard white men flirting with black women every day.

"Come on, Dee." Pete tapped on the window. "You gonna let me buy you that drink?"

"Meet me outside at ten-after-never." She snatched the drapes closed. "Y'all go on in." She told Amanda, "When you throw up, aim for the floor drain. It's easier to hose down that way."

"Thank you," Amanda managed.

She followed Evelyn into the autopsy room. The temperature was as cold as expected, but it was the odor that caught Amanda off guard. It was clean, like Clorox and Pine-Sol mixed with apples; nothing like what she expected.

There had been two calls during her uniform days wherein she was sent out to take a missing persons report and found that person not far from the house. One had been a man who'd been locked in his trunk. The other had been a child who'd gotten trapped inside an old refrigerator on the family's shed porch. Each time, Amanda had taken one whiff and called for backup. She did not know what happened to the cases. She was at the station filling out reports by the time the bodies were removed.

"Who is this elegant lady?" Pete Hanson asked, his eyes on Amanda.

"This is—"

"Amanda Wagner," Amanda told him. "I'm Duke Wagner's daughter."

He paused a beat. "So you are," he finally said. "Duke's quite a character, isn't he?"

Amanda shrugged. She was bruised enough about her father for one day.

"Pete." Evelyn put on her cheery voice again, but her fingers snaked into her hair, giving a telltale sign of her discomfort. "Thanks so much for letting us watch. We were in Lucy's apartment last Monday. We never met her, but it was quite a shock to learn about the suicide."

"Lucy?" Pete's brow furrowed. "Where did you get that?"

"It was in Butch's report," Amanda supplied. "He ID'd her off her license."

Pete walked over to a large, cluttered desk underneath the window. There were piles of papers stacked in a hodgepodge, but he somehow found the right one.

Smoke drifted from his cigarette as he read the preliminary report. The paper was thin. Amanda recognized Butch Bonnie's scrawl reversed on the back where he'd turned the carbon paper the wrong way.

"Bonnie. Not the sharpest tack in the box, but at least it wasn't that jackass Landry." Pete put the report back on his desk. "In a case like this, the license ID is a last resort. I generally prefer dental records, fingerprints, or a family member coming in before I feel comfortable signing off on the identity." He explained, "Learned my lesson in Nam. You don't send someone home in a body bag unless you know the right family's waiting on the other end."

Amanda found relief in his words. For all his eccentricities, the man was at least good at his job.

"So." Pete flicked ash off his cigarette. "What's Kenny been up to? I haven't seen him around."

"This and that," Evelyn said. She was watching Pete's every move—the way he wiped his nose with a tissue from his pocket, the bobbing of his cigarette as he talked. Meanwhile, she pulled so hard at her hair that Amanda was certain she was going to yank some out. "He's working with Bill on a shed at the house today." She chewed her lip for a few seconds. "We're having a barbecue later. You should come."

Pete smiled at Amanda. "Will you be there?"

She got a sinking feeling. It was her lot in life to be attracted to the Kenny Mitchells of the world while the Pete Hansons were the only ones who ever bothered to ask her out. "Maybe," she managed.

"Excellent." He rolled over a metal tray. There were scalpels, scissors, a saw.

Evelyn stared at the instruments. Her face was pale. "You know, maybe I should give Bill a call. We dashed out without telling him when we'd be back."

This wasn't actually the truth. Evelyn had been clear that they weren't sure what time they would return. Bill, unsurprisingly, had been very accommodating to his beautiful wife.

"I should go call," Evelyn repeated. She practically ran out of the room.

Which left Amanda alone with Pete.

He was looking at her, but this time she saw the kindness in his eyes. "She's a great lady, but this is one of the more challenging spectator sports."

Amanda swallowed.

"Would you like me to take you through the process?"

"I—" She felt her throat tighten. "Why do you have to do an autopsy if it's a suicide?"

Pete considered her question before walking across the room. There was a light box mounted on the wall. He flipped the toggle, and the lights flickered on.

"The word 'autopsy' means, literally, 'to see for oneself.' " He waved her over. "Come, my dear. Contrary to rumor, I don't bite."

Amanda tried to conceal her trepidation as she joined him. The X-ray showed a skull. The holes where the eyes and nose were supposed to go looked eerily empty.

"Do you see here?" he asked, pointing to the neck on the X-ray. Pieces of vertebrae flexed apart the way a cat's paw opened when you pressed the pad. "This bone here is called the hyoid. That's pronounced 'hi-oid.' It's horseshoe shaped, and free-floats at the anterior midline between the chin and thyroid." He showed on his own neck. "Here."

Amanda nodded, though she wasn't quite sure she grasped the point of his lecture.

"The wonderful thing about your neck is that you can move it up and down and side to side. The cartilage helps make that possible. The hyoid itself is fairly fascinating. It's the only jointless bone in your entire body. Supports your tongue. Jiggles when you move it. Now, as I said, it's right here—" He pointed to his neck again. "So, if someone is choked with a ligature, you'll generally find bruising around the hyoid. But here"—he moved his fingers up—"is where you'll find bruising if someone is hanged, above the hyoid. That's a classic sign of hanging, actually. I'm sure you'll see it more than once in your career."

"You're saying she tried to hang herself first?"

"No." He pointed to the X-ray of the neck. "See this darker line here that bisects the hyoid?" Amanda nodded. "That indicates a fracture, which tells me she was choked, probably with great force."

"Why great force?"

"Because she's a young woman. Your hyoid starts out as two pieces. The bone doesn't fully fuse until around the age of thirty. Feel for yourself."

She thought he meant for her to touch his neck. Amanda desperately did not want to touch him. Still, she started to reach out.

Pete smiled, saying, "I believe you have your own neck."

"Oh. Right." Amanda laughed through her discomfort. She gently touched her fingers to her throat. She palpated the area, feeling things shift back and forth. The noise clicked in her ears.

Pete said, "You can feel there's a lot of movement in there. So, you'd have to have significant pressure to fracture the hyoid."

He motioned her to follow him over to the body. He stubbed out his cigarette in an ashtray on the table. Without preamble, he pulled back the sheet, exposing Lucy Bennett's head and shoulders. "See these bruises here?"

Amanda felt her eyes blur, but not on purpose. She blinked, focusing only on the neck. There were deep purple and red marks around the woman's throat. They reminded her of Roz Levy. "She was choked."

"Correct," Pete agreed. "Her attacker wrapped his hands around her neck and strangled her. See the fingerprints here?"

Amanda leaned in for a closer look. Now that he'd put the thought into her head, she could see the individual strands of bruises that formed the fingers of a hand.

"Carotids," Pete explained. "Arteries. One on each side of the neck. They deliver oxygenated blood to the brain. Very important. No oxygen, no brain."

“Right.” Amanda remembered the lesson from her police academy days. They got to watch the men learn how to do choke holds one morning.

“Now.” Pete wrapped both his hands loosely around the woman’s neck. “See where my hands are?” Amanda nodded again. “See how pressing her carotid arteries in order to strangle her exerts enough force on the front of the neck to fracture the hyoid?” Again, she nodded. “Which tells me that this woman was strangled into unconsciousness.”

Amanda looked back at the X-ray. “The fall from the roof wouldn’t break the bone?”

“You’ll see when I open the neck that it’s highly improbable.”

Amanda could not suppress the shudder that came.

“You’re really doing quite well.”

Amanda ignored the compliment. “Could she live with a broken Hy ...”

“Hyoid.”

“Right. Could she live with that?”

“Most certainly. A hyoid fracture or break isn’t necessarily fatal. I saw it often in Nam. The officers were trained in hand-to-hand combat, which of course they loved showing off. You hit a man here—” he chopped at his own neck—“with your elbow or even an open hand, and you can stun him or, with enough force, break the bone.” He cupped his hand to his chin like a tweedy college professor. “You feel a very distinctive sensation when you run your fingers along the neck, as if hundreds of bubbles are bursting under the skin. This comes from the air leaking out of the larynx into the tissue planes. In addition to the obvious panic, there’s tremendous pain, bleeding, bruising.” He smiled. “It’s a nasty little injury. Almost totally incapacitating. They’ll just lay there wheezing high up in their throats, praying for someone to help them.”

“Are they able to scream?”

“I’d be shocked if they could manage more than a hoarse whisper, but people surprise you sometimes. Everyone is different.”

Amanda tried to process all this new information. “But what you’re saying is that Lucy Bennett was choked.” She remembered Pete’s earlier terminology. “Strangled to death.”

He shook his head and shrugged at the same time. “I’ll need to see the lungs. Strangulation causes aspiration pneumonitis—the inhalation of vomit into the lungs. The gastric acids eat into the tissue. This gives us something of a timeline. The more tissue damage, the longer she was alive. Was she strangled into unconsciousness and then thrown off the roof or was she strangled to death and then thrown off the roof?”

“Why does it matter?” Either way, Lucy had been murdered.

“When you catch your perpetrator, you’re going to want to know the details of the crime. That way, you can make sure you’ve got the right guy and not some nut looking for a headline in the newspaper.”

Amanda didn’t see a scenario where she would be catching any perpetrator. She wasn’t even sure why Pete was answering her questions. “But why would the killer give details of the crime? That would just make the case against him stronger.”

“He won’t realize he’s walking into the trap you set.” Pete told her, “You are a lot smarter than he is. Your perpetrator is a man who cannot control himself.”

Amanda considered the statement, which didn't strike her as wholly true. "He was smart enough to try to cover the crime."

"Not as smart as you think. Throwing her off the roof was risky. It called attention to the crime. It opened up the possibility of witnesses. Why not leave her in the apartment and let a neighbor report the smell a few days—weeks—later?"

He was right. Amanda remembered the Manson murders, the way the bodies were posed. "Do you think the killer was sending a message?"

"Possibly," Pete allowed. "We can also assume that he knew the victim fairly well."

"Why do you say that?"

Pete gripped his hands around the top of the sheet. "Remember to breathe." He pulled away the covering, exposing the rest of the body.

Amanda put her hand to her mouth. Nothing rushed up her throat. She didn't pass out. She wasn't even woozy. As with Roz Levy's photos, she expected a violent reaction inside her body but was met instead with steely resolve. That same locking sensation from Techwood ran up Amanda's spine. Her stomach actually stopped churning. Instead of fainting, she felt her vision sharpen.

Amanda had never seen another woman entirely nude before. There was something sad about the way her breasts hung to the side. Her stomach was saggy. Her pubic hair was short, as if it had been trimmed, but the hair on her thighs was grotesquely unshaven. Blood and viscera leaked between her legs. Her body had been pummeled. Bruises blackened her stomach and ribs.

Pete said, "In order to hurt somebody like this, you have to hate them. And hate does not come without familiarity. Just ask my ex-wife. She tried to strangle me once."

Amanda glanced up at him. There was no suggestion behind his smile. He wasn't just creepy, he was downright strange. And polite. Amanda could not recall the last conversation she'd had with a man where she wasn't constantly interrupted or talked over.

Pete said, "You could be very good at this."

Amanda didn't know if that was much to write home about. It certainly wasn't conversation for the dinner table. "Can you tell me anything about the nail polish?"

He took a latex glove out of his pocket. "Why don't you tell me?"

Amanda didn't want to, but she took the glove. She tried to shove her hand into the stiff latex.

"Wipe your palm first," Pete advised.

Amanda wiped her sweaty hand on her skirt. The glove was still a tight fit, but once she managed to force her fingers into the tips, the rest of her hand easily followed.

Gently, she reached out for Lucy's hand. The skin felt cold through the glove, or maybe Amanda was just imagining that. Instead of being limp, the body was stiff.

"Rigor mortis," Pete explained. "The skeletal muscles contract, locking the joints. Onset varies depending on temperature and lesser factors. It starts in as little as ten minutes and lasts for up to seventy-two hours."

"You can tell how long she's been dead by how stiff she is."

"Precisely," he confirmed. "By the time I got to our victim yesterday afternoon, she had been dead approximately three to six hours."

"That's quite a window."

"Science is not as precise as we'd like to believe."

Amanda tried to turn the arm. It wouldn't move.

"Don't worry about being gentle. She can't feel pain anymore."

Amanda heard the sound of her throat working as she swallowed. She wrenched up the arm. There was a loud popping sound that sent a knife into Amanda's chest.

"Breathe in and out," Pete advised. "Remember, it's just tissue and bone."

Amanda swallowed again. The sound echoed in the room. She looked at Lucy Bennett's fingers. "There's something under her fingernails."

"Very good catch." He went over to the cabinet in the corner. "We can send it to the lab for analysis."

Amanda wished she had Roz Levy's magnifying glass. It wasn't grime under the girl's fingernails. "What do you think it is?"

"If she fought back, it's probably skin scratched off her attacker. Let's hope she managed to draw blood." Pete was back with a glass slide and something that looked like an oversized toothpick. "Hold her steady." Pete scraped the wooden pick under the fingernail. A long piece of skin came out. "If there's enough blood in this skin tissue, and you find a suspect, we can analyze his blood and see if it's the same type, whether he's a secretor or nonsecretor."

"We'd need more than blood to convict him."

"The FBI is doing amazing work with enzymes right now." He tapped the skin tissue onto the slide. "In ten years' time, they'll have samples from everyone in America stored on thousands of different computers all around the country. All you'll have to do is send the sample around to each computer and bingo, within months you'll know your perpetrator's name and address."

"You should tell that to Butch and Rick." The two homicide detectives would probably laugh in his face. "This is their case."

"Is it really?"

She didn't bother answering the question. "I guess I don't have to tell you how much trouble Evelyn and I would be in if they found out we were down here poking around."

Pete put the slide on the counter. "You know, the GBI can't find enough women to meet their quotas. They're going to lose their federal grants if they don't fill up the slots by the end of the year."

"I work for the Atlanta Police Department."

"You don't have to."

Pete obviously didn't know Duke Wagner as well as everyone else she'd met today. Forget Butch and Rick. Her father would have a canary if he knew Amanda was at the morgue. Touching a dead person. Talking to a hippie about leaving her steady job to be the token woman on the state's police force.

In for a penny, she supposed. There was still the reason they'd come here in the first place. Amanda turned the woman's hand out, exposing the wrist to the light. There they were—the familiar white scars. "She tried to kill herself before."

"Maybe," Pete allowed. "A lot of young women cut themselves. Generally, it's

for attention. Your victim was obviously an addict. You can see that from the track marks. If she wanted to kill herself, she would've doubled down with the needle and her old friend H."

Amanda realized, "You washed her."

"Yes. We took photographs and X-rays, then we cut off her clothes and washed her down in preparation for the procedure. She'd urinated on herself—an unfortunate by-product of strangulation. Though one could point out this pales in comparison to the intestinal prolapse." He added, "I should point out that she was remarkably clean considering her occupation and addiction."

"What do you mean?"

"There was the expected results of the fall—picture a water balloon being dropped from that height—but in my experience, addicts don't favor bathing. The natural oils clog the skin. They think it holds the drug in longer. I'm not sure if there's a scientific basis for that, but someone who injects drain cleaner into their veins isn't necessarily troubled by facts. You can see the trimming—" He indicated the short pubic hair. "That's unusual, but I've seen it before. Some men are drawn to women who appear more infantilized."

"Child molesters?"

"Not necessarily."

Amanda nodded, though her eyes avoided the area Pete was talking about. Instead, she studied Lucy's hands again. The fingernail polish was perfect except for the chip. The strokes were even. It had taken a lot of time and patience to apply such a thick coat. Even Amanda, who buffed and clear-coated her nails in front of the television every night, couldn't manage such an expert job.

Pete asked, "Did you find something else?"

"Her fingernails."

"Are they fake? I've been seeing a lot of those plastic ones out of California lately."

"It looks like—" Amanda shook her head. She didn't know what it looked like. The nails were trimmed in a straight line. The cuticles were neat. The red polish was evenly within the margins. She'd never met a woman who could afford a professional manicure. She doubted a dead prostitute would be the first.

Amanda walked around the table and looked at Lucy's other hand. Again, the polish was perfect, as if someone else had applied it for her.

Amanda opened her mouth to speak, then stopped herself.

"Go on," Pete said. "There are no silly questions in here."

"Can you tell if she's left- or right-handed?"

Pete beamed at Amanda as if she was his star pupil. "There will be more muscle attachment to the bone on the dominant side."

"From holding a pen?"

"Among other things. Why are you asking?"

"When I paint my fingernails, one side always looks better than the other. With her, both sides look perfect."

He smiled again. "This, my dear, is why more women should be in my field."

Amanda doubted any sane woman would ever do this job—at least not one who ever wanted to get married. "Maybe she has a friend who painted her fingernails?"

"Do women really groom one another? I assumed *Behind the Green Door* was

taking cinematic liberties.”

Amanda ignored the observation. She carefully put Lucy’s hand back down on the table. It was so easy to focus on the parts rather than the whole. She’d let herself forget that Lucy Bennett was an actual human being.

This was to be blamed in part because Amanda had not yet looked at the girl’s face. Amanda forced herself to do so now. She felt her early steeliness, but there was a tandem emotion of what could only be called curiosity. With the blood washed from Lucy’s face, she looked different. As in Roz’s photo, the skin still hung loosely to the side, but something beyond the obvious was not right.

“Could you ...” Amanda didn’t want to sound morbid, but she pushed through it. “Can I see her teeth?”

“Most of them were broken in the fall. What are you getting at?”

“The skin on her face. Is it possible to move it back to—”

“Oh, of course.” Pete went to the head of the table. He gripped the loose flesh of the cheek and forehead and pulled it back over her skull. Lucy had bitten her lip in the fall. Pete returned it to the proper position. He used his fingers to tuck the skin into place around the eyes and nose, like a baker kneading dough. “What do you think?”

Amanda realized it was exactly as she had expected. This woman was not Lucy Bennett. The scars on her wrist weren’t the only indication. The open sores on her feet had a familiar pattern, like a constellation of stars. Barring that, there was the face, which clearly belonged to Jane Delray. “I think we need to get Evelyn back in here.”

“How intriguing.”

Amanda left the room through the swinging doors. The lab was empty, so she pushed open the other set of doors leading into the hallway. Evelyn was several yards ahead, close to the entrance. She was talking with a man wearing a navy blue suit. He was tall, over six feet. His sandy brown hair touched his collar. The tailoring of his clothes was obviously professional. The jacket curved into his back. The flared pants hovered over his white loafers. He was finishing a cigarette when Amanda joined them. Evelyn shot her a look, her eyes practically bulging from their sockets.

She was talking to Mr. Blue Suit.

“Mr. Bennett.” Evelyn’s voice was pitched higher than usual, though she was doing a good job of hiding her excitement. “This is my partner, Miss Wagner.”

He barely glanced at her, keeping his eyes on his white loafers as he stamped out the cigarette. “As I said, I just want to see my sister and leave.”

“We had a few more questions,” she began, but Bennett cut her off.

“Is there a man I can talk to? Someone in charge?”

Amanda thought of Pete. “The coroner is in the back.”

Bennett’s lips twisted in distaste, whether at the thought of the coroner or what he saw in Amanda, she wasn’t sure. And it really didn’t matter. The only thing she could focus on was how arrogant and unlikable he was.

Amanda said, “Dr. Hanson is preparing the body. It’ll only be a few more minutes.”

Evelyn picked up the lie. “You won’t want to see her how she is now, Mr. Bennett.”

“I don’t want to see her period,” he snapped back. “As I told you, Mrs.

Mitchell, my sister was a drug addict and a whore. What I'm doing here is a mere formality so that my mother can have some peace at the end of her life."

"His mother has cancer," Evelyn explained.

Amanda let a few seconds pass out of respect for the man's mother, but she couldn't stop herself from asking, "Mr. Bennett, can you tell us when was the last time you saw your sister?"

He glanced away. "Five, maybe six years?" He looked down at his watch. It was a furtive movement, as obvious as Evelyn tugging the back of her hair. "I really do not appreciate your wasting my time. Shall I go back to the coroner?"

"Just another minute." Amanda had never been good at spotting a liar, but Bennett was as easy to read as an open book. "Are you sure that's the last contact you had with your sister?"

Bennett took a pack of Parliaments from his breast pocket and shook out a cigarette. A large gold college ring was on his middle finger. UGA Law School. Class of '74. The Georgia Bulldog was etched into the red stone.

Amanda asked, "Mr. Bennett, are you sure about the timing? It seems like you've had contact with Lucy more recently."

He showed a flash of guilt as he jammed the cigarette between his lips. "I mailed her a letter to the Union Mission. It was perfunctory, I assure you."

"On Ponce de Leon?" Amanda asked. The Ponce Union Mission was the only homeless facility that allowed women.

Bennett said, "I tried to find Lucy when our father passed away. My mother had it in mind that she'd joined the hippie movement—you know, just dropped out for a while. She thought Lucy would want to come home, go to college, live a normal life. She could never accept that Lucy chose to be a whore."

Evelyn asked, "When did your father pass?"

Bennett flicked his gold lighter, taking his time to light the cigarette. He didn't speak again until he'd blown out a stream of smoke. "It was a few weeks after I graduated from law school."

"Last year?"

"Yes. July or August. I can't recall." He inhaled deeply on the cigarette. "Lucy was never really a good girl. I suppose she fooled us all, right up until she ran off with some greaser to Atlanta. I'm sure you've heard this story more than a dozen times." He exhaled, smoke curling from his nostrils. "She was always too willful. Stubborn."

Amanda asked, "How did you know to mail the letter to the Union Mission?"

Bennett seemed irritated that she wouldn't let him change the subject. "I made some calls to some people. They said that Lucy probably would've ended up there."

Amanda wondered who these people were. She took a chance. "Are you a litigator, Mr. Bennett?"

"No, I do tax abatement. I'm a first-year associate at Treadwell-Price downtown. Why do you ask?"

So, Evelyn was right. He'd obviously gotten his boss to make a phone call. "Did you hear back from your sister?"

"No, but the man working there assured me that he gave the letter to Lucy. For whatever that's worth."

"Do you remember the man's name?"

"Trask? Trent?" Bennett blew out a plume of smoke. "I don't know. He was very unprofessional. Dirty clothes. Hair unkempt. Frankly, there was an odor about him. I imagine he's a marijuana smoker."

"You met him in person?"

"You can't trust these people." He sucked on the cigarette. "I thought I might find Lucy there. What I found was a bunch of disgusting whores and drunkards. Just the sort of place I knew Lucy would end up."

"Did you see her?"

"Of course not. I doubt I would even recognize her."

Amanda nodded, though this seemed like an odd statement coming from a man who was about to identify his dead sister's body.

Evelyn asked, "Do you know a young woman named Kitty Treadwell?"

He narrowed his eyes. Smoke drifted from the tip of his cigarette. "What do you know about Kitty?" He didn't let them answer. "You two ladies should mind where you stick your noses. They're liable to get cut off."

The front doors slammed open. Rick Landry and Butch Bonnie walked into the hallway. Both men scowled when they saw Amanda and Evelyn.

"Finally," Bennett mumbled.

Landry was visibly furious. He stomped forward, demanding, "What the hell are you two slits doing here?"

Amanda was standing beside Evelyn. It didn't take much to get in front of her, blocking Landry in the process. "We're investigating our case."

Landry didn't bother responding to her statement. He turned, his shoulder bumping into Amanda's so hard that she had to step back. "Hank Bennett?"

Bennett nodded. "Are you in charge?"

"Yes," Landry said. "We are." He crowded out Amanda, forcing her to step back again as he inserted himself between her and Bennett. "I'm sorry about your loss, sir."

Bennett waved his hand, as if it was nothing. "I lost my sister a long time ago." Again, he checked his watch. "Can we get this over with? I'm late for supper."

Landry walked him down the hallway. Butch took up the rear. He glanced back at Amanda and Evelyn. He gave Amanda an unwelcome wink. She waited until they disappeared behind the door.

Evelyn hissed out air between her teeth. She put her hand to her chest. She was shaking.

"Come on." Amanda grabbed Evelyn's hand. The other woman was resistant. Amanda had to pull her down the hallway. She pushed ajar the door to the lab just as the three men were walking into the morgue.

Amanda waited until they were inside before opening the door. She kept her knees bent, as if she was sneaking around. The curtains on the large picture window were still drawn.

Evelyn whispered, "Amanda—"

"Shh," Amanda shot back. Carefully, she parted the drapes a few inches. Evelyn joined her as they peered through the window.

Pete Hanson stood with his back to the far wall. His arms were crossed. He'd struck Amanda as a very easygoing fellow, but there was something in his posture that indicated he was very unhappy.

Landry and Butch had their backs to the window. Hank Bennett stood opposite, the dead girl between them. He was looking down at the victim's face.

Apparently, Evelyn was, too. She whispered, "That's Jane Delray," at the same moment Hank Bennett said, "Yes, that's my sister."

April 15, 1975

LUCY BENNETT

There was another girl in the next room. The old one was gone. She hadn't been bad, but this one was awful. Constantly crying. Sobbing. Begging. Pleading.

She sure as hell wasn't moving. Lucy could guarantee that. None of them moved. The pain was too excruciating. Too unspeakable. It took your breath away. It blacked you out.

At first, it was impossible not to try. Claustrophobia took over. The unreasonable fear of suffocation. It started in the legs like the cramps from withdrawal. Your toes curled. Your muscles ached to contract. It worked its way through your body like a violent storm.

Last month, a tornado had hit the Governor's Mansion. It started in Perry Homes, but no one cared about that. The Governor's Mansion was different. It was a symbol, meant to show businessmen and visiting dignitaries that Georgia was the heart of the New South.

The tornado had other ideas.

The roof had been torn off. The grounds damaged. Governor Busbee said that he was saddened by the destruction. Lucy had heard him say so on the news. It was a special bulletin cut between the replay of the top-forty countdown. Linda Ronstadt's "When Will I Be Loved," then the governor saying they were going to rebuild. A phoenix rising from the ashes. Hopeful. Certain.

Back when it got really cold, the man had started to let Lucy listen to the transistor radio. He kept it turned down low so the other girls couldn't hear. Or maybe he kept it low special for Lucy. She would listen to the news, tales of the whole wide world spinning by. She would close her eyes and feel the ground moving underneath her.

Lucy didn't like to think too much about it, but she could tell she was his favorite. It reminded her of the games she and Jill Henderson used to play in elementary school. Jill was good with her hands. She'd take a sheet of notebook paper and fold it into triangles. What was it called?

Lucy tried to think. It didn't help that the other girl was sobbing so hard. She wasn't loud, but she was consistent, like a kitten mewing.

Cootie Catchers. That was it.

Jill would slide her fingertips into the folded sections. There were words written on the inside. You asked who liked you. Who was going to marry you. Were you going to be happy? Were you going to have one kid or two?

Yes. No. Maybe. Keith. John. Bobby.

It wasn't just the radio that made Lucy feel special. The man spent more time with her. He was gentler with her than he was before—than he was with the other girls, because Lucy could hear it.

How many other girls had there been? Two, three? All weak. All familiar.

The new girl in the other room should stop fighting back. She should just give in and he would make it all better. Otherwise, she would end up like the girl before. And the one before that. Nothing would get better. Nothing would change.

Things had changed for Lucy. Instead of the pieces of Vienna sausage and stale bread he'd shoved between her teeth in the early days, he was letting her feed herself. She sat on the bed and ate McDonald's hamburgers and french fries. He would sit in the chair, knife in his lap, watching her chew.

Was it Lucy's imagination, or was her body healing itself? She was sleeping more deeply now. Those first weeks—months?—she'd had nothing to do but sleep, but back then, every time she found herself nodding off, she'd jerk awake in panic. Now, oftentimes when he came into the room, he had to wake her.

Gentle nudge of the shoulder. Stroke along the cheek. The warm feel of the washcloth. The careful tending of her body. He cleaned her. He prayed over her. He made her whole.

Back on Juice's corner, the girls would trade stories about the bad johns out there. Who to watch out for. Who you would never see coming. There was the one who stuck a knife in your face. The one who tried to put his whole fist inside you. The one who wore a diaper. The one who wanted to paint your fingernails.

In the scheme of things, was this guy really that bad?

present day

TUESDAY

The morning sun was just winking open its eye when Will raked back the passenger's seat in Faith's Mini. A body had been found, probably the missing Georgia Tech student, and he was wasting time adjusting knobs on a clown car so that his head wouldn't press against the roof.

Faith waited until he was putting on his seatbelt to speak. "You look awful."

Will glanced at her. She was wearing her GBI regs: khaki pants, navy blue shirt, and her Glock strapped to her thigh. "Thank you."

Faith backed the car down the driveway. The wheels bumped over the curb. She didn't say anything else, which was unusual. Faith tended to chat. She tended to pry. For some reason, she was doing neither this morning. Will should've been worried about this, but there were only so many burdens he could take on at once. His useless night in the basement. His argument with Sara. The fact that his father was out of prison. Whatever Amanda was hiding from him. That there was a dead body at Techwood. That he had kissed his wife.

Will put his fingers to his mouth again. He'd wiped off Angie's lipstick with a paper towel, but he could still taste the bitter chemical residue.

Faith said, "There's an accident on this side of North Avenue. Do you mind if I take the long way through Ansley?"

Will shook his head.

"Did you not get any sleep last night?"

"Off and on."

"You missed a place on your—" She touched the side of her cheek. When Will didn't respond, she flipped down the visor in front of him.

Will stared at his reflection in the mirror. There was a small strip of beard he'd missed with the razor this morning. He looked at his eyes. They were bloodshot. No wonder people kept telling him he looked bad.

"This Techwood murder," Faith began. "Donnelly was the first responder."

Will flipped up the visor. Detective Leo Donnelly had been Faith's partner when she worked homicide with the APD. He was slightly annoying, but his greater sin was mediocrity. "Have you talked to him?"

"No. Just Amanda." She paused, as if to give Will the opportunity to ask what Amanda had said. After a few silent seconds, she told him, "I know about your father."

Will stared out the window. Faith had taken more than the long way. There were better routes to bypass North Avenue on the way to Techwood. She had

navigated the back roads to Monroe Drive. They were skirting Piedmont Park and heading toward Ansley. It was six o'clock in the morning. There was no accident on North.

She said, "Mama told me last night. She needed me to make a phone call."

Will watched the houses and apartment buildings go by. They passed the vet's office where Betty got her shots.

"There's a guy I used to date way back when. I think you met him once. Sam Lawson. He's a reporter for the *AJC*."

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. Will didn't want to think about the why behind Evelyn Mitchell's request. He assumed Amanda was making some kind of Machiavellian move, trying to get ahead of whatever the paper was going to print. Sara read the *AJC* every morning. She was the only person Will knew who still got the paper delivered. Was this how Sara was going to find out? Will could imagine the phone call. If she called. Maybe she wouldn't. Maybe Sara would see this as an easy opportunity to get out of whatever they had started.

Faith said, "That's how Amanda found out about your father's parole." She paused, again anticipating a response. "Sam called her office and asked for a quote. He wanted to know how she felt about him getting out." Faith stopped at the red light. "He's not going to run the story. I fed him some details on a biker gang APD busted for running crank out of a charter school. It's a front-page story. Sam won't circle back."

Will stared at the darkened strip of Ansley Mall. The upscale stores weren't open yet. Their lights glowed in the low dawn. He felt a strange sensation, like he was being driven to the hospital for surgery. Some part of his body would be removed. He would have to recover from that. He would have to find a way to acclimate his senses so they did not feel the gaping hole.

Faith asked, "What did you do to your hands?"

Will tried to bend his fingers. It hurt just flexing them. His ankle throbbed with every beat of his heart. His basement excursion was being felt by every joint in his body.

"Anyway." Faith swung through the steep curve that took them up Fourteenth Street. "I looked up his case."

Will was more than familiar with his father's crimes.

"He dodged a bullet. *Furman v. Georgia* was in the early seventies."

"Seventy-two," Will provided. The landmark Supreme Court case had temporarily suspended the death penalty. A few more years either side and Will's father would've been put to death by the State of Georgia.

He said, "Gary Gilmore was the first man executed after Furman."

"Spree killer, right? Up in Utah?" Faith loved reading about mass murderers. It was an unfortunate hobby that often came in handy.

Will asked, "Is it a spree if it's only two people?"

"I think two qualifies so long as the timing is close."

"I thought that it had to be three."

"I think that's just for serial killers." Faith took out her iPhone. She typed with her thumb as she waited to make an illegal turn onto Peachtree.

Will stared up Fourteenth Street. He couldn't see the hotel from his vantage point, but he knew that the Four Seasons was two blocks away. That was probably why Faith was making the turn. She knew that his father was staying

at the hotel. Will wondered if he was still in bed. The man had been in prison for over thirty years. It was probably impossible for him to sleep late. Maybe he'd already ordered his breakfast from room service. Angie said he used the gym every morning. He was probably running on the treadmill, watching one of the morning shows and planning his day.

"Here we go. Two or more qualifies as a spree." Faith dropped her iPhone back into the cup holder and turned against the light. "Can we talk about your father now?"

Will said, "Did you know that Peachtree Street is Georgia's continental divide?" He pointed to the side of the road. "Rain that falls on that side of the road goes to the Atlantic. Rain on this side goes to the Gulf. Maybe I've got the sides mixed up, but you get the gist."

"That's fascinating, Will."

"I kissed Angie."

Faith nearly ran up onto the sidewalk. She jerked the car back into the lane. She was silent for a while before she muttered, "You fucking idiot."

That felt more like it.

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know." He stared out the window again. They were heading toward the thick of downtown. "I think I have to tell Sara."

"No, you most certainly do not," she countered. "Are you crazy? She'll kick your ass to the curb."

She probably should. There was no way that Will could explain to Sara that the oldest cliché in the world happened to be true this one time: the kiss meant nothing. For Will's part, it had been a reminder that Sara was the only woman he wanted to be with; maybe the first woman he'd ever *really* wanted to be with. For Angie's part, the kiss had been tantamount to a dog raising its leg on a fire hydrant.

Faith asked, "Do you want to be with Angie?"

"No." He shook his head. "No."

"Was there anything else?"

Will remembered he'd touched her breast. "Not—" He wasn't going to get into specifics with Faith. "There was no contact between—"

"Okay, I get it." She turned onto North Avenue. "Jesus, Will."

He waited for her to continue.

"You can't tell Sara."

"I can't hide things from her."

She laughed so loud his ears hurt. "Are you kidding me? Does Sara know about your father? Does she know that he—"

"No."

Faith did not bother to hide her incredulity. "Well then, don't let this be the one thing you tell her the truth about."

"It's different."

"Do you think Angie will tell her?"

Will shook his head. Angie's moral code wasn't easily decipherable, but Will knew she would never tell Sara about the kiss. It was much better to use it to torture Will.

Faith cut straight to the point. "If it's not going to happen again and it didn't

mean anything, then you're just going to have to live with the guilt. Or live without Sara."

Will couldn't talk about this anymore. He stared out the window again. They were stopped at a red light. The lights were on at the Varsity. In a few hours, the curb men would be out sweeping the lot, slapping numbers on cars and taking orders. Mrs. Flannigan used to bring the older kids to the Varsity once a month. It was a reward for good behavior.

Faith asked, "Have you ever tried to talk to the detectives who worked your mother's case?"

"One disappeared. Somebody thought he moved to Miami. The other died from AIDS in the early eighties."

"Did either of them have family?"

"No one I could find." Honestly, Will hadn't looked that hard. It was like picking at a scab. There came a point when you started to draw blood.

"I can't believe how many conversations I've had with you over the last two years, and you never told me about this."

Will left her to wonder why on her own.

Faith crossed the interstate. The athlete dorms that had been built for the Olympics had the Georgia Tech logo on them now. The old stadium was being remodeled. The streets were freshly paved. Brick inlays carpeted the sidewalks. Even this early in the morning, students were out jogging. Faith turned at the next light. She was more than familiar with the area. Her son was currently enrolled at Georgia Tech. Her mother had gotten her doctorate here. Faith had finished her four-year degree at the university so she could qualify for employment with the GBI.

Faith slid a piece of notebook paper out from her visor. Will saw that she'd scribbled directions on it. She slowed the car, mumbling, "Centennial Park North ... here we go." Finally, she turned onto a side street, downshifting as they went up a hill. The area was filled with upscale brick apartment buildings and townhouses. The cars on the street were nice—newer Toyotas and Fords with an occasional BMW thrown in. The grass was trimmed. The eaves and windows were painted a crisp white. Satellite dishes dotted every other balcony. The compound was designed to be mixed income, which meant a handful of poor people lived in the less desirable units and the rest went for top dollar. Will imagined that some of the better-off students lived here rather than the dorms, where Faith's son resided.

"Zell Miller Center," Faith read from the sign. "Clark Howell Community Building. Here we go." She slowed the car to a crawl. The directions weren't really needed anymore. Two cruisers blocked the street. Police tape cordoned off a group of residents. Most were in pajamas and robes. A few of the joggers had stopped to find out what was happening.

Faith had to drive down several blocks to find a space. She pulled up onto a berm and jerked up the parking brake. She asked Will, "Are you okay?"

He was going to ignore the question, but that didn't seem fair. "We'll see," he managed, then got out of the car before she could say anything else.

The streetlights were still on, supplementing the rising sun. Two newscopters hovered overhead. Their whirring blades chopped the air into white noise. More reporters were camped out down the road. Cameras were set up on tripods.

Reporters were checking their makeup, scribbling their notes.

Will didn't wait for Faith. He headed back toward the crime scene, where he could see Amanda Wagner was waiting.

Her arm was in a sling, the only indication that she'd spent the night in the hospital. She stood on the sidewalk dressed in her usual monochromatic skirt, blouse, and jacket. Two burly patrolmen were looking down at her, nodding as she gave them orders. They looked like football players huddled before a snap.

As Will and Faith approached Amanda, the patrolmen jogged off toward the bystanders, probably to get names and photos so they could run them through the database. Amanda was old school with all her investigations. She didn't rely on a blood sample or a stray hair to sway a jury. She worked the case until she got a resolution that no logical human being could ever doubt.

She also didn't bother with small talk. "I don't want you here."

"Then why did you call me?"

"Because I knew you wouldn't stay away."

Amanda didn't wait for a response. She turned on her heel, heading toward the community building. Will easily matched her brisk pace. Uncharacteristically, Faith kept her distance, trailing several feet behind.

Amanda said, "We're covered up in red tape. As you know, this whole area used to be a slum. The state emptied it out for the Olympics. The city got its finger in the pie. Tech got a piece of it. The Parks Department had its say. The Housing Authority. The Historical Register, which is a joke if there ever was one. We've got more jurisdictions than news vans. APD is supplementing for now, but it's our techs and our ME handling the evidence."

"I want to sit in on the autopsy."

"It'll be hours before—"

"I'll wait."

"Do you really think that's a good idea?"

Will thought it was a terrible idea, but that wasn't going to stop him. "You need to bring him in for questioning."

"Why would I do that?"

The fact that her voice sounded so reasonable made Will want to punch her. "You read my father's file."

She stopped, looking up at him. "Yes."

"You think it's a coincidence that he got out of prison and a dead student was found dumped at Techwood?"

"Coincidences happen all the time." Her usual certainty was showing some cracks. "I can't bring him in without probable cause, Will. Due process? The Fourth Amendment? Any of these inalienable rights ringing a bell?"

"That's never stopped you before."

"I've found it's within the purview of rich white men to avoid such unpleasanties."

Will realized that she'd backed him into a corner. "Still—"

"There's nothing more to say." Amanda continued walking. "We have a tentative ID on Ashleigh Snyder. They found her purse in the Dumpster. Her credit cards were there but her license was missing. So was her cash."

"That sounds familiar."

"Bless the Sunshine Laws." Georgia's freedom of information act was one of

the most liberal in the country. Inmates were especially fond of the law.

Will said, "He's staying at the Four Seasons Hotel."

"I'm aware of that," she acknowledged. "We lost track of him for two hours yesterday afternoon, but I've made certain that won't happen again."

"He's been out almost two months."

Amanda didn't immediately answer. "I've never understood time off for good behavior. It's prison. Shouldn't you be on your best behavior at all times?"

"No one told me when he got out."

"That's the thing about having a sealed juvenile record, Will. They aren't allowed to notify you unless you ask them to."

"He was supposed to die in there."

"I know."

One of the patrolmen called out, "Dr. Wagner?"

Amanda said, "You two go on." She waited for the cop to join her.

Will kept walking. Faith had to jog to keep up. She asked, "What was that about?"

He could only shake his head as they entered the mouth of the parking lot. The ground sloped downward. In the back of the lot, a group of detectives formed a half circle around the body. The woman was in front of a large Dumpster area. Brick walls horseshoed the metal container. The tall metal doors stood open. The lock was hanging off the latch, the ring broken. Someone had already marked it with a yellow tag so it could be catalogued as evidence.

Will glanced around, feeling watched. Or maybe he was just being paranoid. He scanned the area. The community center was on the opposite side of the parking lot. More apartments edged the perimeter. Their white garage doors were like teeth against the gum of the red brick. There was a playground in the distance, with brightly colored tunnels and swings. The Coca-Cola building loomed on the horizon.

If he squinted at the view back across the interstate, he could pick out the familiar salmon-colored façade of the Four Seasons Hotel.

"Another case solved by the glorious GBI." Leo Donnelly laughed around the cigarette in his mouth. As usual, the homicide detective was dressed in a tan suit that was probably already wrinkled when he picked it up off the floor this morning. His new partner, a young guy named Jamal Hodge, nodded at Faith.

Leo winked at her. "Lookin' good across the chest, Mitchell. I guess you're still nursing?"

"Fuck off, Leo." Faith took her notebook out of her purse. "When'd the call come in?"

Leo pulled out his own notebook. "Four thirty-eight in the cheery a.m. Janitor comes on shift, sees her and freaks. His name's Otay Keehole."

"Utay Keo," Jamal corrected.

"Lookit Poindexter here." Leo shot him a nasty look. "Ooo-Tay is a student at Tech. Twenty-four years old. Lives with his baby mama. No priors."

Faith asked, "How's he look for this?"

Jamal supplied, "Not likely."

Leo made a show of closing his notebook. He took a drag on his cigarette, staring at Jamal. "Janitor's two years out of Cambodia. Works off his student visa. Voluntarily submitted to fingerprinting and DNA. No record. No motive.

I'm sure he's popped a few whores in his day—who hasn't?—but he doesn't even have a car. Took the bus here."

Will asked, "You ID'd the victim off her credit cards?"

Jamal held out his hands, indicating Leo should answer.

"We're pretty sure it's Snyder," Leo said. "Face is a mess, but the blonde hair is a giveaway."

Will asked, "Have you notified the family?"

"Mom's dead. Daddy's flying back from a business trip in Salt Lake. Should be here this afternoon."

Jamal added, "We asked for dental records."

"Great, thanks," Faith mumbled. She was probably thinking about the father's long flight home, the moment at the morgue when his life would forever be changed.

They all turned back to the Dumpster. The crowd had dispersed so the crime scene techs could begin the arduous process of cataloguing the scene.

Will looked down at the woman's twisted body. Long blonde hair draped across her face. She was on her back. Her arms were turned, wrists open to the sky. Her face was a bloody pulp, probably unrecognizable to even her closest friends. Her fingernails were painted bright red. Blood glued her clothes to her skin. Will could guess what was underneath the tight T-shirt and flowered skirt.

Leo said, "Here's something you don't see every day: guy pummeled her gut until her intestines shit out. You can't find that kind of thing on YouTube." He chuckled to himself. "At least, not until I figure out how to work the camera on my phone."

"Lord help us," Jamal muttered. He headed toward Charlie Reed, the GBI crime scene investigator.

"Come on, Hodge," Leo called to his back. "It's funny."

Faith said, "Smart, Leo. You really want to piss off the deputy chief's grandson?"

Will glanced at Faith. Her voice sounded a little shaky. She had never been good around bodies, but through sheer determination she held her own. One crack in her shell and Leo or someone like him would turn Faith into a joke every squad room was laughing about by morning roll call. Faith had once told Will that working with Leo was like watching a wind-up monkey that couldn't quite get the cymbals to meet.

Will knew better than to ask if she was okay. Instead, he knelt beside the body, keeping his distance so he wouldn't taint the area. The crime scene photographers weren't waiting for the sun. Their digital cameras and computers were laid out on a folding table. One of the women turned on the diesel generator. The xenon lights flickered. The victim's hand showed stark against the asphalt. Her red manicured nails glistened as if they were still wet.

Faith asked Leo, "What's this building? Is it still a community center?"

"Dunno." Leo shrugged. "Guess they named it after that guy on the radio."

Will stood up too quickly. He fought a wave of dizziness. "Clark Howell was the publisher of *The Atlanta Constitution*."

"No shit?" Leo asked.

"He's chock-full of fascinating trivia today," Faith said. "Do you have any leads?"

"What's it to you?"

Faith put her hands on her hips. "Don't be an asshole, Leo. You know this is a state case. Do you have any leads, or should I ask Jamal?"

Leo reluctantly offered, "I made some calls, checked with downtown. There's nobody on our books what would knock the shit out of a girl like this." He laughed at his own joke. "Literally."

"She have any enemies?"

"Y'all should know more about that than me."

"What about a drug problem?"

Leo sniffed, rubbing his nose. "Nothing serious, from what I've heard."

"Coke or meth?"

"She's a student. What do you think?"

"Meth," Faith said. "And watch the generalities, Leo. My kid goes to Tech. He doesn't hit anything harder than Red Bull."

"Sure."

"Faith," Amanda called. She was at the edge of the parking lot, waving them over. Faith shot Leo a nasty look as they headed toward Amanda.

Leo yelled at their backs, "No, don't thank me, Officers. It was my pleasure."

Amanda was digging around in her purse when they joined her. She pulled out her BlackBerry. The case was still cracked from her fall. She scrolled through her emails while she talked. "Patrol found a jogger who saw a suspicious green minivan circling the area shortly after four this morning."

"He just came forward?" Faith looked at her watch. "Was he jogging for two hours?"

"That sounds like a good question to start with. He lives there, apartment two-six-twenty." Amanda indicated the building across the street. "Make sure you get him on paper. All the t's crossed and i's dotted."

Will said, "I'll talk to him." He made to go, but Amanda stopped him.

"Faith, you do this."

Faith gave him a look of apology before heading toward the apartment building.

Amanda held up a finger, silencing Will. She read a few more emails before dropping her BlackBerry into her purse. "You know you can't work this case."

"I don't see how you're going to stop me."

"This has to look good on paper. We can't have it falling apart in court."

"It held up in court the last time and he still got out."

"Welcome to the criminal justice system. I rather thought you were familiar with it by now."

Will stared across the interstate. Rush hour was gearing up. Cars were starting to clog the fourteen lanes. He saw a sign for one of the Emory hospitals. Sara had gone to Emory University. Grady was part of their teaching system. She would be getting ready for work right now. Showering, drying her hair. Will usually walked the dogs before he left. He wondered if she missed that.

Amanda said, "Give me time to do this right, Will. It has to be done right."

Will shook his head. He didn't care about the means, just the end. "We need to work his case from the beginning."

"What do you think I've been doing?" she asked. "I've had two teams on this since I found out. We're dealing with a thirty-plus-year time gap in a city that

tears itself down every five years. His old stomping ground is currently a twelve-story office complex.”

“I’ll check it. Faith can go with me.”

“It’s already been checked top to bottom.”

“Not by me.”

She wasn’t looking at him. Like Will, she was staring over the interstate. “Motive, means, and opportunity.” It was Amanda’s mantra.

Will said, “You know he’s got all three.”

She gave a tight nod of her head. If Will hadn’t been watching, he would’ve missed it. He studied her profile. She seemed to be as tired as he was. There were dark circles under her eyes. Her makeup was caked into the creases around her eyes and mouth.

She said, “I have to say, I love what you did with the basement.”

Will’s hands clenched. The cuts opened up along his fingers.

“Did you find what you were looking for?”

His jaw popped when he opened his mouth to speak. “Why were you there?”

“That’s a very interesting question.”

“How long have you known about my father?”

“You work for me, Will. It’s my job to know everything about you.”

“Why did that reporter call you?”

“It makes for a good story, I suppose—your chosen path of law and order. Your rise from the ashes. Atlanta’s symbol is the phoenix. What a fitting dovetail.”

He turned and headed toward North Avenue, the bridge over the interstate. Amanda’s stride was half as long as Will’s. She had to work to match his pace.

She asked, “Where are you going?”

“To talk to my father.”

“To what end?”

“You’ve read his file. You know he has a pattern. He kills one, he keeps one. He’s probably already picked her out.”

“Shall I put out an APB on a missing prostitute?”

She was mocking him. “You know he’s looking for another girl.”

“I told you we’ve got eyes on him. He hasn’t left his room.”

“Except for yesterday afternoon.”

She stopped trying to keep up. “You will *not* talk to him.”

Will turned around. Amanda never raised her voice. She didn’t scream. She didn’t stamp her foot. She never cursed. She managed to scare everyone by reputation. For the first time in fifteen years, he saw through her. She was nothing, really. An old woman with her arm in a sling and secrets she would carry to her grave.

She said, “I’ve issued a standing order to have you arrested the minute you step one foot in that hotel. Understood?”

He stared his hate into her. “I should’ve left you to rot in that basement.”

“Oh, Will.” Her voice was filled with regret. “I have a feeling that by the end of this, we’re both going to wish you had.”

Present Day

SUZANNA FORD

She missed *Dancing with the Stars*. She missed Bobo, her little dog who'd died when she was ten. She missed her grandmother, who'd died when Suzanna was eleven, and her grandfather, who'd died a few months later. She missed Adam, the goldfish who'd died the night they brought him home from the store. Suzanna had found him in the tank just floating on his side. His eye was blank. She could see her reflection in it.

Suzanna called the store to complain.

"Just flush 'em down the toilet," the manager said. "Come by tomorrow and we'll give you a new one."

Suzanna had felt uneasy at the prospect. It felt wrong. Did Adam mean nothing? Was he that replaceable? Just plop another fish in the tank and forget he even existed? Call that one Adam, too. Feed him Adam's food. Let him swim through Adam's secret treasure box and pink coral castle?

In the end, there was nothing else to do. Suzanna flushed him down the toilet. As the water circled around the bowl, she saw his fin flip up. The glass orb of his eyeball turned to her, and she had seen something like panic.

In her dreams, Suzanna was the fish. She was Adam One, because of course the temptation was too great—they had gone back the next day and gotten a free Adam Two.

That was the entirety of the dream:

Suzanna One, helpless, staring up at the ceiling as she spun, spun, spun quickly down the drain.

July 14, 1975

MONDAY

Amanda leaned against her Plymouth as she waited for Evelyn in the parking garage of the Sears building. The air did not move in the underground facility. The coolness afforded from the poured concrete walls was no match for the scorching heat. Even at seven in the morning, Amanda could feel sweat dripping down her neck and into her collar.

Neither she nor Evelyn had been up for the barbecue after leaving the morgue on Saturday evening. Hank Bennett. The misidentified girl. The red fingernails. The broken hyoid bone. It was a lot to process, and neither of them seemed up to having a coherent conversation. They'd both talked in monosyllables, Amanda because of the things she'd seen with Pete Hanson, and Evelyn—most probably—because she'd been unsettled about seeing Rick Landry again. No matter their reasons, Evelyn had gone home to her husband and Amanda had gone home to her empty apartment.

If Sunday brought anything, it was a welcome sense of normalcy. Amanda had cooked breakfast for her father. They'd gone to church. She'd cooked Sunday dinner. All the while, Duke had been notably more cheerful. He'd made a few jokes about the preacher. He was feeling bullish on his case. He'd spoken with his lawyer again. Lars Oglethorpe's reinstatement was definitely good news for the men Reginald Eaves had fired.

Amanda doubted it was good news for her.

Evelyn's station wagon made a tight turn, the tires squealing against the concrete. She backed into the space beside the Plymouth, calling through the open window, "Did Kenny call you yesterday?"

Amanda felt a shock of panic. "Why would Kenny call me?"

"I gave him your number."

For a few seconds, Amanda was too flustered to do anything but stare. "Why would you give him my phone number?"

"Because he asked for it, silly. Why do you sound so surprised? And why are you just standing there?"

Amanda shook her head as she got into the car. Men like Kenny Mitchell didn't ask for her phone number. "That's very nice of you to put him up to this, but let's not waste time on something that's not going to happen."

"You can—" Evelyn stopped, but only for a moment before she blurted out, "You can wear Tampax, right?"

Amanda pressed her fingers into her eyelids, not caring whether or not she

smudged her makeup. "If I say yes, can we please change the subject?"

Evelyn wouldn't be daunted. "You know, Pete's a real doctor. He can write you a prescription, no questions asked, and if you slip the guy at the Plaza Pharmacy a few extra bucks, he won't be a jerk about it."

Amanda fanned her face. The heat was even more stifling inside the car. She tried not to think about her telephone ringing in her empty apartment yesterday.

"It's legal now, sweetheart. You don't have to be married to get birth control anymore."

Amanda's laugh was genuine this time. "I think you're jumping to a lot of conclusions."

"Maybe, but it's fun, isn't it?"

It was humiliating, actually, but Amanda tried to hide that fact by looking at her watch again. "Did this consume your entire Sunday, or did you manage to think at all about what we've been doing?"

Evelyn rolled her eyes. "Are you kidding? It's all that's been on my mind for the last week. I was so distracted this morning I put salt instead of sugar in Bill's coffee. Poor man drank half the cup before he realized what I'd done." She paused for a breath. "What about you?"

"I've been going over Butch's notes." Amanda pulled the homicide detective's notebook out of her purse. "See this here?" She pointed to the page for Evelyn's benefit. The letters *CI* were circled twice.

"Confidential informant," Evelyn said. She flipped back through the notebook. "Does he say anything else about it? A name, maybe?"

"Nothing, but a lot of Butch's cases rely on CIs." Most of them did, actually. The man was very good at finding criminals and lowlifes who were willing to parlay information into a get-out-of-jail-free card. "He never names his sources."

"Oh, that's sneaky." She scanned the pages, stopping on a crude drawing of the apartment where Jane Delray had lived. "He left out the bathroom. Did he even search the place?" She answered her own question. "Of course he didn't. Why would he?"

Amanda checked the time again. She didn't want to be late for roll call. "We should go over what we're doing today. I can call my friend at the Housing Authority when I get to work. Maybe we can find out who rented that apartment."

Evelyn paused for a moment as she switched gears. "I'll call Cindy Murray at the Five and see if she has time to check the confiscated-license box for a Lucy Bennett. At least we'll have a photograph of her."

"I don't know what good it'll do. Pete will have to sign off on the ID. It came from her own brother." Neither she nor Evelyn had the nerve to contradict Hank Bennett's identification of his sister. "Bennett hasn't laid eyes on her in five or six years. Do you think he knew it wasn't Lucy?"

"I think all he cared about was not being late for his dinner date."

They were both silent. Amanda felt a ping-pong sensation inside her head. Thoughts kept bouncing around, getting lost. It was just too much to keep up with.

Evelyn was obviously feeling the same. She said, "Bill and I started a puzzle last night—bridges of the Pacific Northwest. Zeke picked it out for Father's Day last month—and I thought, 'This is exactly how I've felt all week. Like there are

all of these different little pieces to a puzzle floating around out there, and if I could only put them together, maybe I'd be able to see the full picture.' "

"I know what you mean. All I do is ask myself questions, and I can't seem to get a satisfactory answer to any of them."

"Hey, I've got a crazy idea."

"You cannot imagine my surprise."

Evelyn gave her a sarcastic grimace, then leaned into the back seat of the station wagon.

"What are you doing?"

She snaked her body around into the back seat. Her legs went up. Amanda swatted the woman's feet out of her face. She scanned the parking lot, praying they were not being watched.

"Evelyn," she said. "What on earth?"

"Got it." Finally, she shimmied back into her seat. She had a pack of construction paper in her hands. "Zeke's crayons melted into the carpet. Bring your pen." She pushed open the door.

Amanda got out of the car and followed her around to the front of the wagon. Evelyn took a piece of paper off the top of the pack and, using Amanda's pen, wrote, "HANK BENNETT" on the page. Next, she took another page and wrote, "LUCY BENNETT," then on another put, "JANE DELRAY." She added "MARY" and "KITTY TREADWELL" into the mix, then "HODGE," "JUICE/DWAYNE MATHISON," and finally, "ANDREW TREADWELL."

"What are you doing?" Amanda asked.

"Puzzle pieces." She spread the multicolored pages out on the Falcon's hood. "Let's put it together."

Amanda took in the disparate words. The idea wasn't so crazy after all. "We should do it chronologically." She moved the names around as she spoke. "Hank Bennett came into the station, and then Sergeant Hodge sent us to Techwood. Make a new one for Tech." Evelyn scribbled the word onto a new sheet. "We need to subcategorize these." Amanda took the pen and started filling in details: dates, times, what they'd been told. The Fury's engine clicked in the heat. The metal hood singed her skin.

Evelyn suggested, "I'll make a timeline."

Amanda handed her the pen. She pointed to the different pages as she called out the sequence. "Hank Bennett goes to Sergeant Hodge last Monday. Hodge immediately sends us out to Techwood to take a rape report." She looked at Evelyn. "Hodge won't tell us why he sent us in the first place. Obviously, there wasn't a rape. Why did he send us there?"

"I'll ask him again this morning, but he wouldn't tell me the last four times."

Amanda felt the need to tell her, "You were very brave to do that."

"Fat lot of good it did." Evelyn waved away the compliment. "Juice, the pimp, doesn't belong in here."

"Unless he's the one who killed Jane."

"That doesn't seem likely. Juice was probably in jail when it happened. Or having the crap beaten out of him for resisting arrest."

"Okay, let's push him up here as a remote possibility." Amanda moved Juice to the periphery. "Next: We're at the apartment in Techwood. Jane tells us that there are three girls missing: Lucy Bennett, Kitty—who we later find out is

Treadwell—and a girl named Mary, last name unknown.”

“Right.” Evelyn wrote down the information, shooting their names off Jane Delray’s.

“Then, a few days later, Jane is murdered.”

“But she was misidentified as Lucy,” Evelyn corrected. “I’ll put an asterisk beside her name, but we should keep it this way just for clarity’s sake.”

“Right. A person who is thought to be Lucy Bennett is murdered.”

“I wonder if the brother had a big life insurance policy on her?”

Amanda supposed being married to an insurance man put these ideas into Evelyn’s head. “Is there a way to check? A registry?”

“I’ll ask Bill, but just talking it out, I think given Lucy’s life, why murder her when she would eventually kill herself with drugs?” Evelyn looked down at the timeline. “It’s not much of a motive.”

“Motive.” There was something they hadn’t considered. “Why would someone want to murder Jane?”

“Are we assuming the killer knew it was Jane whom he was murdering?”

Amanda’s head was starting to hurt. “I think we have to assume that until we find out otherwise.”

“Okay. Motive. Jane was very annoying.”

“True,” Amanda agreed. “But the last person she annoyed other than us was Juice, and if there’s one thing I know about pimps, it’s that they don’t kill their girls. They want them working. They’re product.”

“I’ll call the jail and see when Juice got out, just to make triple sure.” Evelyn tapped the pen against her chin. “Maybe the murderer was someone who saw Jane talking to us at Techwood? The whole compound lit up when we arrived. There’s no way it wasn’t broadcast to the rooftops that Jane was talking to two police officers.”

Amanda felt unsettled by the thought that she might’ve been partly responsible for the girl’s death. “Write that down as a possibility.”

“I hate to think we had anything to do with it. Then again, she wasn’t exactly baking cookies for the PTA.”

“No,” Amanda agreed, but Evelyn had only seen the pictures. “Have you ever had a manicure?”

Evelyn looked at her fingernails, which were clear-coated, just like Amanda’s. “Bill treated me to one last Christmas. I can’t say that I enjoyed having a stranger touch my hands.”

“Jane’s fingernails were perfect. They were filed and polished. I couldn’t’ve done a better job myself.”

“That manicure was ridiculously expensive. I can’t imagine Jane having the money.”

“No, and if she did, she’d spend it on drugs, not getting her fingernails polished.” Amanda remembered, “Pete said something interesting about the attacker. He said the man was angry, uncontrolled.”

“How in the world can he tell that?”

“From the way Jane looked. She was beaten all over.” Amanda tried to think it through, but she found it was easier to talk it out to Evelyn. “I guess we should be asking ourselves what kind of person is capable of this. And then, ask how he would do it. He obviously used his fists, but he had the hammer, too. He

busted open the lock on the access door to the roof. But then, we need to consider how he was able to get the better of someone like Jane. She wasn't bright, but she was street-smart."

"Who, how, and why," Evelyn summarized. "Those are very good questions. If Juice isn't the answer to them, then who is? Someone Jane has seen before. A regular customer who knows where she lives." Evelyn tapped the pen again. "But, then, this is what we're saying: He knocked on the door. He gave her a manicure. Then he threw her off the roof."

"He strangled her before he threw her off the roof."

Evelyn asked, "Pete told you that?" Amanda nodded. "That seems like a more plausible scenario. Jane screamed like a stuck pig when you kicked her, and that was barely a tap."

"You didn't say that at the time."

"I was scared," Evelyn admitted. "I'm sorry."

"It's all right," Amanda told her. "Maybe we could ask around and see if any johns are into choking."

"I know a gal who works undercover downtown. I'll see what she knows. But even if there is a guy out there who likes choking women—and something tells me there's more than one—how are we going to find his real name? And if by some miracle we do find his name, how on earth would we link him to Jane?"

Amanda offered, "Pete scraped some skin out from under Jane's fingernails. He said he could match the blood type against a suspect. See if he's a secretor or a nonsecretor."

"Eighty percent of the population has secretor status. Nearly forty percent is type O-positive. That's hardly narrowing it down."

"I didn't know that," Amanda admitted. Evelyn was much better at statistics than she was. "Let's go back to the puzzle before we're both late for work." Amanda picked up where they'd left off in the timeline. "Next, we met Mr. Blue Suit, aka Hank Bennett, at the morgue. He admits he hasn't seen his sister in years, which might explain why he couldn't identify her."

"Or, he's just too arrogant to admit that he can't."

That seemed far more likely. "I still find it odd that Lucy Bennett didn't have a record. She's been on the game at least a year, probably more."

"Neither does Kitty Treadwell." Evelyn looked sheepish. "I radioed dispatch on my way here. They ran through all the variations for me. There was no record for a Kitty Treadwell."

"How about Jane Delray?"

"She had two pick-ups several years ago, but nothing recently."

"Then her fingerprints are on file."

Evelyn frowned. "No, they're not. I asked. A lot of the older records have been purged."

"That's convenient." Amanda updated the information under each girl's name. "We need to work on Andrew Treadwell. He's a lawyer. He's a friend of the mayor's. What else do we know about him?"

"Jane intimated that he was Kitty's uncle. She point-blank said that Kitty was rich, that her family was connected."

Amanda said, "That article in the newspaper listed Andrew Treadwell as having only one daughter."

"He's one of the top lawyers in the city. He's politically powerful. If he has a daughter who's been pimped out on the streets by a black man, do you really think that's something he'd advertise? He'd more likely use his money and influence to keep her hidden away."

"You're right," Amanda allowed. She stared down at the diagram. "Don't you think it's odd that Lucy and Kitty are both out on the street and one of them has a brother working for the other's uncle?"

"Maybe they met at a self-help group," Evelyn smiled. "Whores Anonymous."

Amanda rolled her eyes at the joke. "Are we still assuming that Andrew Treadwell is the one who sent Hank Bennett to talk to Hodge last Monday?"

"I am. Are you?"

Amanda nodded again. "Which may support your theory that Andrew Treadwell doesn't want it to get out that he's related to Kitty. We could be looking at it wrong. Who does Treadwell want to hide the relationship from if not his buddies at City Hall?"

"Bennett is quite a piece of work," Evelyn mumbled. "He's one of the most arrogant asses I've met. And that's saying a lot considering the guys we work with."

Amanda tried to recall Hank Bennett's terse answers to their questions outside the morgue. She should've written them down. "Bennett said he sent his sister a letter at the Union Mission. Do you remember him saying when?"

"Yes. He mailed the letter to the Mission when his father passed away last year—this time last year. Which reminds me: Jane said Lucy has been missing for about a year."

Amanda wrote down this information under Lucy's name. "When you asked Bennett if he knew the name Kitty Treadwell, he told us to watch where we put our noses."

"Trask," Evelyn remembered. "That was the man he talked with at the Union Mission."

"He said Trask or Trent," Amanda corrected. The exchange stuck in her head because her mother's maiden name was Trent.

"We have to call him something for now," Evelyn pointed out.

"Trask," Amanda suggested.

"Okay, Trask told Bennett that he gave the letter to Lucy, which means he must know Lucy. If he works at the Union Mission, he might know all of our girls. Oh, Amanda—" She sounded devastated. "Why didn't we think to go to the Union Mission in the first place? All the hookers go there when they need a break. It's their Acapulco."

"The mission is just up the street," Amanda reminded her. "We can still talk to Trask, see if he remembers anything about Lucy—or Jane."

"If we're lucky, they'll tell us Lucy's alive and well and on such-and-such corner, and why are people saying she's been murdered." Evelyn looked at her watch. "I have to check in at Model City, but I could meet you there in half an hour."

"That should give me enough time to call the Housing Authority and figure out what I'm going to do with Peterson."

"I'm sure Vanessa won't mind taking him."

Amanda tucked her pen back in her purse. "I feel that's a bad situation

brewing.”

“Maybe. Listen, I’ll try to question Hodge again, but I doubt that’ll get me anywhere.” She scooped up the pieces of construction paper and stacked them together. “I just have such a bad feeling about all of this.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think Lucy Bennett’s dead either way.”

“Possibly, but it could be drugs, not malfeasance.”

“Have you read about all those girls in Texas who disappeared around the I-45 corridor?”

“What?”

“A dozen or more,” Evelyn told her. “They’re not even sure where the bodies are.”

“Where do you hear these things?”

There was no shame in her smile. “*True Crime* magazine.”

Amanda sighed as she watched Evelyn climb into her station wagon. “I’ll see you at the mission.”

“Deal.” Evelyn slowly pulled out of the parking space. “And I wouldn’t worry too much about Vanessa,” she called through the open window. “Who do you think told me about the guy behind the counter at the Plaza Pharmacy?”

“Mandy!” Vanessa called as soon as she walked into the station.

Amanda pushed her way through the crowd. The station was full. Roll call was a few minutes off. Amanda glanced into the sergeant’s office, but it was empty.

“Hurry!” Vanessa was sitting in back again, practically bouncing in her chair. She was wearing slacks and a flowery blouse. Her gun was holstered on her hip. She was dressed in men’s shoes. Amanda was beginning to wonder if she was worried about the wrong sex where Vanessa was concerned. At least she was still wearing a bra.

“Lookit what I got.” Vanessa held up a credit card as if it was a bar of gold. Amanda recognized the logo of the Franklin Simon department store. And then her jaw dropped at the punch-typed gold letters spelling out VANESSA LIVINGSTON underneath.

“How did you ...” Amanda sank down in her chair. She was almost afraid to touch the card. Then she did. “Is it real?”

“Yep.” Vanessa beamed.

Amanda could not stop staring at the card. “Is this a joke?” She glanced around to see if anyone was watching. No one seemed to care. “How did you get this?”

“Rachel Foster over in dispatch told me about it. All you have to do is show them six months’ worth of pay stubs.”

“Are you kidding me?” Amanda hadn’t been able to get her apartment without Duke guaranteeing the rent. If not for the city providing her a car, she’d be on foot. “They just gave it to you? Just like that?”

“That’s right.”

“They didn’t ask to speak to your husband or your father or—”

“Nope.”

Amanda was still dubious. She handed back the card. Franklin Simon was all

right, but they were doomed to bankruptcy if they were handing out credit so freely. "Listen, can you do me a favor today and ride with Peterson?"

"Sure."

"Don't you want to know why?"

The guttural sound of someone vomiting filled the room. It was joined by other men making similar disgusting noises. Butch Bonnie walked into the station, his fists held up as if he was Muhammad Ali. Amanda had forgotten how ill he'd been at the crime scene last Friday. Obviously, the rest of the squad had not. People clapped and laughed. There were even cheers from the black side of the room. Butch did a sort of victory spin as he made his way toward Amanda.

He leaned on the table. "Hey, gal, you got my stuff for me?"

Amanda reached into her bag for the typed report. She dropped the pages on the table beside him.

"Why you bein' so cold?" he asked. "You on the rag?"

"It's what your partner did to Evelyn Mitchell," Amanda shot back. "He's an animal."

Butch scratched the side of his cheek. He looked rough. His clothes were wrinkled. His face was unshaven. There was a distinct odor of alcohol and stale cigarettes sweating from his pores.

Amanda stared straight ahead. "Is there anything else?"

"Jesus, Mandy. Cut him some slack. His wife's been giving him enough crap at home. He don't need to come to work and catch lip off another skirt."

She forced herself not to soften. "Your notes had a factual error."

Butch tossed a cigarette into his mouth. "Whattaya talkin' about?"

"You said you ID'd Lucy Bennett off a license in her purse. The evidence receipt didn't list a license of any type."

"Shit," he mumbled, then, "S'cuse the language." He skimmed his notebook, compared it to her typed report. "Yeah, I see it."

"How did you ID the victim?"

He lowered his voice. "Off a CI."

"Who?"

"Never you mind who," he told her. "Just fix the report."

"You know they can't change the evidence receipt. The carbons are in triplicate."

"Then change the report so it says someone recognized her." He handed back the typed report. "There was a witness on scene. Call him Jigaboo Jones. I don't care. Just make it work."

"Are you sure?" she asked. "You're the one whose signature goes at the bottom."

He looked nervous, but said, "Yeah, I'm sure. Just do it."

"Butch—" She stopped him before he could leave. "How did Hank Bennett find out his sister was dead? You usually specify that in your notes, but this time, there's nothing." Amanda pressed a bit harder. "Lucy didn't have a record, so it seems strange that you and Landry were able to locate next of kin so quickly."

He stared at her, unblinking. She could almost see the wheels turning in his head. She didn't know if Butch was just now asking himself the question or wondering why Amanda had posed it. Finally, he told her, "I don't know."

She studied him, trying to detect duplicity. "It seems like you're telling me the truth."

"Jesus, Mandy, hanging around Evelyn Mitchell's turning you into the wrong kinda gal." He pushed himself up from the table. "Get that report back to me first thing tomorrow morning." He waited for her to nod, then went to the front of the room.

"Wow," Vanessa said. She'd been strangely quiet. "What's going on with you and Butch?"

Amanda shook her head. "I need to make a phone call."

There were two telephones in the front of the room, but Amanda didn't want to make her way through the crowd. Nor did she want to run into Rick Landry, who'd just walked into the station. The clock on the wall was straight up at eight o'clock. Sergeant Woody was still not here. Amanda wasn't surprised. Woody had a reputation for hitting the bars before work. She might as well use his office.

Nothing much had changed since Luther Hodge had vacated the space. Paperwork was scattered across the blotter. The ashtray was brimming over. Woody hadn't even bothered to get a new mug for his coffee.

Amanda sat down behind the desk and dug into her purse for her address book. The black leather was cracked and peeling. She thumbed to the C's and traced her finger down to Pam Canale's number at the Housing Authority. They weren't close friends—the woman was Italian—but Amanda had helped Pam's niece out of some trouble a few years ago. Amanda was hoping the woman wouldn't mind returning the favor.

She checked the squad room before dialing Pam's number, then waited while the call was transferred.

"Canale," Pam said, but Amanda hung up. Sergeant Luther Hodge was heading back toward the office. His office.

She stood from the desk so fast that the chair hit the wall.

"Miss Wagner," Hodge said. "Has there been a promotion about which I am uninformed?"

"No," she said, then, "Sir." Amanda scuttled around the desk. "I'm sorry, sir. I was making a phone call." She stopped, trying to appear less flustered. The fact was that she was stunned. "Did you get transferred back here?"

"Yes, I did." He waited for her to move out of his path so that he could sit down. "I suppose you think I'm holding water for your father."

Amanda had been about to leave, but she couldn't now. "No, sir. I was just making a phone call." She remembered Evelyn, her boldness in confronting Hodge. "Why did you send me to Techwood last week?"

He had been about to sit at his desk. He paused midair, hand holding back his tie.

"You told us to investigate a rape. There was no rape."

Slowly, he sat down. He indicated the chair. "Have a seat, Miss Wagner."

Amanda started to close the door.

"Leave that open."

She did as she was told, sitting opposite him at the desk.

"Are you trying to intimidate me, Miss Wagner?"

"I—"

"I realize your father still has many friends in this department, but I will not be intimidated. Is that clear?"

"Intimidated?"

"Miss Wagner, I may not be from around here, but I can tell you one thing for sure. One thing you can take straight back to your daddy: this nigger ain't goin' back into the fields."

She felt her mouth working, but no words would come out.

"Dismissed."

Amanda couldn't move.

"Should I repeat my order?"

Amanda stood. She walked toward the open door. Her competing emotions compelled her to keep moving, to work this out in private, to formulate a more reasoned response than what actually came out of her mouth. "I'm just trying to do my job."

Hodge had been writing something on a piece of paper. Probably a request to have her transferred to Perry Homes. His pen stopped. He stared at her, waiting.

Words got jumbled in her mouth. "I want to work. To be good at ... I need to be good at ..." She forced herself to stop speaking long enough to collect her thoughts. "The girl you sent us out to interview. Her name was Jane Delray. She wasn't raped. She wasn't injured. There wasn't a scratch on her. She was fine."

Hodge studied her a moment. He put down his pen. He sat back in his chair, his hands clasped in front of his stomach.

"Her pimp came in. His street name is Juice. He chased Jane out of the apartment. He made suggestive overtures toward me and Evelyn. We arrested him."

Hodge continued to stare at her. Finally, he nodded.

"Last Friday, this woman was found dead at Techwood Homes. Jane Delray. It was reported as a suicide, but the coroner told me that she was strangled, then thrown from the building."

Hodge was still looking at her. "I think you're mistaken."

"No, I'm not." Even as Amanda said the words, she questioned herself. Was she certain that the victim was not Lucy Bennett? How was it possible to tell whether or not the corpse at the morgue was truly Jane Delray? Hank Bennett had been equally as certain that he was identifying his sister. But the face, the track marks, the scars on her wrists.

Amanda said, "The victim was not Lucy Bennett. It was Jane Delray."

Her words floated up into the stale air. Amanda fought the urge to equivocate. This was the hardest lesson they had learned at the academy. It was a woman's nature to be diminutive, to make peace. They'd spent hours raising their voices, giving orders rather than making requests.

Hodge steepled his fingers. "What's your next step?"

She let some of the breath out of her lungs. "I'm meeting Evelyn Mitchell at the Union Mission. All the streetwalkers end up there eventually. It's like their Mexico." Hodge's brow furrowed at the analogy. Amanda kept talking. "There has to be someone at the Union Mission who knew the girls."

He kept studying her. "Did I mishear a plural?"

Amanda bit her lip. She longed for Evelyn's presence. She was so much better at this. Still, Amanda couldn't give up now. "The man you spoke to last Monday.

The lawyer in the blue suit. His name is Hank Bennett. You thought he was sent by Andrew Treadwell.” Hodge didn’t disagree, so she continued. “I imagine he was here looking for his sister, Lucy Bennett.”

Hodge supplied, “And then, less than a week later, he found her.”

His statement hung between them. Amanda tried to analyze its meaning, but then a more pressing issue presented itself. Rick Landry barreled into the office. He reeked of whiskey. He threw his cigarette on the floor. “Tell this fucking broad to keep her nose out of my case.”

If Hodge was surprised, he didn’t show it. Instead, he asked in a perfectly reasonable voice, “And you are?”

Landry was visibly taken aback. “Rick Landry. Homicide.” He glared at Hodge. “Where’s Hoyt?”

“I imagine Sergeant Woody is drinking his breakfast downtown.”

Again, Landry was taken off guard. It was commonly held on the force that a man’s drinking problem was his own business. “This is a homicide case. Ain’t got nothin’ to do with her. Or that mouthy bitch she’s been hangin’ around with.”

“Homicide?” Hodge paused just a moment longer than necessary. “I was under the impression that Miss Bennett committed suicide.” He pushed through the paperwork on his desk, taking his time finding what he was looking for. “Yes, here’s your preliminary report. Suicide.” He held out the paper. “Is that your signature, Officer?”

“Detective.” Landry snatched the report out of his hand. “It’s what you said, preliminary.” He wadded the paper into a ball and stuck it in his pocket. “I’ll give you the final report later.”

“So, the case is still open? You believe Lucy Bennett was murdered?”

Landry glanced back at Amanda. “I need more time.”

“Take all the time you need, Detective.” Hodge held out his hands as if he was placing the world at Landry’s feet. When the man did not leave, he asked, “Is there anything else?”

Landry glowered at Amanda before making his exit. He slammed the door behind him. Hodge looked at the closed door, then back at Amanda.

She asked, “Why did Hank Bennett come here last Monday?”

“That sounds like a very good question.”

“Why did he want you to send us to Kitty’s apartment?”

“Another good question.”

“You didn’t give us a name, just an address.”

“That’s correct.” He picked up his pen. “You can skip roll call.”

Amanda remained seated. She didn’t understand.

“I said you can skip roll call, Miss Wagner.” He went back to his paperwork. When Amanda didn’t leave, he glanced up at her. “Don’t you have a case to work?”

She stood, using the arm of the chair to leverage herself up. The door was stuck. She had to jerk it open. Amanda kept her gaze ahead as she walked through the squad room and out the door. Her resolve almost broke when she was pulling the Plymouth out of the parking lot. She could see the squad through the broken pane of glass in the storefront. A few of the patrolmen watched her leave.

Amanda pulled out onto Highland. Her breathing didn’t return to normal until

she was on Ponce de Leon heading toward the Union Mission. By her watch, she had another ten minutes before Evelyn joined her. Maybe Amanda could use the time to figure out what had just happened. The problem was that she didn't know where to begin. She needed time to digest it all. She also still needed to make a phone call.

The Trust Company branch on the corner of Ponce and Monroe had a bank of pay phones outside the building. Amanda pulled into the parking lot. She backed her car into a space and sat with her hands still wrapped around the wheel. None of this made sense. Why was Hodge speaking in riddles? He didn't seem to be afraid of much. Was he trying to help Amanda or trying to discourage her?

She found some coins in her wallet and grabbed her address book. Two of the pay phones were out of order. The last one took her dime. She dialed Pam's number again and listened to the rings. At twenty, she was about to give up, but Pam finally answered.

"Canale." She sounded even more harried than before.

"Pam, it's Amanda Wagner."

A few seconds passed before Pam seemed to recognize her name. "Mandy. What's going on? Oh, crap, don't tell me something's wrong with Mimi?"

Mimi Mitideri, the niece who'd almost run off with a Navy cadet. "No, nothing like that. I was calling to see if you could do me a favor."

She seemed relieved, though her day was probably filled with people asking for favors. "What do you need?"

"I was wondering if you could look up a name for me, or an apartment." Amanda realized she wasn't being very clear. She hadn't thought through the conversation. "There's an apartment at Techwood Homes—apartment C. It's on the fifth floor in the row of buildings—"

"Whoa, let me stop you there. There's no C at Techwood Homes. They're numbered."

Amanda resisted the temptation to ask her where one might find these numbers. "Could you look up a name, then? A Katherine or Kate or Kitty Treadwell?"

"We don't go by names. We go by roll numbers."

Amanda sighed. "I was afraid you'd say that." She felt the uselessness of the situation sitting like an elephant on her chest. "I'm not even sure if I've got the right name. There are—were—at least three girls living there. Maybe more."

"Wait a minute," Pam said. "Are they related?"

"I doubt it. They're working girls."

"All in the same unit?" Pam asked. "That's not allowed unless they're related. And even if they are, none of those gals ever want to room together. They lie all the time." There was a noise on Pam's end of the line. She covered the mouthpiece for a few seconds and had a muffled conversation with another person. When she came back on the line, her voice was clearer. "Tell me about the apartment. You said it was on the top floor?"

"Yes. Fifth floor."

"Those are one-bedroom units. A single girl wouldn't get that housing assignment unless she has a child."

"There was no child. Just three women. I'm guessing it was three. Maybe there were more."

Pam groaned. When she spoke, her voice was barely more than a whisper. "My supervisor can be persuaded sometimes."

Amanda was going to ask what she meant, but then it hit her.

Pam sounded bitter. "They should put me in charge. I wouldn't trade a top-floor apartment for a blow job."

Amanda gave a shocked laugh—as if such a thing was possible. "Well, thank you, Pam. I know you've got work to do."

"Let me know if you get the unit number. Maybe I can track it back from there. Might take me a week or two, but I'll do it for you."

"Thank you," Amanda repeated. She hung up the phone. Her hand stayed on the receiver. Her mind had been working on other things while she was talking to Pam Canale. It was like looking for your keys. The minute you stopped trying to find them, you remembered where you'd left them.

But there was only one way to be certain.

Amanda put another dime in the slot. She dialed a familiar number. Duke Wagner was never one to let a phone ring more than twice. He picked up almost immediately.

"Hey, Daddy," Amanda managed, but then she didn't know what else to say.

Duke sounded alarmed. "Are you all right? Did something happen?"

"No, no," she told him, wondering why she had called her father in the first place. This was sheer lunacy.

"Mandy? What's going on? Are you at the hospital?"

Amanda rarely heard her father panicked. Nor had she ever considered the fact that he might be worried about the job she was doing, especially since he was no longer there to protect her.

"Mandy?" She heard a chair slide across the kitchen floor. "Talk to me."

She swallowed back the uneasy realization that for just a moment, she had enjoyed scaring her father. "I'm fine, Daddy. I just had a question about—" She didn't know what to call it. "About politics."

He sounded relieved and slightly irritated. "This couldn't wait until tonight?"

"No." She looked out at the street. Cars were backing up at the light. Businessmen were going to work. Women were taking their children to school. "We had a new sergeant last week. One of Reggie's boys."

Duke made a sharp comment about this, as if his feelings weren't already known.

"He got transferred after just one day. Hoyt Woody was moved into his position."

"Hoyt's a good man."

"Well." Amanda didn't finish her thought. She found the man unctuous and off-putting, but that was not the point of this conversation. "Anyway, after a few days, Hoyt got transferred back out, and now the old sergeant, Reggie's boy, got moved back in."

"And?"

"Well," she repeated. "Doesn't that strike you as odd?"

"Not particularly." She heard him light a cigarette. "It's how the system works. You get one guy in to do one thing, then move in another to do something else."

"I'm not sure I follow."

"You gotta star pitcher, right?" Duke always favored baseball metaphors. "Only he can't swing a bat. You got it?"

"Yes."

"So you send in a pinch hitter."

"Oh." She nodded, understanding.

Duke still didn't think she got it. "There's something going on in your squad. Reggie's boy wouldn't follow orders, so they sent in Hoyt to take care of business." He laughed. "Typical. Send in a white man when you need the job done right."

Amanda held the phone away from her mouth so he wouldn't hear her sigh. "Thanks, Daddy. I should get back to work."

Duke wouldn't let her off that easy. "You're not getting mixed up in something you shouldn't?"

"No, Daddy." She tried to think of something else to say. "Be sure to put the chicken back in the refrigerator around ten. It'll spoil if you leave it out all day."

"I heard you when you told me the first six times," he snapped. Instead of hanging up, he said, "Be careful, Mandy."

She rarely heard such compassion in his voice. Unaccountably, tears came into her eyes. Butch Bonnie was right about one thing. It was close to that time of month for Amanda. She was turning into a hormonal mess. "I'll see you tonight."

She heard a click as Duke hung up the phone.

Amanda returned the receiver to the cradle. Back in her car, she took a handkerchief out of her purse and wiped her hand. Then she patted dry her face. The sun was unrelenting. She felt as if she was melting.

A honking sound ripped through the quiet of her car. Evelyn Mitchell's Ford Falcon had stopped for a yellow light. A delivery truck sped around her. The man stuck his hand out in an obscene gesture.

"For goodness sakes," Amanda mumbled, turning the key in the ignition. She pulled out onto the road and followed Evelyn three blocks down Ponce de Leon to the Union Mission. Evelyn took a slow, wide turn into the parking lot so she could back into an empty space. Amanda swung her Plymouth around and was getting out of the car by the time Evelyn turned off the engine.

Amanda said, "You're going to get yourself killed driving that slowly."

"You mean driving the speed limit? That truck driver—"

"Almost killed you," Amanda quipped. "I'm going to take you out to the stadium this weekend and give you a proper lesson."

"Oh." Evelyn seemed pleased. "Let's make a day of it. We can go to lunch and do some shopping."

Amanda was startled by her eagerness. She changed the subject. "Hodge is back at my station."

"I thought it was strange that he wasn't at Model City this morning." Evelyn closed her car door. "Why did they send him back?"

Amanda debated whether or not to reveal that she'd called her father. She decided against it. "It's possible the brass transferred in Hoyt Woody to do their dirty work."

"Why would they send in a white man? Wouldn't one of Reggie's boys be better for this sort of thing? Keep it in the family, as it were?"

She had raised a good point, but then, Evelyn didn't suffer from Duke's color

blindness. Hoyt Woody would do as he was told in hopes of ingratiating himself with the brass. Luther Hodge might not be as malleable.

Amanda said, "I imagine Woody was sent in for the same reason Hodge sent two women out to talk to Jane. We're expendable. No one really listens to us."

"That's true enough." Evelyn shrugged because there was nothing they could do about it. "So, Hodge was replaced for a few days by someone who would do their dirty work, then he was slotted back in."

"Exactly." Amanda said, "Your friend at the Five said she called security on Jane Delray when she tried to cash Lucy's vouchers. Security is run out of the Five Points precinct. Whoever hauled Jane out of the building would've written her up on an incident card." The cards were part of a larger system used to track petty criminals who weren't yet worth arresting. "The cards are fed into a daily report that goes up the chain of command. Someone high up would know that Jane was trying to use Lucy's name."

Evelyn came to the same conclusion as Amanda had. "We were sent to Techwood to scare Jane into silence."

"We did a great job, didn't we?"

Evelyn put her hand to her temple. "I need a drink. This is giving me a migraine."

"Well, this should make your head hurt even more." Amanda told her about the phone call with Pam Canale, the dead end she'd hit. Then she relayed the cryptic conversation she'd had with Sergeant Hodge.

"How strange," was all Evelyn could manage. "Why won't Hodge answer our questions?"

"I think he wants us to keep working this case, but he can't appear to be encouraging us."

"I think you're right." Evelyn said, "Maybe Kitty didn't get that top-floor apartment with sexual favors. Maybe her uncle or daddy pulled some strings."

"If Kitty is the black sheep of the Treadwell family, I can certainly see Andrew Treadwell trying to keep her from making trouble. He sets her up in an apartment with her own kind. He gets her on the welfare rolls. He makes sure she's got just enough money to stay out of his hair."

"There's no way we can talk to Andrew Treadwell. We wouldn't make it as far as the lobby."

Amanda didn't bother to agree with the obvious.

Evelyn said, "I talked to my gal in undercover. It's just what I thought: it'd be easier to find a man who *doesn't* like choking whores."

"That's depressing."

"It is if you're a whore." Evelyn added, "I told her to ask around if anybody likes painting fingernails."

"Smart thinking."

"We'll see if it pans out. I told her to call me at home. I'd hate for any of this to go out on the radio."

"Did you find out whether or not Juice was in jail when Jane was murdered?"

"He was at Grady getting fitted with a resisting-arrest turban."

Amanda had heard the terminology before. There were a lot of prisoners who woke up in the Grady ER with no recollection of how they'd gotten there. "That's hardly an alibi. He could walk in and out of the hospital without anyone

noticing.”

“You’re right,” Evelyn agreed.

Amanda blinked at the sweltering sun. “We could stand out here all day talking ourselves into circles.”

“Right again. Let’s get this part over with.” Evelyn indicated the flat, one-story building in front of them. The Union Mission had been a butcher’s shop at one time.

Amanda said, “Acapulco. Where did you get that?”

“I saw a spread in *Life* magazine. Johnny Weissmuller has a place there. It was gorgeous.”

“You and your magazines.”

Evelyn grinned, then turned serious as she looked up at the building. “How are we going to handle this? As far as anyone knows, Lucy Bennett committed suicide.”

“I think that’s the story we should stick to, don’t you?”

“I don’t think we have a choice.”

Amanda was used to not having a lot of choices, but it had never grated the way it did lately. She walked toward the front entrance. She could hear funk music playing on a radio. There were metal bars across the glass storefront. Rows of empty beds filled the front space, at least twenty deep and four across. The girls weren’t allowed to stay here during the day. Ostensibly, they were supposed to be out looking for jobs. The front door was propped open and the smell of the building airing out was as unpleasant as anything Amanda had smelled in the last week.

“Help you?” a man called over the music. He was dressed like a hippie, wearing sunglasses even though he was indoors. His sandy blond mustache was long and droopy. A brown fedora was pulled low on his head. He was extremely tall and lanky. His walk was more of an amble.

Evelyn mumbled, “He looks like Spike, Snoopy’s brother.”

Amanda didn’t share that she’d been thinking the same thing. She called to the man, “We’re looking for a Mr. Trask?”

He shook his head as he walked over. “No Trask here, ladies. I’m Trey Callahan.”

“Trey,” Evelyn and Amanda said in unison. At least Bennett had been close. There was no telling what he thought Amanda and Evelyn were called. If he gave it any thought at all.

“So,” Callahan flashed a laconic smile, tucking his hands into his pockets. “I’m guessing one of the girls is in trouble, in which case, I probably can’t help you. I’m neutral, like Switzerland. You dig?”

“Yes,” Evelyn said. Like Amanda, she had to look up at the man. He was at least six feet tall. “Maybe this will change your mind: We’re here about Lucy Bennett.”

His easygoing demeanor dropped. “You’re right. I’ll do anything I can to help. God rest her troubled soul.”

Amanda said, “We were hoping you could tell us about her. Give us an idea of who she was, with whom she associated?”

“Let’s go to my office.” He stood to the side, indicating they should go first. Despite his hippie appearance, someone had managed to teach him manners.

Amanda followed Evelyn into Callahan's office. The space was small but cheerful. The walls were painted a bright orange. Posters from various funk bands were pinned around the room. She catalogued the items on his desk: a framed photograph of a young woman holding a Doberman puppy. A rusted Slinky. A thick stack of typewriter paper held together by a rubber band. There was a sweet odor in the air. Amanda glanced at the ashtray, which looked recently emptied.

Callahan turned off the transistor radio on his desk. He indicated a set of chairs and waited for Evelyn and Amanda to sit before dragging his own chair out from behind the desk and sitting adjacent to them. It was a tactful move, Amanda realized. He'd managed to put them all on the same level.

Evelyn took a spiral-bound notebook out of her purse. She was very businesslike. "Mr. Callahan, you work here in what capacity?"

"Director. Janitor. Job counselor. Priest." He held out his hands, indicating the office. Amanda realized he was bigger than she first thought. His shoulders were broad. His frame filled the chair. "It doesn't pay much, but it gives me time to work on my book." He placed his palm on top of the stacked typewriter pages. "I'm doing an Atlanta version of *Breakfast of Champions*."

Amanda knew better than to engage him about the project. Her professors at school could wax on for hours. "Are you the only one who works here?"

"My fiancée works the night shift. She's finishing her nursing degree at Georgia Baptist." He pointed to the framed photo of the woman and the dog, flashing a used-car salesman's smile. "Trust me, ladies, we're all aboveboard here."

Evelyn wrote this down, though it was hardly germane. "Can you tell us about Lucy Bennett?"

Callahan seemed troubled. "Lucy was different from the usual clientele. She spoke properly, for one. She was tough, but there was a softness underneath." He indicated the outer room, all the empty beds. "A lot of these girls come from troubled families. They've been injured in some way. In a bad way." He paused. "You picking up what I'm putting down?"

"I feel you," Evelyn offered, as if she spoke jive every day. "You're saying Lucy wasn't like the other gals?"

"Lucy had been hurt. You could tell that about her. All of these girls have been hurt. You don't end up on the streets because you're happy." He leaned back in the chair. His legs were spread wide. Amanda could not help but be fascinated by the way a change of posture turned him from a boy into a man. Initially, she'd assumed he was her age, though looking at him now, he seemed closer to thirty.

Evelyn asked, "Did Lucy have any friends?"

"None of these girls are really friends," Callahan admitted. "Lucy chilled with her group. Their pimp was Dwayne Mathison. Goes by the name Juice. Though I'm not telling you anything you don't already know."

Amanda picked at an invisible piece of lint on her skirt. The ghetto gossip mill was more streamlined than the APD's. She guessed Callahan knew that Juice had almost assaulted them.

Evelyn asked, "When's the last time you saw Lucy?"

"Over a year ago."

"You seem to remember a lot about her."

"I had a soft spot for her." He held up his hand. "Not what you're thinking. It was nothing like that. Lucy was smart. We talked about literature. She was a voracious reader. Had these dreams about giving up the life and going to college one day. I told her about my book. Let her read some pages, even. She was down with it, you know? Got what I was doing." He shrugged. "I was trying to help her, but she wasn't ready for it."

"Did she ever have contact with her family?"

His hands gripped the arms of the chair. "That why y'all are here?"

Evelyn was better at sounding clueless than Amanda. "I don't understand."

"Lucy's brother. He send you here to tell me to keep my mouth shut?"

"We don't work for Mr. Bennett," Amanda assured the man. "He told us that he came here looking for his sister. We're simply following up."

Callahan didn't answer immediately. "Last year. Guy comes in here throwing his weight around. He was dressed real fly. Arrogant as hell." That sounded like Hank Bennett all right. "Wanted to know did I give Lucy the letter he mailed."

"Did you?"

"Of course I did." His grip loosened. "Poor thing couldn't bring herself to open it. Her hands were shaking so hard I had to put it in her purse for her. I never found out if she read it. She disappeared a week, maybe two weeks, later."

"When was this?"

"Like I said, about a year ago. August, maybe July? It was still hot as Hades, I remember that."

"You haven't seen Hank Bennett before or since?"

"I count myself lucky for that." He shifted in the chair. "Man wouldn't even shake my hand. I guess he was scared the groovy would rub off."

Evelyn asked, "I know it's been a while, but do you remember the other girls Lucy hung around with?"

"Uh ..." He pushed up his sunglasses and pressed his fingers into his eyes as he thought it out. "Jane Delray, Mary something, and ..." He dropped the glasses back down. "Kitty somebody. She wasn't here much—most nights, she was over at Techwood, but I got the feeling that wasn't a permanent situation. I never got her last name. She was a lot more like Lucy than the other girls. Not a stranger to the King's English, if you catch my drift. But they hated each other. Couldn't stand to be in the same room together."

Amanda didn't let herself look at Evelyn, but she could feel her own excitement reflecting off the other woman. "This place at Techwood—did Kitty have an apartment there?"

"I dunno. Could be. Kitty's the type of gal who's good at getting what she wants."

"Did Lucy and Kitty know each other from before?"

"I don't think so." He silently considered the question, then shook his head. "They were just the kind of girls who couldn't get along with each other. Too much alike, I expect." He leaned forward. "I'm a student of sociology, you dig? All good writers are. That's the focus of my work. The streets are my dissertation, if you will."

Evelyn seemed to understand exactly what the man was saying. "You have a theory?"

"The pimps know how to pit these types against each other. They make it clear only one can be their number one girl. Some of the gals are okay with being second string. They're used to being kicked down, you dig? But then some of them want to fight for the top. They'll do whatever it takes to be number one. Work harder. Work longer. It's survival of the fittest. They gotta be on that number one podium. Meanwhile the pimps just sit back and laugh."

Sociology be damned. Amanda had figured that out back in high school. "When's the last time you saw Kitty?"

"Maybe a year ago?" he guessed. "She wasn't spending much time here. That's around the time the church off Juniper opened up a soup kitchen. I think that was more Kitty's scene. Less competition there, anyway."

Evelyn asked, "Do you remember if Kitty stopped coming here before or after Lucy disappeared?"

"After. Maybe a couple of weeks? Not as long as a month. They might remember her at the church. Like I said, that was more Kitty's scene. She was fascinated by redemption. I gathered she had a religious upbringing. For all her faults, Kitty's a prayerful woman."

Amanda had a hard time imagining a streetwalker feeling close to the Lord. "Do you know the name of the church?"

"No idea, but it's got a big black cross painted on the front. Run by a tall brother, real clean-cut. Well spoken."

"Brother," Evelyn echoed. "You mean he's Negro?"

Callahan chuckled. "No, sister. I mean he's a brother in Christ. At the end of the day, we all shuffle off the same mortal coils."

"*Hamlet*," Amanda said. She'd studied Shakespeare two quarters ago.

Callahan lifted up his sunglasses and winked at her. His eyes were bloodshot. The lashes reminded her of the teeth on a Venus flytrap. "'Be all my sins remembered,' fair Ophelia."

Amanda felt a flash of embarrassment.

Thankfully, Evelyn took over. "This man at the church. Do you know his name?"

"No idea. Kind of an asshole, if you ask me. Wants to argue about books and shit but you can tell he's never read one in his life." Callahan dropped his sunglasses back into place. "You know, I really thought Lucy would tell me goodbye before she left. Like I said, we had a thing. A platonic thing. Maybe she was too ashamed. These girls don't usually stay put for long. Their pimp gets tired of them not earning enough. He trades them off to the next guy down the line. Sometimes, they just move on. A few go back home, if their families will have them. The rest end up down at the Gradys."

"Gradys," Amanda repeated. It was strange to hear this word coming out of a white man's mouth. Only the blacks called Grady Hospital the Gradys. The name dated back to when the hospital wards were segregated. Amanda asked, "What about Jane Delray? Have you ever heard of her?"

Callahan gave a surprised laugh. "That sister is crazy mean. She'd cut you just as soon as look at you."

"Why do you say that?"

"Jane was always fighting with the girls. Always stealing their stuff. I finally had to ban her from the mission, and I don't like to do that to any of them. This

is their last resort. They can't come here, there's nowhere else for them to go."

"They can't go to the soup kitchen?"

"Not if they're messed up. Brother won't let them through the door." Callahan shrugged. "It's not a bad policy. When these girls come in high, they're more prone to make trouble. But I can't just lock the door and leave them on the street."

"They can't get assistance from the Housing Authority?"

"Not if they've got prostitution on their record. The HA screens them out. They don't want girls setting up their businesses on the public dime."

Amanda tried to process the information. She was glad Evelyn was writing this down. "Is there anything else you can remember about Lucy?"

"Just that she was a good girl. I know it's hard for you to believe, especially working for the po-lice. But all of them started out good. They made a bad choice somewhere along the line, and then they made another one, and pretty soon their lives were nothing but bad choices. Lucy especially. She didn't deserve to go out like that." His hands gripped the chair again. His voice took on a hard edge. "I don't like to break on a brother, but I hope they fry him for this."

Amanda asked, "What do you mean?"

"It's already out." Callahan indicated the radio. "Heard it on the radio before you ladies walked in. Juice was arrested for killing Lucy Bennett. He gave a full confession." The phone on his desk started ringing. "Excuse me," he apologized, leaning over to lift the receiver.

Amanda didn't trust herself to look at Evelyn.

Callahan used his hand to cover the mouthpiece on the phone. "I'm sorry, ladies. This is one of our donors calling. Was there anything else you needed from me?"

"No." Evelyn stood up. Amanda followed suit. "Thank you for your time."

The sun was so bright when they walked out of the building that Amanda's eyes teared up. She shaded herself with her hand as they walked into the parking lot.

"Well." Evelyn slipped on her Foster Grants. "Arrested."

"Arrested," Amanda echoed. "And confessed."

They both stood by the cars, stunned silent.

Finally, Amanda said, "What do you make of that?"

"I'm flummoxed," Evelyn admitted. "I suppose Juice could've done it. Might've done it." She contradicted herself. "Then again, it's not that hard to get a confession, especially for Butch and Landry."

Amanda nodded. At least once a week, Butch and Landry showed up for roll call with cuts and bruises on their knuckles. "You said it yourself: Juice could've slipped out of the hospital, murdered Jane, and climbed back in bed with no one realizing he was gone." Amanda leaned against her car, then thought better of it when the heat singed through her skirt. "Then again, Trey Callahan just confirmed Juice was pimp to both Lucy Bennett and Jane Delray. He would know the difference between the two girls. Why would he confess to killing one when it was the other?"

"I doubt very seriously Rick Landry is letting him get his story out." She added, "A black man kills a white woman? That's a hummy if there ever was one."

She was right. The case would hum right through City Hall. Juice would be in prison before the year was out—if he lived that long.

Both women were silent again. Amanda couldn't recall a time she'd been more shocked.

And then Evelyn topped it. "Do you think we could speak to him?"

"Speak to whom?"

"Juice."

The question was as crazy as it was dangerous. "Rick Landry would string us up alive. I didn't want to tell you, but he was very angry this morning. He complained to Hodge right in front of me about us interfering in his case."

"What did Hodge say?"

"Nothing, really. The man speaks in riddles. Every question I asked, he just said, 'That's a good question.' It was maddening."

"That's his way of telling you to ignore Rick and to keep moving forward." Evelyn held up her hands to stop Amanda's protest. "Think about it: If Hodge wanted you to stop looking into this, he would've ordered you to stop. He could've assigned you to crossing duty. He could've benched you and made you file all day. Instead, he told you to skip roll call and meet up with me." She smiled appreciatively. "It's very clever, really. He doesn't tell you what to do, but he makes you want to do it."

"It's annoying, is what it is. Why can't he just speak directly? What's wrong with that?"

"He was already transferred to Model City for four days. I imagine he's making sure he doesn't get sent back."

"Meanwhile, it's my head on the chopping block."

Evelyn seemed to be gauging her own words. "He's probably afraid of you, Amanda. You must know that a lot of people are."

Amanda could've been knocked down with a feather. "Whatever for?"

"Your father."

"That's just silly. Even if my father cared about such things, I'm not a tattletale."

"They don't know that." Evelyn's voice was gentle. "Sweetheart, it's just a matter of time before your father's back in uniform. He still has a lot of powerful friends. There's bound to be payback. Do you really think people shouldn't be afraid?"

Amanda didn't want to admit that she was right about Duke, even while she was wrong about the rest. "I don't know why we're even having this conversation. Juice has been arrested for murder. The case is closed. We'd turn the whole department against us if we made trouble."

"You're right." Evelyn looked out into the street, the cars rushing by. "We're probably fools to care. Juice was going to rape us. Jane hated us on sight. Lucy Bennett was a junkie and a prostitute whose own brother couldn't stand to be in the same room with her." She nodded back at the mission. "No matter how well read Snoopy's brother says she was." She took off her sunglasses. "What was with that Ophelia line, anyway?"

"It's from *Hamlet*."

"I'm aware of that." Evelyn sounded testy. "I *do* read more than magazines, you know."

Amanda considered it wiser to hold her tongue.

Evelyn put her sunglasses back on. "Ophelia was a tragic figure. She had an abortion and killed herself by falling from a tree."

"Where do you get that she had an abortion?"

"She took rue. It's an herb women used to bring about miscarriages. Shakespeare had her passing out flowers and she—" Evelyn shook her head. "Never mind. The point is, are you going to go to the jail or not?"

"Me?" Amanda's mind couldn't handle these sudden shifts. "Alone?"

"I told Cindy I'd go to the Five and check the license box for Lucy's ID."

"That's very convenient."

"Bubba Keller is one of your father's poker buddies, right?"

Amanda wondered if she was making an allusion to the Klan. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Keller runs the jail."

"And?"

"And, if *you* go to the jail and ask to speak with Juice, it's no big deal. If you go to the jail with *me* and ask to speak to Juice, it gets back to your father."

Amanda didn't know what to say. She felt caught out, as if Evelyn was suddenly privy to all the lies Amanda had told Duke over the last week.

"It's all right," Evelyn said. "We all have to answer to someone."

Evelyn didn't seem to have to answer to anybody. Amanda said, "Let me get this straight: you want me to waltz into the jail and ask to speak to a prisoner who's just been arrested for murder?"

Evelyn shrugged. "Why not?"

Present Day

SUZANNA FORD

Zanna woke with a start. She couldn't move. She couldn't see. Her throat ached. She could barely swallow. She turned her head back and forth. A pillow cupped her head. She was lying down. She was in bed.

She tried to say "help," but her lips would not move. The word got trapped in her mouth. She tried again.

"Help ..."

She coughed. Her throat was bone dry. Her eyes throbbed in her head. Every movement sent pain shooting through her body. She was blindfolded. She didn't know where she was. All she remembered was the man.

The man.

His weight shifted on the bed as he stood up. They weren't in the hotel room anymore. The low rumble of traffic weaving through downtown had been replaced by two noises. The first one was a hum, like the white-noise machine they bought her grandmother for Christmas one year. It kept up a steady hushing sound.

Hush, little baby ... don't say a word ...

The other noise was harder to place. It was so familiar, but every time she thought she had it pinned down, it would change. A whistling sound. Not like a train. Like air sucking through a tunnel. An underwater tunnel. A pneumatic tube.

There was no regularity to it. It only served to make her feel more out of body. More out of place. She didn't even know if she was still in Atlanta. Or Georgia. Or America. She had no idea how long she'd been out. She had no sense of time or place. She knew nothing but the fear of anticipation.

The man started mumbling again. There was the sound of a faucet turning on. The splash of water in a metal bowl.

Zanna's teeth started chattering. She wanted meth. She needed meth. Her body was starting to convulse. She was going to lose it. She was going to start screaming. Maybe she should scream. Maybe she should shout so loud that he had to kill her, because she had no doubt that's what this man was going to do. It was only a matter of the hell he would put her through first.

Ted Bundy. John Wayne Gacy. Jeffrey Dahmer. The Night Stalker. The Green River Killer.

Zanna had read every book Ann Rule had ever written, and when there wasn't a book, there was a TV movie or an Internet site or a *Dateline* or a *20/20* or a *48*

Hours, and she remembered every lurid detail about every sadistic freak who had ever kidnapped a woman for his own demonic pleasure.

And this man was a demon. There was no arguing with that. Zanna's parents had given up on church when she was a kid, but she had lived in Roswell long enough to recognize a stray verse, the cadence of scripture. The man mumbled prayers and he beseeched God for His forgiveness, but Zanna knew that no one was listening except the Devil himself.

The water turned off. Two footsteps, and he was back on the bed. She felt the weight of him as he sat down beside her. More water dripping. Loud drops into the bowl.

Suzanna flinched as the warm, wet rag washed along her skin.

Present Day

TUESDAY

Sara's knees protested as she worked her way around the living room, dipping a washcloth into the bowl of vinegar and hot water, then washing down the baseboards section by maddening section.

Some women sat around watching TV when they were upset. Others went shopping or gorged themselves on chocolate. It was Sara's lot in life that she cleaned. She blamed her mother. Cathy Linton's response to any ailment was generally hard labor.

"Ugh." Sara sat back on her heels. She wasn't used to cleaning her own apartment. She was dripping sweat despite the low temperature on her thermostat. The climate was not being appreciated by anyone. Her greyhounds were huddled on the couch as if they were in the middle of an arctic winter.

Technically, Sara was supposed to be at work right now, but there was an unspoken rule in the ER that any person could leave if three really horrendous things happened to them during one shift. Today, Sara had been kicked in the leg by a homeless man, narrowly avoided being punched in the face by the mother of a boy who was so high he'd defecated on himself, and had her hand vomited on by one of the new interns. All before lunchtime.

If Sara's supervisor hadn't told her to leave, she was fairly certain she would've quit. Which was probably why Grady had the rule in the first place.

She finished the last section of baseboard and stood up. Her knees were wobbly from being bent for so long. Sara stretched out her hamstrings before she walked toward the kitchen with the rag and bowl. She dumped the vinegar solution down the drain, washed her hands, then picked up a dry rag and a can of Pledge to begin the next phase.

Sara looked at the clock on the microwave. Will still had not called. She imagined he was sitting on a toilet at Hartsfield-Jackson Airport waiting for a business traveler to tap his foot under the stall. Which meant there was plenty of time for him to dial her phone number. Maybe he was sending a message. Maybe he was trying to tell her that what they had was over.

Or maybe Sara was reading too much into his silence. She had never been good at playing games in relationships. She preferred to be direct. Which was at the very root of their problems.

What she desperately needed was a second opinion. Cathy Linton was at home, but Sara had a feeling her mother's reaction would be similar to the one she had the time Sara was ill from eating an entire package of Oreos. Sure, she'd

held back Sara's hair and patted her back, but not without first demanding, "What the hell did you think would happen?"

Which was exactly what Sara kept asking herself. The worst part was that she was turning into one of those annoying people who got so caught up whining about a bad situation that they forgot they were actually capable of doing something about it.

Sara cleared off the mantel for dusting. She gently held the small cherrywood box that had belonged to her grandmother. The hinge was coming apart. Sara carefully opened the lid. Two wedding rings rested on the satin pillow.

Her husband had been a cop, which was basically where the similarity between Jeffrey and Will ended. Or maybe not. They were both funny. They had the same strong, moral character that Sara had always been attracted to. They were both drawn to duty. They were drawn to Sara.

That was one thing about Jeffrey that was completely different from Will. He had made no equivocations about wanting Sara. It was clear from the beginning that he was going to have her. He'd strayed once, but Jeffrey had dragged himself through broken glass to win her back. Not that Sara expected the same kind of dramatic gestures from Will, but she needed a stronger sign of commitment than just showing up in her bed every night.

Sara had fallen in love with her husband because of his beautiful handwriting. She'd seen his notes written in the margin of a book. The script was soft and flowing, unexpected for someone whose work required him to carry a gun and occasionally use his fists. Sara had never seen Will's handwriting, except for his signature, which was little more than a scrawl. He left her Post-it notes with smiley faces on them. A few times, he'd sent her a text with the same. Sara knew Will read the occasional book, but mostly stuck with audio recordings. As with many things, his dyslexia wasn't something they talked about.

Could she love this man? Could she see herself being part of his life—or, at least the part of his life that he allowed her to see?

Sara wasn't sure.

She closed the box and returned it to its proper place on the mantel.

Maybe Will didn't want her. Maybe he was just having fun. He still kept his wedding ring in the front pocket of his pants. Sara had been pleased when he'd shown up with his finger bare, but she wasn't stupid. Neither was Will, which was why it was puzzling that he kept the ring in an area where her hands usually ended up.

Sara hadn't realized she was falling in love with Jeffrey when she'd opened that book and seen his writing. It was only later when she looked back that she realized what was happening. There were memories of Will that gave her heart that familiar tug. Watching him wash dishes at her mother's kitchen sink. The way he listened so intently when she talked about her family. The look on his face the first time he'd really made love to her.

Sara leaned her head against the mantel. Given enough idleness and time, she could talk herself into either loving or hating the man. Which was why she wished he would just bite the bullet and call her.

The phone rang. Sara jumped. She felt her heart thumping as she walked toward the phone, which was equal parts stupid and foolish. She'd gone to medical school, for the love of God. She shouldn't be so easily swayed by

coincidence. “Hello?”

“How is my favorite student?” Pete Hanson asked. He was one of the top ME’s in the state. Sara had taken several courses from him when she was medical examiner for Grant County. “I hear you’re playing hooky from school.”

“Mental health day,” she admitted, trying to hide her disappointment that it wasn’t Will on the other end of the line. Then, because Pete never just called her out of the blue, she asked, “Is something wrong?”

“I have some news, my dear. It’s fairly private, so I’d prefer to deliver it in person.”

Sara glanced around the apartment, which was upside down. Pillows on the floor. Rugs rolled up. Dog toys scattered around. Enough fur to build a new greyhound. “Are you at City Hall East?”

“As always.”

“I’m on my way.”

Sara ended the call and tossed the receiver onto the couch. She checked her reflection in the mirror. Her hair was frizzed with sweat. Her skin was blotchy. She was wearing jeans that were torn at the knees and a Lady Rebels T-shirt that had looked great back when she was in high school. Will worked in the same building as Pete, but he was on the Southside all day, so there was no chance of running into him. Sara grabbed her keys and left the apartment. She took the steps down to the lobby, and didn’t stop until she saw her car.

There was another note tucked under the windshield wiper. Angie Trent had changed things up. Along with the familiar “Whore,” the woman had kissed the white notebook paper with her heavily lipsticked mouth.

Sara folded the note in two as she got into her car. She rolled down the window and tossed the paper into the trashcan by the automatic gate. Sara supposed Angie parked on the street and walked under the gate to put these notes on her car. Up until a few years ago, Angie had been a cop. Apparently, she had been one of the best undercover agents that the Vice Squad had ever had. Like many former police officers, she didn’t worry about petty crimes such as trespassing and terroristic threats.

A horn beeped behind her. Sara hadn’t noticed the gate go up. She waved her hand in apology, pulling out into the street. If thinking about Will was a futile endeavor, thinking about his wife was a lesson in self-hatred. There was a reason Angie had so easily passed for a high-class call girl. She was tall and curvy and had that secret pheromone that let every interested man—or woman, if the stories were true—know that she was available. Which was why Will was going to be wearing a condom until his final blood test came back.

That was, if they lasted that long.

City Hall East was less than a mile from Sara’s apartment. Housed in the old Sears department store building on Ponce de Leon Avenue, the space was as sprawling as it was dilapidated. The metal windows and cracked brickwork had been pristine at one time, but the city hadn’t the money to maintain such a vast structure. It was one of the largest buildings by volume in the southeastern United States, which only partially explained why half the complex stood vacant.

Will’s office was on one of the upper floors that had been taken over by the Georgia Bureau of Investigation. The fact that Sara had never seen his office was

one of the many things she tried to push from her mind as she navigated the large loop down to the underground parking lot.

Despite the mild climate, the parking garage was not as cool as it should've been, considering it was belowground. The morgue was even more subterranean, but like the garage, was mildly warmer than expected. There must've been something wrong with the air circulation, or maybe the building was so old that it was doing its best to force the inhabitants to let it go.

Sara took the cracked concrete stairs down to the basement. She could smell the familiar odors of the morgue, the caustic products that were used to clean the floors and the chemicals used to disinfect the bodies. Back in Grant County, Sara had taken the part-time job of medical examiner to help buy out her retiring partner at the children's clinic. The work in the morgue was sometimes tedious, but generally a lot more fascinating than the tummy aches and sniffles she treated at the clinic. That Grady Hospital was only marginally more challenging was yet another thought she pushed from her mind.

Pete Hanson's office was adjacent to the morgue. Sara could see him through the open door. He was bent over his desk, which was piled high with papers. His filing system wasn't one Sara would've chosen, but many times, she'd seen Pete pluck exactly what he needed from a random pile.

She knocked on the door as she walked into the office. Her hand stopped midair. He'd lost weight recently. Too much weight.

"Sara." He smiled at her, showing yellow teeth. Pete was an aging hippie who refused to give up his long braided hair, even though there was considerably less of it. He favored loud Hawaiian shirts and liked to listen to the Grateful Dead while he performed procedures. As medical examiners went, he was fairly typical, which was to say the bottled specimen of an eighteen-year-old victim's heart that he kept on a shelf above his desk was only in aid of his favorite joke.

She set it up for him. "How are you doing, Pete?"

Instead of telling her that he had the heart of an eighteen-year-old, Pete frowned. "Thanks for coming by, Sara." He indicated an empty chair. Pete had obviously prepared for her. The papers and charts that were normally piled on the chair had been placed on the floor.

Sara sat down. "What's wrong?"

He turned back to his computer and tapped the space bar on his keyboard. A digital radiograph was on the screen. The frontal chest X-ray showed a large white mass in the middle portion of the left lung. Sara looked at the file name at the top. Peter Wayne Hanson.

"SCLC," he told her. Small-cell lung cancer, the deadliest kind.

Sara felt like she'd been punched in the gut. "The new protocol—"

"Doesn't work for me." He clicked the file closed. "It's already metastasized to my brain and liver."

Sara delivered bad news to her patients on a daily basis. She seldom found herself on the other end. "Oh, Pete, I'm so sorry."

"Well, it's not the best way to go, but it beats slipping in the tub." He sat back in his chair. She saw it clearly now—the gauntness in his cheeks, the sallow look in his eyes. He indicated the jar on the shelf. "So much for my eighteen-year-old heart."

Sara laughed at the inappropriate humor. Pete was a great doctor, but his best

trait was his generosity. He was the most patient and giving teacher Sara had ever had. He was delighted when a student managed to pick up on a detail he'd missed—a rare trait among physicians.

He said, "At the very least, it's given me a wonderful excuse to take up smoking again." He mimicked puffing a cigarette. "Unfiltered Camels. My second wife hated them. You've met Deena, right?"

"I only know her by reputation." Dr. Coolidge ran the forensics lab at GBI headquarters. "Do you have any plans?"

"You mean a bucket list?" He shook his head. "I've seen the world—at least the parts of it I want to see. I'd rather make myself as useful as I can with what little time I have left. Maybe plant some trees at my farm that my great-grandchildren will climb on. Spend time with my friends. I hope that includes you."

Sara willed herself not to tear up. She looked down at the cracked tile floor. There was so much asbestos in the building, she wouldn't be surprised to learn that Pete's cancer was down to more than cigarettes. She glanced at the pile of papers by the chair. A manila envelope was on top of the pile, faded red tape sealing it closed. The evidence was old. Deep creases maintained the accordion fold of the envelope. The areas that weren't yellowed with age were smeared black.

Pete followed her gaze. "Old case."

Sara noted the date, which was over thirty years ago. "Very old case."

"We were lucky they found it in evidence, though I'm not sure if we'll need it after all." He picked up the envelope and put it on his desk. The black dust transferred to his fingers. "The city used to purge closed cases every five years. We did some crazy stuff back then."

Sara could tell the case meant something to him. She knew the feeling. There were still victims she'd worked on back in Grant County that would haunt her memories until the day she died.

Pete asked, "How are things at Grady?"

"Oh, you know." Sara didn't know what to say. She was called "bitch" so often that she turned her head whenever anyone yelled the word. "Swimming pools and movie stars."

"In nearly fifty years, I've not once had a patient talk back or file a complaint against me." He raised an eyebrow. "You know they'll need someone to take my place when I'm gone."

Sara laughed, then saw that he wasn't joking.

"Just a thought," he told her. "But this brings me to a favor I need to ask."

"What can I do?"

"I've got a case that just came in. It's very important. It has to hold up."

"Does it have anything to do with that?" She indicated the dirty envelope on his desk.

"Yes," he admitted. "I can do all the heavy lifting, but I need to make sure that six months, a year from now, someone's around to testify."

"You've got dozens of people working under you."

"Just four at the moment," he corrected. "Unfortunately, none of them possess the length and breadth of your experience."

"I don't—"

"You're still credentialed. I checked with the state." He leaned forward. "I'm not a duplicitous man, Sara. You know that about me. So you'll understand that I'm being brutally honest when I tell you that this is a dying man's last request. I need you to do this for me. I need you to go to court. I need you to speak directly to a jury and put this man back where he belongs."

Sara was momentarily at a loss. This was the last thing she'd been expecting. Her apartment looked as if it had been hit by a tornado. She still had Will to deal with. She was dressed more suitably for a pickup softball game than for work. Still, she knew that she didn't have a choice. "There's already a suspect?"

"Yes." He shuffled the papers around and found a yellow file folder.

Sara scanned the preliminary report. There wasn't much. A dead Jane Doe had been found outside a Dumpster in a fairly upscale part of town. She'd been beaten to death. Her wallet was absent cash. The bruising around her wrists and ankles indicated that she'd been tied up, possibly kidnapped.

Sara looked up at Pete. She had an awful, sinking feeling. "The missing Georgia Tech student?"

"We don't have positive ID yet, but I'm afraid so."

"Death penalty case?" Pete nodded. "Is the body here?"

"They brought her in half an hour ago." Pete looked up at the doorway. "Hello, Mandy."

"Pete." Amanda Wagner's arm was in a sling. She looked worse for the wear, though she still kept up the formalities. "Dr. Linton."

"Dr. Wagner," Sara returned. She couldn't help but look over the woman's shoulder for Will.

Amanda asked Pete, "Did Vanessa come by?"

"First thing this morning." He explained to Sara, "The fourth Mrs. Hanson."

Amanda said, "Dr. Linton, I hope we can avail ourselves of your expertise?"

Sara felt a bit managed. She asked the obvious question. "Is this Will's case?"

"No. Agent Trent is absolutely not assigned to this case. Which doesn't explain why I've spent the last three hours of my day walking up and down every hallway in a twelve-story office building talking to people who have better things to do than watch us chase our tails." She paused for a breath. "Pete, when did we get so old?"

"Speak for yourself. I always told you I was going to die young."

She laughed, but there was a sad edge to the sound.

"I can still remember the first time you came into my morgue."

"Please, let's not get maudlin. Try to go out with some dignity."

He grinned like a cat. There was a moment between them, and Sara wondered if Amanda Wagner had fallen somewhere along the timeline of the many Mrs. Hansons.

The moment passed quickly. Pete stood from his desk. He reached out, bracing himself against the chair. Sara jumped up to help him, but he gently pushed her away. "Not to that point yet, my dear." He told Amanda, "You can use my office. We'll go ahead and get started."

Pete indicated that Sara should leave ahead of him. She pushed open the doors to the morgue, resisting the urge to hold them for Pete. He seemed more diminished in the large tiled room. The office had served as a buffer against his wasted appearance. In the bright lights of the autopsy theater, there was no

hiding the obvious.

"A bit cool in here," Pete mumbled, taking his white lab coat off the hook. He went to the cabinet and handed Sara one of his spares. His name was stitched over the pocket. Sara could've wrapped the coat around her body twice. But then, so could Pete.

"Our victim." He indicated a draped body in the center of the room. Blood had permeated the sheet, which was unusual. Circulation stopped when the heart stopped beating. Blood congealed. Sara couldn't help but feel some guilty excitement. She relished a difficult case. Working at Grady, dealing with the same types of ailments and injuries over and over again, could become a bit mind-numbing.

Pete said, "We've already photographed and X-rayed her. Sent her clothes to the lab. Do you know we used to just cut them off and throw them in a bag? And rape cases." He laughed. "My God, the science was flawed from the beginning. There was no taking the victim's word for it. If we didn't find semen in the suspected attacker's underwear, then we couldn't legally sign off on a charge of rape."

Sara didn't know what to say. She couldn't imagine how awful things used to be. Thankfully, she didn't have to.

Pete looped his braid on top of his head and pulled on an Atlanta Braves baseball hat. He was in his element inside the morgue, visibly more animated. "I remember the first time I talked to an odontologist about bite marks. I was certain we were looking at the future of crime solving. Hair fibers. Carpet fibers." He chuckled. "If I have one regret about my impending doom, it's that I won't live to see the day when we've got everyone's DNA on an iPad, and all we have to do is scan some blood or a piece of tissue and up pops a current location for our bad guy. It'll end crime as we know it."

Sara didn't want to talk about Pete's impending doom. She busied herself with her hair, tightening the band, tucking it into a surgeon's cap so she wouldn't contaminate anything. "How long have you known Amanda?"

"Since dinosaurs walked among us," he joked. Then, in a more serious tone, he said, "I met her when she started working with Evelyn. They were both a couple of pistols."

The description struck Sara as odd, as if Amanda and Evelyn had run around Atlanta like two Calamity Janes. "What was she like?"

"She was interesting," Pete said, which was one of his highest compliments. He looked at Sara's reflection in the mirror over the sink as he washed his hands. "I know it wasn't great when you came up in medical school—what were there, a handful of women?"

"If that," Sara answered. "But this last class was over sixty percent." She didn't mention that the ones who weren't taking time off to have children were mostly funneling themselves into pediatrics or gynecology, the same as they had when Sara was an intern. "How many women were on the force when Amanda joined?"

He squinted as he thought about it. "Less than two hundred out of over a thousand?" Pete stepped back so Sara could wash her hands. "No one thought women should be on the job. It was considered man's work. There was all kinds of grumbling about how they couldn't protect themselves, didn't have the

cojones to pull the trigger. The truth was that everyone was secretly terrified they'd be better. Can't blame 'em." Pete winked at her. "The last time women were in charge, they outlawed alcohol."

Sara smiled back at him. "I think we should be forgiven one mistake in almost a hundred years."

"Perhaps," he allowed. "You know, you listen to my generation these days, we were all free-loving hippies, but the truth is there were more Amanda Wagners than there were Timothy Learys, especially in this part of the country." He gave her a twinkling smile. "Not to say it entirely passed us by. I lived in a glorious singles complex off the Chattahoochee. Riverbend. Ever hear of it?"

Sara shook her head. She was enjoying Pete's reminiscing. His cancer was obviously compelling him to put his life in perspective.

"A lot of airline pilots lived there. Stewardesses. Lawyers and doctors and nurses, oh my." His eyes lit up at the memory. "I had a nice side business selling penicillin to many of the fine Republican men and women currently running our state government."

Sara used her elbow to turn off the faucet. "Sounds like crazy times." She had come of age during the AIDS epidemic, when free love started exacting its price.

"Crazy indeed." Pete handed her some paper towels. "When was *Brown v. the Board of Education*?"

"The desegregation case?" Sara shrugged. Her high school history class was some time ago. "Fifty-four? Fifty-five?"

Pete said, "It was around that time that the state required white teachers to sign a pledge disavowing integration. They would lose their jobs if they refused."

Sara had never heard of the pledge, but she wasn't surprised.

"Duke, Amanda's father, was away when the pledge was circulating." Pete blew into a pair of powdered surgical gloves before putting them on. "Miriam, Amanda's mother, refused to sign the pledge. So her grandfather—a very powerful man. He was a higher-up with Southern Bell—sent her off to Milledgeville."

Sara felt her lips part in surprise. "He committed his daughter to the state mental hospital?"

"The facility was basically a warehouse back then, mostly for vets and the criminally insane. And women who wouldn't listen to their fathers." Pete shook his head. "It broke her. It broke many people."

Sara tried to do the math. "Was Amanda born yet?"

"She was around four or five, I'd guess. Duke was still in Korea, so his father-in-law was in charge. I gather no one told Duke what was really going on. The minute he was back in Georgia, he grabbed Amanda and signed his wife out of Milledgeville. Never talked to his father-in-law again." Pete handed Sara a pair of gloves. "Everything seemed fine, and then one day, Miriam went out into the back garden and hanged herself from a tree."

"That's awful." Sara pulled on the surgical gloves. No wonder Amanda was so closed down. She was worse than Will.

"Don't let it soften you toward her too much," Pete warned. "She lied to you in my office. She wanted you here for a reason."

Instead of asking what reason, Sara followed his gaze to the door. Will was

there. He stared at Sara in utter shock. She had never seen him look so awful. His eyes were bloodshot. He was rumpled and unshaven. His body swayed from exhaustion. His pain was so obvious that Sara could almost feel her heart breaking.

Her instinct was to go to him, but Faith was there, then Amanda, then Leo Donnelly, and Sara knew that a public display would only make things worse. She could read it in his face. He looked absolutely stricken to find her there.

Sara glared at Pete, making sure he knew that she was furious. Amanda may have lied about this being Will's case, but Pete was the one who had lured Sara to the morgue. She snapped off the gloves as she walked toward Will. He obviously didn't want Sara to see him like this. She planned to take him into Pete's office to explain what had happened and apologize profusely, but Will's expression stopped her.

Close up, he looked even worse. Sara had to force herself not to put her hands to his face, rest his head on her shoulder. Exhaustion radiated from his body. There was so much pain in his eyes that her heart broke all over again.

She kept her voice low. "Tell me what you need me to do. I can leave. I can stay. Whatever is best for you."

His breathing was shallow. He gave her such a look of desperation that Sara had to fight to keep herself from crying.

"Tell me what to do," she begged. "What *you* need me to do."

His gaze settled on the gurney. The victim on the table. He mumbled, "Stay," as he walked into the room.

Sara let out a stuttered breath before she turned around. Faith couldn't look at her, but Amanda held her gaze. Sara had never understood Will's mercurial relationship with his boss, but at that moment, she ceased caring. There was not another person on the planet right now whom Sara despised more than Amanda Wagner. She was obviously playing some kind of game with Will, just as it was obvious that Will was losing.

"Let's begin," Pete suggested.

Sara stood to Pete's side, opposite Will and Faith, her arms crossed. She tried to calm her anger. Will had told her to stay. Sara could not guess the reason why, but she didn't need to add more tension to the room. A woman had been murdered. That should be the focus.

"All right, ladies and gentlemen." Pete used his foot to tap on the Dictaphone to record the procedure. He called out the usual information—time of day, persons present, and the victim's tentative identity of Ashleigh Renee Snyder. "ID has yet to be confirmed by family, though of course we'll follow with dental records, which have already been digitized and sent to the Panthersville Road lab." He asked Leo Donnelly, "Is the father en route?"

"Squad car's picking him up from the airport. Should be any minute now."

"Very good, Detective." Pete gave him a stern look. "I trust you're going to keep any wry comments or off-color jokes to yourself?"

Leo held up his hands. "I'm just here for the ID so I can turn over the case."

"Thank you."

Without preamble, Pete grabbed the top of the sheet and pulled back the drape. Faith gasped. Her hand went to her mouth. Just as quickly, she forced her arm back down to her side. Her throat worked. She didn't blink. Faith had never

had the stomach for these things, but she seemed determined to hold her own.

Unusually, Sara shared her discomfort. After all these years, she'd thought herself anesthetized to the horrors of violence, but there was something gut-wrenching about the state of the woman's body. She hadn't just been killed. She'd been mutilated. Bruises blackened her torso. Tiny red edemas cracked the skin. One of her ribs had punctured through the flesh. Her intestines hung between her legs.

But that wasn't the worst of it.

Sara had never been one to believe in the concept of evil. She always thought the word was an excuse—a way to explain away mental illness or depravity. A safe word to hide behind rather than face the truth that human beings were capable of despicable acts. That not much kept us from acting on our baser urges.

Yet, "evil" was the only word that came to mind when Sara looked down at the victim. It wasn't the bruises, the punctures, even the bite marks that were shocking. It was the methodical slices along the insides of the woman's arms and legs. It was the crisscross pattern that traced up her hips and torso in an almost ruler-straight line. Her attacker had ripped the flesh the same way you would rip out a seam in a dress.

And then there was her face. Sara could not begin to understand what had been done to her face.

Pete said, "The X-rays show the hyoid bone was broken."

Sara recognized the familiar bruising around the woman's neck. "Was she thrown off a building after she was strangled?"

Pete said, "No. She was found outside a one-story building. The intestinal prolapse is likely from premortem external trauma. A blunt object, or a fist. Do these striations look like finger marks to you, perhaps from a closed fist?"

"Yes." Sara pressed her lips together. The force of the blows must have been tremendous. The killer was obviously fit, probably a large man, and undoubtedly filled with rage. For all the world had changed, there were still men out there who absolutely despised women.

"Dr. Hanson," Amanda asked, "for the benefit of the tape, what would you estimate is the time of death?"

Pete smiled at the question. "I would guess anywhere between three and five o'clock this morning."

Faith volunteered, "The witness who saw the green van was out jogging around four-thirty. He doesn't know the make or model." She still couldn't look at Sara. "We've put out an APB, but it's probably a dead end."

"Four-thirty this morning certainly works for me," Pete said. "As you all know, time of death is not an exact science."

Amanda huffed, "Just like old times."

"Dr. Linton?" Pete motioned for Sara to join him. "Why don't you take the left side and I'll take the right?"

Sara pulled on a fresh pair of gloves. Will stepped back as she made her way around the table. He was being too quiet. He wouldn't meet her questioning gaze. Sara still felt the need to do something for him, but there was an equally overwhelming pull to do right by the dead woman. Something told her that the latter would aid in the former. This was Will's case, no matter what lies Amanda

had told. He obviously felt some emotional attachment. Sara had never seen anyone look so bereft.

And she understood why Pete wanted to make sure someone he trusted was able to testify. Every inch of the victim's body screamed for justice. Whoever had attacked and murdered Ashleigh Snyder had not just wanted to hurt her. He'd wanted to destroy her.

Sara felt a subtle shift in her brain as she prepared herself for the procedure. Juries had watched enough *CSI* to understand the basic tenets of autopsy, but it was the medical examiner's job to guide them through the science behind each finding. The chain of custody was sacrosanct. All the slide numbers, tissue samples, and trace evidence would be catalogued into the computer. The lot would be sealed with tamper-proof tape that could be opened only inside the GBI lab. Trace evidence and tissue would be profiled for DNA. The DNA would hopefully be matched to a suspect, and the suspect would be arrested based on incontrovertible evidence.

Pete asked Sara, "Shall we begin?"

There were two Mayo trays prepared with identical instruments: wooden probes, tweezers, flexible rulers, vials and slides. Pete's had a magnifying glass, which he held to his eye as he leaned over the body. Instead of starting at the top of the head, he studied the victim's hand. As with the legs and torso, the flesh along the inside of her arm, from her wrist to her armpit, was ripped open in a straight line. It continued in a U to her upper torso, then followed down to her hips.

"You haven't washed her?" Sara asked. The skin looked scrubbed. There was a faint odor of soap.

"No," Pete answered.

"She looks clean," Sara noted for the tape. "The pubic hair is shaved. No stubble on the legs." She used her thumb to press the skin around the eyes. "Eyebrows tweezed into an arch. Fake eyelashes."

Sara concentrated on the scalp. The roots were dark, the remaining strands a choppy yellow and white. "She has blonde hair extensions. They're attached close to the scalp, so they must be new." Sara used the fine-toothed comb as best she could, working around the weave to remove any particles from the hair. The white paper under the girl's head showed dandruff and pieces of asphalt. Sara set the specimens aside for processing.

Next, she examined the hairline, checking for needle punctures and other marks that didn't belong. She used an otoscope to examine the nostrils. "There's some nasal corrosion. The membrane is torn, but not perforated."

"Meth," Pete guessed, which was probable, given the victim's age. He raised his voice. Either the Dictaphone was old or he wasn't used to using it. "The fingernails are professionally manicured. The nails are painted a bright red." He suggested to Sara, "Dr. Linton, perhaps you can check your side?"

Sara picked up the woman's hand. The body was in the early throes of rigor mortis. "Same on this hand. Manicured. Same polish." She didn't know why Pete was drawing such close attention to the fingernails. You couldn't throw a rock in Atlanta without hitting a nail salon.

He said, "The pedicure color is different."

Sara looked at the girl's toes. The nails were painted black.

Pete asked, "Is it normal for the toes to be different from the nails?"

Sara shrugged, as did Faith and Amanda.

"Well," Pete said, but the opening refrain from "Brick House" cut him off.

"Sorry." Leo Donnelly took his phone out of his pocket. He read the caller ID.

"It's the patrolman I sent to the airport. Daddy Snyder's probably outside." He answered the phone as he walked out the door. "Donnelly."

The room was quiet except for the hum of the motor on top of the walk-in refrigerator. Sara tried to get Will's attention, but he just stared at the floor.

"Jesus Christ." Faith wasn't cursing Donnelly—she was looking at the victim's face. "What the hell did he do to her?"

There was a click as Pete's foot tapped off the Dictaphone. He spoke to Sara, as if she'd been the one to ask the question. "Her eyes and mouth were sewn shut." Pete had to use both hands to hold open one of the torn eyelids. They were shredded in thick strips like the plastic curtain inside a butcher's freezer. "You can see where the thread ripped through the skin."

Sara asked, "How do you know this?"

Pete didn't answer the question. "These lines along her torso, inside her arms and legs—a thicker thread was used to keep her from moving. I imagine an upholstery needle was used, probably a waxed thread or maybe a silk-blend yarn. We'll probably find plenty of fibers to analyze."

Pete handed Sara the magnifying glass. She studied the lacerations. As with the victim's eyes and mouth, the skin was ripped apart, flesh hanging down in even intervals. She could see the red dots where the thread had gone in. Not once. Not a few times. The circles were like the holes in Sara's earlobes where she'd gotten her ears pierced when she was a child.

Amanda said, "She must've ripped herself away from the mattress, or whatever she was sewn to, when he started beating her."

Pete expounded on the hypothesis. "It would be an uncontrollable response. He punches her in the stomach, she curls up into a ball. Mouth opens. Eyes open. And then he punches her again and again."

Sara shook her head. He was jumping to some pretty quick conclusions. "What am I missing?"

Pete tucked his hands into the empty pockets of his lab coat, silently watching Sara with the same careful intensity he used when he was teaching a new procedure.

Amanda supplied, "This isn't our killer's first victim."

Sara still didn't understand. She asked Pete, "How do you know?"

Will cleared his throat. Sara had almost forgotten he was in the room.

He said, "Because the same thing was done to my mother."

June 15, 1975

LUCY BENNETT

Father's Day. It was all over the radio. Richway was having a special sale. Davis Brothers was offering an all-you-can-eat buffet. The disc jockeys were talking about their favorite gifts from years past. Shirts. Ties. Golf clubs.

Lucy's dad was easy to buy for. They always got him a bottle of scotch. Then two weeks would pass and if there was anything left in the bottle, they'd all get a drink on the Fourth of July while they watched the fireworks explode over Lake Spivey.

Lucy's dad.

She didn't want to think about him. About anyone she used to know.

Patty Hearst was suddenly in the news again. Her trial was still a year off, but her defense had decided to leak details about the kidnapping. Lucy already knew what went down with that crazy chick. It happened back when Lucy was on the street. There was no one else to talk about it with back then. Except for Kitty, none of the girls even knew Hearst's name. Or maybe Kitty was lying. She was good at lying, pretending she knew things when all it was in the end was an excuse to lure you in so she could stab you in the back like a sneaky little bitch.

After Hearst, there was a reporter with the *Atlanta Constitution* who'd been kidnapped. They demanded a million bucks for his release. They claimed to be from the SLA, too. What they were was idiots. They got snatched up by the cops. They didn't spend a dime of that money.

A million dollars. What would Lucy do with that kind of dough?

The only bank in town who'd had the ransom cash on hand was C&S. Mills Lane was the bank president. His picture was in the paper a lot. He was the same guy who helped the mayor build the stadium. Not the black mayor, but the one who ran against Lester Maddox.

Lucy felt the gurgle of laughter in her throat.

The Pickrick. Maddox's restaurant on West Peachtree. He kept axes on the wall. Rumor was he'd smash one through the head of any nigger who dared walk through the front door.

Lucy tried to imagine Juice going through the front door. An ax in his head. Brains splattered everywhere.

Washington-Rawson. The slum they'd torn down to build the Atlanta Stadium. Lucy's dad told her the story. They were there for a baseball game. The Braves. Chief Noc-a-Homa with his crazy big face running around with an ax he could've stolen from Lester Maddox. Lucy's dad said the stadium was supposed to

revitalize the area. There were almost a million and a half residents in the city limits, most of them living on government vouchers. If Atlanta couldn't strong-arm the nigras out of the city, then they'd just pave over them.

The SLA paved over Patty Hearst. They were a cult. They brainwashed her. Or so said a doctor on the radio. The shrink was a woman, so Lucy took her opinion with a grain of salt, but she claimed that it only took two weeks for a person to become brainwashed.

Two weeks.

Lucy had lasted at least two months. Even after the H had worn off. Even after she had stopped longing for the high. Even after she had learned not to move, not to breathe too deep or too long. Even after she had stopped caring that she had sores on her back and legs from laying for so long in her own piss and shit.

She'd glowed with hate whenever he came into the room. She'd flinched when he touched her. She'd made sounds in her throat, used words that even without moving her mouth, she knew he could understand.

Satan.

Devil.

I'll kill you dead.

Motherfucker.

And then suddenly, he'd stopped coming. It had to be only a few days. You couldn't live without water for more than two, three days, tops. So maybe he'd been gone three days. Maybe when he'd come through the door, she'd been crying. Maybe when he brushed back her hair, she didn't flinch. Maybe when he washed her, she didn't tense up. And maybe when he finally got on top of her, finally did the things that Lucy had expected him to do from day one, she'd felt herself responding.

And then maybe when he left again, she sobbed for him. Longed for him. Begged for him. Missed him.

Just like she'd done with Bobby, her first love. Just like she'd done with Fred, the guy who cleaned planes at the airport. Then Chuck, who managed the apartment complex. Then countless others who had raped her, beat her, fucked her, left her on the side of the road for dead.

Stockholm syndrome.

That's what the woman doctor on CBS Radio called it. Walter Cronkite introduced her as a noted authority. She worked with victims of cults and mind-control experiments. She seemed to know what she was talking about, but maybe she was just making excuses, because what she was saying didn't entirely track.

At least not to Lucy.

Not to the girl who slept in her own excrement. Not to the girl who couldn't move her arms or legs. Not to the girl who couldn't open her mouth unless it was cut open for her. Couldn't blink without the razor sharp edge of his pocketknife slicing through the tiny stitches of thread.

The second Lucy saw an opening, the minute she saw even the sliver of a chance, she would escape. She would run to her freedom. She would crawl on her hands and knees back home. She would find her parents. She would find Henry. She would go to the cops. She would rip her body from this mattress and find a way to get home.

Patty Hearst was a stupid bitch. She was in a closet, but no one held her down. She had a chance. She had ample opportunity. She'd stood with a rifle in that bank, yelling SLA bullshit, when she could've just run out the door and asked for help.

If Lucy had a rifle, she'd use it to shoot the man in the head. She'd pound in his skull with the stock. She'd rape him with the long barrel. She'd laugh when the blood poured from his mouth and his eyeballs popped out.

And then she'd find that woman doctor from the radio and tell her that she was dead wrong. Patty Hearst wasn't helpless. She could've gotten away. She could've bolted at any time.

But then the doctor might point out that Lucy had something Patty Hearst did not.

Lucy wasn't alone anymore. She didn't need Bobby or Fred or Juice or her father or even Henry ever again. She no longer marked time by the feel of warm sunlight rising or falling across her face or the seasonal change in temperature. She marked her passage not in days, but in weeks and months and the cresting swell of her belly.

It would happen any day now.

Lucy was going to have a baby.

July 14, 1975

MONDAY

Captain Bubba Keller was one of Duke's poker buddies, which meant that he likely had his white robe pressed at the dry cleaner where Deena Coolidge's mother had died. Keller's wife would be the one dropping off his laundry. He probably had no idea who cleaned it.

Amanda had never given much thought to her father's Klan affiliation. The Klan still controlled the Atlanta Police Department when men like Duke Wagner and Bubba Keller joined. Membership was compulsory, the same as paying dues to the Fraternal Order of Police. Neither man had likely objected. They were both of German descent. They had both joined the Navy in hopes of being sent to the Pacific rather than having to fight in the European theater. They both wore their hair in tight military cuts. Their pants were always creased. Their ties were always straight. They took charge of things. They opened doors for ladies. They protected the innocent. They punished the guilty. They understood right and wrong.

That is to say, they were right and everyone else was wrong.

Back in the late sixties, Police Chief Herbert Jenkins had drummed the Klan out of the force, but most of the men with whom Duke played poker still honored the former affiliation. As far as Amanda could tell, membership consisted solely of sitting around and grouching about how much things had changed for the worse. All they could talk about was the good old days—how much better things had been before the coloreds ruined everything.

What they didn't acknowledge was that the things that made it bad for them made it better for everyone else. Over the last few days, Amanda had found herself thinking that injustice was never more tragic than when you found it knocking at your own door.

She tried to keep this in perspective as she walked into the Atlanta Jail. Captain Bubba Keller took pride in his post, though the Decatur Street building was despicable, worse than anything you'd find in Attica. Bats hung from the ceiling. The roof had gaping holes. The concrete floor was crumbling. During the winter, prisoners were allowed to sleep in the hallways rather than risk freezing to death inside their cells. Last year, a man had been rushed to Grady after being attacked by a rat. The creature chewed off most of his nose before the guards managed to beat it off with a broom.

The most surprising part of that story was not that there was a broom at the jail, but that a guard had noticed something was amiss. Security was lax. Most of

the men were already inebriated when they showed up for work. Escapes were routine, a problem compounded by the fact that the secretarial pool was adjacent to the cells. Amanda had heard horror stories from some of the typists about rapists and murderers running past their desks on their way out the front doors.

“Ma’am,” a patrolman said, tipping his hat to Amanda as she walked up the stairs. He took a deep breath of fresh air as he headed toward the street. Amanda imagined she’d do the same thing when she left this nasty place. The smell was almost as bad as the projects.

She smiled at Larry Pearse, who ran the property room from behind a caged door. He gave her a wink as he sipped from his flask. Amanda waited until she was on the stairs to look at her watch. It wasn’t yet ten in the morning. Half the jail was probably lit.

The whir of Selectrics got louder as Amanda headed toward the typing pool. This had been her dream job, but now she couldn’t imagine sitting behind a desk all day. Nor could she imagine working for Bubba Keller. He was lecherous and bombastic, two things he didn’t bother to hide from Amanda, despite being close friends with Duke.

She often wondered what would happen if she told her father that Keller had grabbed her breast on more than one occasion, or about the time he’d pushed her up against the wall and whispered filthy things in her ear. Amanda wanted to think that Duke would be angry. That he would end the friendship. That he would pop Keller in the nose. The possibility that he might not do any of these things was likely what kept her from telling him.

True to form, she could hear Keller’s raised voice over the hum of typewriters. His office faced the typing pool, which was large and open. Sixty women sat behind rows of desks, diligently typing, pretending that they couldn’t hear what was going on a few yards away. Holly Scott, Keller’s secretary, stood in his open doorway. She was wise not to go in. Keller’s face was bright red. He waved his arms in the air, then swooped down his hand and pushed all the papers onto the floor.

“You goddamn do that!” he yelled. Holly mumbled something back, and he picked up his telephone and threw it against the wall. The plaster cracked, sending down a rain of white powder. “Clean up this mess!” Keller ordered, grabbing his hat and stomping out of his office. He stopped when he saw Amanda. “What the hell are you doing here?”

The lie came without much thought. “Butch Bonnie asked me to check—”

“I don’t care,” he interrupted. “Just don’t be here when I get back.”

Amanda watched him push his way toward the exit. He was the very definition of a bull in a china shop. Desks were shoved out of the way. Stacks of paper were knocked onto the floor. There were sixty women seated at sixty desks, working on sixty typewriters and trying their darndest not to be singled out.

And then finally, there was an audible, collective sigh of relief as Keller left the room. The typewriters were momentarily silenced. Someone screamed back in the cells.

Holly said, “Good night, Irene.”

Titters of laughter went around the room. The typewriters whirled back into

motion. Holly waved Amanda back into Keller's office.

"Goodness," Amanda said. "What was that about?"

Holly bent over, picking up a broken bottle of Old Grand-Dad bourbon. "I just lost it."

Amanda knelt down to help her pick up the scattered papers. "Lost it how?"

"We're all trying to get Reggie's new handbook typed for the printer." Holly tossed the broken glass into the trashcan. "We're on deadline. The brass is breathing down our necks. Breathing down Keller's."

"And?"

"And so Keller thinks that's the perfect time to call me into his office and tell me to show him my tits."

Amanda sighed. She was familiar with the request. It was usually followed by a disturbing laugh and a groping hand. "And?"

"And, I told him I was going to file a complaint against him."

Amanda picked up the telephone. The plastic was cracked, but it still had a dial tone. "Would you really do it?"

"Probably not," Holly admitted. "My husband told me if he does it again, to just get my purse and leave."

"Why don't you?"

"Because that asshole's one more tantrum away from a heart attack. I'm going to outlive him if it kills me." She scooped up the last of the papers. There was a smile on her face. "What're you doing here, anyway?"

"I need to talk to an inmate."

"White or black?"

"Black."

"Good. There's an awful case of lice being passed around." Everyone knew the coloreds didn't get lice. "Keller's going to have to set off a can of DDT back there. It's the third time this year. The smell is just awful." Holly took a pen off the desk and held it over a sheet of paper. "Who's the girl?"

Amanda felt a thickness in her throat. "Male."

Holly dropped the pen. "You want to go back there and talk to a black man?"

"Dwayne Mathison."

"My God, Mandy. Are you crazy? He killed a white woman. He already confessed."

"I just need a few minutes."

"No." She vehemently shook her head. "Keller would have my scalp. And rightfully so. I've never heard anything so crazy. Why on earth would you want to talk to him?"

Not for the first time, Amanda realized that she would be better served to plan out her explanations in advance. "It's for one of my cases."

"What case?" Holly sat down at the desk to organize the papers. There were two more bottles of bourbon on the blotter, one of them almost empty. The cut-crystal glass between them showed a permanent ring from Keller's constantly replenishing his drink throughout the day. Crude renderings of a penis and a pair of breasts were carved into the soft wood of the desk.

Holly looked up at her. "What is it?"

Amanda pulled around another chair, just as Trey Callahan had this morning at the Union Mission. She sat across from Holly. Their knees were almost

touching. "There are some missing girls."

Holly stopped collating. "You think the pimp killed them, too?"

Amanda didn't outright lie. "Maybe."

"You should tell Butch and Rick. It's their case. And you know they're going to hear about this." She put one hand on her heart and held up the other, as if swearing allegiance. "They won't hear about it from me or my girls, but you know it'll get around."

"I know." There was nothing more prevalent in any police force than gossip. "But I want to do it."

"Mandy." Holly shook her head, as if she couldn't understand what had happened to her friend. "Why are you inviting trouble?"

Amanda stared at her. Holly Scott had a dancer's lean body. She ironed her long red hair straight. Her makeup was expertly applied. Her skin was perfect. Even in this miserable heat, she could be photographed for a magazine ad. That she took near-perfect dictation and could type 110 words a minute were probably factors Keller had not even considered when he'd hired her.

Amanda reached back and closed the door. The typewriters were just as loud, but it engendered a feeling of confidentiality.

She told Holly, "Rick Landry threatened me." She didn't feel right bringing Evelyn's name into this, but Amanda was telling the truth when she said, "He called me a slit in front of my boss. He cursed at me. He told me I should stay the ... the F away from his case."

Holly's lips pressed together in a straight line. "Aren't you going to listen to him?"

"No," Amanda said. "I'm not. I'm tired of listening to them. I'm tired of being scared of them and doing all their bidding when I know better than they do."

The words were said quietly, but there was an air of revolution about them.

Holly nervously glanced over Amanda's shoulder. She was afraid of being heard. She was afraid of being any part of this. Still, she asked, "Have you ever been into men's holding?"

"No."

"It's awful down there. Worse than the women's side."

"I assumed it would be."

"Rats. Feces. Blood."

"Don't oversell it."

"Keller will be furious."

Amanda forced up her shoulders in a shrug. "Maybe this will give him that heart attack you've been waiting for."

Holly stared at her for a good long while. Her blue eyes glistened with tears that did not fall. She was visibly afraid. Amanda knew she had a kid and a husband who worked two jobs so they could live in the suburbs. Holly went to school at night. She helped out at church on Sundays. She volunteered at the library. And she came here five days a week and put up with Keller's advances and innuendo because the city was the only employer around that followed the federal law mandating women be paid the same salary as men.

And yet, Holly held Amanda's gaze as she reached over for the phone on Keller's desk. Her finger found the dial. There was a slight tremor in her hand. She didn't have to look down as she dragged the rotary back and forth. Holly

put through calls for Keller all day long. She was silent as she waited for the line to engage. "Martha," she said. "This is Holly up in Keller's office. I need you to have a prisoner transferred to holding for me."

Amanda watched her carefully as Holly relayed Dwayne Mathison's information. She had to shuffle through the papers from Keller's desk to get his arrest record, which had his booking number. Her hands steadied as they performed the familiar task. Her nails were short and clear-coated, like Amanda's. Her skin was almost as white as Jane Delray's, though of course absent any track marks. Amanda could see the thin blue lines of the veins in the back of the other woman's hand.

She looked down at her own hands, which were clasped in her lap. Her nails were neatly trimmed, though she hadn't bothered with polish the night before. The skin along the side of her palm was scratched. Amanda didn't remember injuring herself. Maybe she'd scraped off the skin while she was cleaning her father's house. There was a piece of metal sticking out of the refrigerator that always caught her hand when she cleaned it out.

Holly put down the phone. "He's being transferred. It'll be about ten minutes." She paused. "I can call them back, you know. You don't have to go through with this."

Amanda had other things on her mind. "Can I use the phone while I wait?"

"Sure." Holly groaned as she hefted the phone around. "I'll be outside. I'll let you know when they're ready."

Amanda found her address book in her purse. She should be scared about coming face-to-face with Juice again, but looking at her scratched hand had put a question in her mind.

She kept an index card in the back of her address book that listed the numbers she used on a daily basis. Butch was constantly leaving out details in his notes. Amanda had to call the morgue at least once a week. She usually talked to the woman who handled the filing, but today she asked for Pete Hanson.

The phone was picked up on the third ring. "Coolidge."

Amanda considered hanging up, but then she had a flash of paranoia, as if Deena Coolidge could somehow see her. The jail was only a few buildings down from the morgue. Amanda glanced around nervously.

Deena said, "Hell-o?"

"It's Amanda Wagner."

The woman let some time pass. "Uh-huh."

Amanda looked out into the typing pool. All the women were hard at work, backs straight, heads slightly tilted, as they typed the pages of a handbook that would more than likely be used as toilet paper by half the force and target practice by the other. "I had a question for Dr. Hanson," Amanda said. "If he's around?"

"He's in court all day testifying on a case." Deena seemed to lose some of her wariness. "May I help you with something?"

Amanda closed her eyes. This would be so much easier with Pete. "I had a question about the piece of skin found under the victim's fingernail." Amanda looked down at the scratch on her palm. "I was wondering—" She couldn't do this. Maybe she would wait for Pete. He would probably be back in the office tomorrow. Jane Delray wouldn't be any more dead by then.

Deena said, "Come on, girl. Don't waste my time. Spit it out."
"Pete found something under the girl's fingernail on Saturday."
"Right. Skin tissue. She must've scratched her assailant."
"Did you analyze it yet?"
"Not yet. Why?"

Amanda shook her head, wishing she could just melt into the chair. It was probably best to just blurt it out. "If the attacker was Negro, wouldn't the skin under the girl's fingernail be black?"

"Hm." Deena was quiet for a few seconds. "Well, you know, Pete's got this special light. You shine it on the skin sample and it glows this kind of orange if it's from a Negro."

"Really?" Amanda had never heard of such a thing. "Did he test the skin yet? Because I think—"

At first, she thought Deena was crying. Then Amanda realized the woman was laughing so hard that she had started gulping for air.

"Oh, very funny," Amanda said. "I'm hanging up now."

"No, wait—" Deena was still laughing, though she was obviously trying to get it under control. "Wait. Don't hang up." She kept laughing. Amanda looked down at Keller's desk. Cigarette butts spilled out of the ashtray. His coffee cup was rimmed in an orange nicotine stain. "Okay," Deena said. "All right." And then she started laughing again.

"I'm really hanging up now."

"No, wait." She coughed a few times. "I'm good now. I'm good."

"I was asking a sincere question."

"I know you were, honey. I know." She coughed again. "Listen, you know that Pure and Simple lotion ad, shows the different layers of skin?"

Amanda couldn't tell whether or not she was setting up another joke.

"I'm serious, girl. Listen to me."

"Okay, I know the ad."

"The skin basically has three layers. All right?"

"All right."

"Usually, when you scratch someone, you get the upper dermis, which is white no matter who you are. In order to get the pigmented layer of skin, the black part, you'd have to scratch to the subcutis, which means the fingernail would have to go deep enough to cause some serious bleeding. And it wouldn't be a sliver of skin you'd have to scrape out from under the fingernail. It'd be a chunk."

Amanda detected Pete's patient teaching tone in the woman's words. "So, there's no way to tell if the girl from Friday scratched a black assailant or a white one?"

Deena was quiet again, though this time, she wasn't laughing. "You're talking about that pimp they arrested for killing that white girl, aren't you?"

Amanda saw a guard standing by Holly's desk. He was gangly, with an untrimmed mustache and dark hair. Holly waved Amanda over. Juice was ready.

"Amanda?" Deena asked. "I'm not playing now. You best think about what you're doing."

"I assumed you'd be eager to help one of your own kind."

"That murdering bastard ain't got nothing to do with me." She lowered her voice. "I'm eager to keep my head attached to my shoulders, is what I am."

"Well, thank you for answering my question."

"Wait."

Holly's waving took on an urgency. She was probably afraid Keller would return. Amanda held up her finger, indicating she needed a minute. "What is it?"

"Be careful. The same people protecting you right now are gonna be the same ones coming after you when they find out what you're doing."

There was a long silence after that. Both of them reflected on the words.

"Thank you." Amanda tried not to read anything into Deena's gruff goodbye. She hung up the phone. Her heart was thumping in her chest. The woman was right. Duke would be furious if he knew what Amanda was doing. So would Keller. So would Butch and Landry and possibly Hodge. Add the whole department to that if they found out she was trying to help a black man get out of jail. A black man who'd already confessed to murder.

Holly came to the doorway. "Hurry up, Mandy. Phillip's going to take you down and stay with you." She lowered her voice. "He's not so bad."

Amanda felt the urge to flee. Her bravado was going up and down like a piston engine. "I'm ready."

She stood from the desk. She forced a smile onto her face as Phillip came into the office. He was wearing the dark blue uniform of the prison guards, a set of keys hanging from one side of his belt and a nightstick dangling from the other.

He was younger than Amanda, but he talked to her as if she was a child. "You sure you wanna be doing this, gal?"

Amanda swallowed past the lump in her throat. She wished that Evelyn were there to give her strength. Then she felt guilty, because Evelyn had been taking the brunt of the anger lately—not just from Rick Landry, but from Butch and whoever had transferred her into Model City.

Maybe Evelyn was right. Maybe people were careful with Amanda because they were afraid of Duke. Instead of being afraid of him herself, Amanda should be taking advantage of it. At least for as long as she could.

"I'm not sure we've met." Amanda walked toward the man, hand extended. "I'm Amanda Wagner. Duke's daughter."

His eyes shifted to Holly, then to Amanda as he shook her hand. "Yeah, I know Duke."

"He's friends with Bubba." Amanda never called Keller by his first name, but the guard needn't know that. She took her purse out of the chair and dug around for the new pen and spiral-bound notebook she'd brought from home. She handed her bag to Holly. "Mind holding on to this for me?"

Holly stared wide-eyed as Amanda walked out of the office. She forced herself to keep a steady pace as she passed through the typing pool. The constant spinning and pecking of the Selectric balls seemed to match the erratic beats of her heart, but Amanda forced herself to keep walking. Going into the men's jail was likely the same as going into a swimming pool. You either jumped in and experienced that quick shock of cold or you dragged it out, walking in slowly, your skin prickling with goose bumps, your teeth chattering.

Amanda jumped right in.

She held on to the railing as she walked down the stairs. She didn't wait for

Phillip to open the door. She pushed it with the palm of her hand. The cells. Holly was right. The men's side was far worse than the women's. Large cracks split the walls. Pigeons cooed from the rafters; their droppings littered the concrete floor. She stepped over a passed-out wino leaning against the wall. She ignored the catcalls and the stares. She kept her posture straight, her eyes ahead, until Phillip spoke.

"It's on the left."

Amanda stopped in front of a door. Someone had used a knife to carve INTERROGATION into the thick lead paint. There was a square window at eye level, though the glass was nearly opaque with grime.

Phillip took out a set of keys and searched for the right one. He swayed slightly, obviously from drink. Finally, he found the correct key. He slid it into the lock and pushed open the door. Amanda turned around, preventing him from going in.

She said, "I've got it from here."

He laughed, then saw she was serious. "Are you nuts?"

"I'll call you if I need you."

"That ain't gonna be enough time." He indicated the door. "This thing locks when you close it. I can leave it cracked so—"

"Thank you." She pulled one of Rick Landry's moves, closing the space between them, forcing him back without having to touch him. The last thing she saw of Phillip was the shocked expression on his face when she closed the door.

The clicking of the latch echoed in the room. She caught a glimpse of the guard's blue hat, just the rim, in the window, but nothing else.

And then she turned around.

Dwayne Mathison was sitting at the table. A bloody white bandage was wrapped around his head. One of his eyes was swollen shut. His nose was broken. He had pulled back his chair several feet, so it was almost touching the wall. Amanda recognized his clothes as the same he'd had on last week, though they were stained with blood and dirt now. His legs were wide apart. His arm hung over the back of the chair, fingers nearly touching the floor. She could see the Jesus tattoo on his chest. The mole on his cheek. The hate in his eyes.

"Whatchu doin' here, bitch?"

It was a good question. Amanda had never before interviewed a suspect in a proper interrogation room. She was usually in the suspect's home. His parents were in the room, sometimes a lawyer. The boys were always contrite, terrified to be talking to a police officer, though relieved it was just a woman. Their fathers assured Amanda that it would never happen again. Their mothers revealed salacious details about the girl who'd made the allegations. Generally, it was over in less than an hour and the boy was left to get on with his life.

So what was she doing here?

Amanda hugged her notebook to her chest, then regretted the move. Juice would think she was covering her breasts. He would think she was scared. Both of which were true, but she couldn't let him know that. She dropped her arms as she walked to the table. The room was small. It was just a few steps. She dragged back the empty chair and sat down. Juice was watching her the way an animal studies prey. Amanda pulled the chair closer to the table, though every muscle in her body was tingling with the desire to flee.

In seconds, he could lurch across the table and snap her neck. He could punch her. Beat her. Try to rape her again. Amanda had always worried that if something bad happened—a man broke into her apartment in the middle of the night, an attacker cornered her in an alley—she would not be able to scream. She hadn't screamed before when Juice had threatened her. Could she scream now if he lunged for her? Would Phillip even hear her? If he did, would he be able to find his keys in time to stop the worst of it?

Amanda couldn't generate enough saliva in her mouth to swallow. She opened her notebook. "Mr. Mathison, I understand that you've confessed to the murder of Lucy Bennett?"

He didn't answer.

Water dripped from a hole in the ceiling. The drops had puddled on the floor. There was a dead rat in the corner, its neck broken by a trap. Cobwebs filled the corners. The air stank of sweat mixed with the distinctive ammonia smell of dried urine.

She said, "Mr. Math—"

"Mm-mm." Juice slowly licked his tongue along his top lip. "You still a fine-lookin' woman." He made a tscking noise. "Shoulda took you when I had the chance."

Incongruously, Amanda felt a smile wanting to come to her lips. She could hear Evelyn's voice, the way she'd mimicked Juice when they were at the Varsity.

Her tone was surprisingly strong when she said, "Well, you lost your chance." Amanda clicked her pen so she could take notes. "What happened to Jane Delray?"

He made a noise somewhere between a grunt and a groan. "Why you askin' after that bitch?"

"I want to know where she is."

He held his hand up above his head and whistled like a dive-bombing airplane as he dropped it to the table.

Amanda looked at his hand. Two of his fingers were taped together with surgical tape. There were no scratches on his hands, his bare arms. "You confessed to killing Lucy Bennett."

"I confessed to keepin' my black ass outta the 'lectric chair."

"The death penalty is no longer legal."

"They say they gone bring it back for me."

Given the circumstances, Amanda didn't doubt that the state would try. Everyone knew it was only a matter of time before Old Sparky was powered back up again.

She said, "We both know you didn't kill that woman."

"Wished I woulda."

"Why didn't you?"

"Why you here, bitch? Why you care what happen to a nigger?"

"I don't, actually." Amanda was startled by the truth of her own words. "I care about the girls."

" 'Cause they white."

"No." Again, she told him the truth. "Because they're girls. Because no one else cares about them."

He looked at her. Amanda hadn't realized until that moment that Juice had been avoiding her eyes. She stared back at him, wondering if she was the first woman who'd had the courage to do so. He must have a mother somewhere. A sister. He couldn't rape and whore out every woman he met.

Juice tapped his hand on the table. Amanda didn't look away, but Juice did. "You're like her."

"Like who?"

"Lucy." He kept tapping his fingers on the tabletop. "She strong. Too strong. I break her down. But she always get back up."

"Was Kitty like that, too?"

"Kitty." He snorted. "That bitch near about broke *me*, you hear what I'm sayin'? Had to beat her down and keep her down." He pointed at Amanda. "You run them gals long enough, you see the strongest one's the one what's gonna be most loyal. All's you gotta do is find you way in."

"I'll keep that in mind if I ever decide to trick out women."

He put his palms flat on the table and leaned toward her. "I trick you out, bitch. Gimme five minutes with that fine white ass." He started thrusting his hips, banging against the table. "Dig my hands in that juicy white meat. Stick it in ya till ya cryin'." He banged harder against the table, punctuating each thrust with a deep moan. It was a guttural sound that made her note the dark bruises on his throat.

She asked, "Would you choke me?"

"I choke you, bitch." He pushed one last time against the table. "I choke you till you come so hard you pass out."

"Do you like being choked?"

"Shit." He crossed his arms over his chest. His biceps were huge. "Ain't nobody chokin' this brother."

Amanda remembered something Pete had said in the morgue. "Did you urinate on yourself?"

"I ain't piss myself." He tilted up his chin defensively. "Who told you that?"

Amanda felt a smug smile on her lips. "You just did."

He stared at the wall.

"The apartment at Techwood. That's Kitty's, isn't it?"

He didn't answer.

"I can stay here all day," she told him, and in that moment, Amanda could see herself doing just that. Bubba Keller would have to drag her from this room. She would sit here staring down this disgusting pimp for as long as it took. "The apartment at Techwood belonged to Kitty, did it not?"

Juice seemed to understand her resolve. "That's all'a them girls'. She charge it out. Tryin' to pimp 'em space. I put a stop to that."

Amanda couldn't imagine another woman charging rent to whores, but in the last few days, her worldview had expanded considerably. "Tell me about Hank Bennett."

"What he tell you?"

"You tell me about him."

"Fool came onto *my* corner trying to order *me* around." His fist was clenched when he banged it on the table. "Man need to step back."

"When was this?"

"I don't know, bitch. I ain't keep a calendar."

Amanda made a slash mark on the paper. If she had a dollar for every time a man had called her "bitch" lately, she could retire. "Did Hank Bennett see you before or after Lucy disappeared?"

His tongue darted out as he thought it over. "Before. Yeah, before. Bitch up and gone a week, two week later. I figure he took her. Lucy talk about him all the time."

Amanda's dictation was rusty, but it came back to her as she scribbled notes across the page. "So, Hank Bennett approached you before Lucy disappeared?" Another lie they'd caught the lawyer in. "What did he want?"

"Wanted to tell me my bidness. Brother better be glad I didn't beat down his skinny white ass."

"What business?"

"Told me cut Kitty loose. Said he'd pass me some bills if I stop givin' her the Boy."

Amanda was sure she'd heard wrong. "Kitty? You mean Lucy."

"Naw, bitch. It was Kitty he wanted to talk about. Dude had a hard-on for her."

"Why would Hank Bennett care about Kitty?"

He shrugged his shoulders, but still answered, "Her daddy some big-time lawyer. Disowned the bitch when he found out she was sippin' some Juice." He gave her a lurid grin, making sure she got his meaning. "She got another sister somewhere. She the good one. Kitty always been bad."

"Kitty's father is Andrew Treadwell."

He nodded. "You finally gettin' it, bitch. Ain't the mayor tell you this already?"

Amanda flipped back through her notes. "Hank Bennett offered you money to stop giving Kitty heroin."

"Why you keep repeatin' everything I say?"

"Because it doesn't make sense," Amanda admitted. "Hank Bennett comes to you about Kitty. He doesn't ask about his sister? Ask to see her?" Juice shook his head. "He's not worried about Lucy?" Again, Juice shook his head. "And, a week later, Lucy disappeared?"

"Yeah, an' about a week after—" He snapped his fingers. "Kitty gone."

Amanda remembered Jane's words. "Just disappeared."

"Thass right."

"What about Mary?"

He snorted. "Bitch gone, too. 'Bout two, three months later. Ain't been a while since I lose that many girls at a go. Usually some other pimp tryin' to poach me off."

"You had three girls disappear in as many months." Amanda wasn't asking him a question. She was trying to get her head around what had happened. "Did you ever see Lucy with a letter from her brother?"

He gave a curt nod. "Had it in her purse."

"Can you read?"

"Bitch, I ain't ignert."

Amanda waited.

"Some bullshit 'bout how he missed her when I knowed that ain't the truth.

Said he wanted to meet with her.” Juice thumped the table with his fingers. “Shee-it, brother wanna see her, he coulda spent five mo’ minutes on my corner. I tole him she be right there.”

Amanda scribbled down his words as she tried to think through her next question. “Was there anyone hanging around who was ...” “Scary” wasn’t the right word for a man like Juice. “Who wasn’t right? Someone who was dangerous or violent? Someone you wouldn’t trust with your girls?”

“Bitch, I charge extry for that.” He smiled. One of his front teeth was missing. The gum was raw. “They some weird motherfuckers out there.” He cleared his throat. “ ’Scuse me.”

Amanda nodded at the apology. “What weird people?”

“They’s a dude likes to fist ’em.” He pumped his fist in the air. Amanda guessed he meant punching the girls. “They’s one use a knife, but he all right. He never stick nobody. Least not with the blade.”

“Anyone else?”

“They’s that tall dude runs the soup kitchen.”

“I’ve heard about him.”

“He real tight with the dude at the mission.”

So, Trey Callahan had lied to them, too.

“Dude always comin’ ’round at night, trying to preach to my gals.”

“The man from the soup kitchen?” Juice nodded. “Were the girls ever afraid of him?”

“Shit. They ain’t afraid’a nothin’ when I’m around. That’s my job, bitch.”

She made yet another slash on the paper. “This man from the church came at night to your street corner and tried to preach to Lucy and Kitty and—”

“Nah, they gone by then. Mary, too.” He sat up in his chair. “Lookit, that salvation shit okay during the day, but don’t come shootin’ off ’bout Jesus while I’m tryin’ to do my bidness. You feel me?”

“I do.” Amanda leaned forward. “Tell me who killed Jane Delray.”

“You get me outta here?”

Amanda was getting good at this game, but she wasn’t quite there yet. Juice obviously read her expression.

“Shit.” He slumped back in his chair. “You cain’t do nothin’, bitch.”

“If I could find someone from City Hall to talk to you, could you tell him who killed Jane?”

“Another slit?”

“No, a man. Someone in charge.” Amanda didn’t know anyone downtown except for a bunch of secretaries. Still, she kept her shoulders straight, put some threat into her tone. “But you have to tell him something meaningful. You have to give him a name that can be followed up on. Otherwise, that deal you made with Butch and Landry goes out the window. I promise you, the state *will* bring back the death penalty. By the time it goes to the Supreme Court, you’ll be dead.”

There was a tapping sound. His leg had started moving up and down. The heel of his patent leather shoe clicked against the concrete. “I gotta deal. Done made my confession.”

“That doesn’t matter anymore.”

“Whatchu mean?”

"I mean, you confessed to killing Lucy Bennett, not Jane Delray. Once I tell them about the mistake—" She shrugged. "I hope they remember to shave your head before they strap that metal cap on."

He was nervous. His breath whistled through his broken nose. "Whatchu mean, bitch?"

"You hear about the last guy they executed? His hair caught on fire. The switch was too hot. They couldn't turn it off. He burned alive. Flames went as high as the ceiling. He screamed for two whole minutes before they found the junction box and shut it down."

Juice's throat worked. His leg was shaking so hard that his knee bumped the table.

"Give me a name, Juice. Tell me who killed Jane."

His fist clenched and unclenched. The table trembled.

"Give me a name."

He pounded his fist against the table. "I ain't gotta name!"

Amanda clicked her pen. She closed her notebook. She hadn't flinched. She kept perfectly calm, waiting.

"Got damn." He spoke through clenched teeth. "Got damn them bitches. Gettin' me on the hook for this shit."

"Who would want to kill Jane?"

"Ever'body," he said. "She mouth off all the time. Make enemies on the street."

"Anyone who would murder her?"

"Not without gettin' they throat slit. Bitch kept a knife in her purse. All them do. Girl knew how to use it. Cain't turn your back on her fo' a minute. Bitch mean as a snake."

"That's pretty rich coming from her pimp."

He didn't respond. His shoulders rounded. He gripped his hands in his lap. "What'd that other bitch say? 'Bout Kitty knowin' the mayor? You think he can give a brother a hand? Get me outta this mess?"

"I told you, if you tell me the truth, maybe I can help you."

He stared at her, eyes going back and forth as if he was reading a book.

"Shee-it," he mumbled. "You think they gone lissen to you?" He pushed himself up from the table. Amanda's body tensed, but she stayed seated as he loomed over her. "Look 'round you, bitch." He held out his hands. "They let a black man run this world 'fore they let a slit do."

* * *

Amanda stood at Evelyn's front door with a bottle of wine in her hand. It wasn't the cheap stuff, but she was uncertain whether or not price had anything to do with taste. As with many things, she was out of her element. Especially when Kenny Mitchell opened the door.

A smile spread across his mouth. His teeth were perfect. His face was perfect. There wasn't anything about him she would change. Not that Amanda would be given the chance.

He said, "Amanda. Great to see you again." He leaned toward her, and without thinking, Amanda pulled back.

"Oh," she said, then leaned back in, looking more like a pecking duck than a

grown woman. The moment could've been made more awkward, but Kenny laughed as he put his hand to her face and kissed her cheek. She could feel the rough texture of his skin, the prickly hairs of his mustache. His other hand rested lightly on her arm. A rush of heat went straight through her.

"Come in." He held open the door. Amanda walked into the house, feeling instantly enveloped by the cool air. "It's nice, right?" Kenny took the bottle of wine from her. Every move he made had a certain kind of grace, like an athlete on the field. "Ev's in back putting down the kid. I'm afraid that odor you smell is from me and Bill trying to cook supper. May I bring you a glass of wine?" He looked at the bottle and gave a low whistle. "Classy stuff. Maybe I'll keep it for myself."

"That's fine," Amanda said, not sure which question she was answering. She looked down at the floor, surprised to see that her feet were still there, that she wasn't melting into a bubbling pool of adolescent giddiness. "Whatever you like."

Kenny seemed not to notice, or maybe he was used to women acting so foolishly around him. He pointed down the hallway. "First door on the right."

Amanda felt his eyes on her as she walked down the hallway. Oddly, she thought about Juice, the things he'd said about her bottom. Amanda bit her lip. Why, of all the things the pimp had said, had that particular one stuck in her head? Surely, Kenny wasn't like that. He wasn't craven or crude. Neither was Amanda, which didn't explain the obscene images that were flashing in her mind as she gently knocked on the bedroom door.

Evelyn whispered, "Come in."

Amanda pushed open the door. Evelyn was sitting in a rocking chair. Zeke was in her arms. His head was flopped back. His arm hung down to the side. He was towheaded with pink cheeks and a button nose. It wasn't surprising that Evelyn had such a beautiful baby. Or that his nursery was so playfully decorated. Fluffy white sheep were painted on the light blue walls. His crib was a glossy white. The yellow in the sheets matched the carpet, which in turn matched the glowing nightlight that provided the only illumination in the room.

"You look nice," Evelyn whispered.

"Thank you." Amanda self-consciously patted her hair. She'd washed it four times in an attempt to remove the odors from the jail, then dabbed some Charlie on her wrists and neck for other reasons. "Do you want me to help in the kitchen?"

"No, it's Bill's night." Evelyn groaned as she leveraged herself out of the chair. She cradled Zeke as she carried him to the crib. He flopped onto the mattress like a rag doll. Evelyn pulled up the sheet and tucked it around his narrow shoulders. Her fingers brushed back his hair. She leaned down and kissed his cheek before indicating they should leave.

Instead of heading toward the kitchen, Evelyn took Amanda into the next room. Her dress was a short blue crinoline that rustled as she walked. She turned on the overhead light, revealing an office. Two desks were on opposite walls. Both were very tidy. Amanda guessed the black metal desk belonged to Bill Mitchell. She doubted he was using the elegantly curved white rococo desk with pink glass knobs. Evelyn's spiral notebook was neatly lined up to the edge. A grocery list was beside it. Most remarkably, their earlier project was displayed

on the wall. Evelyn had used thumbtacks to pin up the various pieces of construction paper.

"I thought it would be easier this way." Evelyn rolled Bill's chair over for Amanda. She sat down at her desk and opened the top drawer. "I found these at the Five."

Amanda took the licenses. Lucy Anne Bennett. Kathryn Elizabeth Treadwell. Mary Louise Eitel. Donna Mary Halston. Mary Abigail Ellis.

She studied the photos carefully and set aside two of the Marys, leaving Donna Mary Halston. "This one looks like Kitty and Lucy."

"That's what I thought."

"He has a type." Amanda had never considered such a thing, but of course it made sense. Men always had certain types they were attracted to. Why would murder be any different?

Evelyn said, "They all look so normal. You'd never guess what they were doing."

Amanda stared at the girls' photographs. They did look normal. There was nothing to suggest that they were prostitutes, nothing to indicate they had sunk to the lowest levels of depravity in order to feed an addiction.

Most striking was their similarity. Long blonde hair. Blue eyes. Tall and slim. Lush lips. Expressive eyes. They were not just pretty, but beautiful. "They all list the same address," Amanda noted. "Techwood Homes. I can call back Pam Canale and see if she can trace the apartment to a roll number. I have a feeling it belongs to Kitty, but it wouldn't kill us to be certain." An idea occurred to her. "We could take these license photos to Techwood tomorrow. Like you said, it's ninety percent black there. Three white girls would stick out."

"That's good. You hold on to them." Evelyn grabbed her notebook off the desk, but didn't open it. "I checked all the missing persons files at the rest of the precinct. There was nothing for Lucy or Jane, but I found one for Mary Halston. She has a sister who lives in Virginia who's been looking for her for almost a year."

"We could call her." Amanda tucked the licenses into her purse. "I'm sure she'd talk to us."

"We'll have to do it from here. If we call long-distance from the station, they'll have our hides."

Their hides were already in enough jeopardy. "Did anything else stick out?"

"I checked the DNF." She looked down at the notebook. "None of them seemed to match our case. But all those missing girls, Amanda. At least twenty of them, and no one thought to do anything but shove them in a file at the back of the cabinet." She slowly shook her head. Amanda felt ashamed for having told her about it in the first place.

Evelyn continued, "They're dead, or they've been abducted, or hurt, and no one cares. Or at least no one knows to care. They must have families who are looking for them. But there are hardly any missing persons reports on black women. I guess their families know it doesn't matter. At least not ..." Her voice trailed off as she opened her notebook. "I wrote down their names. I don't know why. I just thought that somebody should. Somebody has to acknowledge that they're gone."

Amanda looked at the long list of women's names. All dead. All tossed into

files that no one ever looked at.

Evelyn let out a long sigh. She put the notebook back on her desk. "How was the jail?"

"Disgusting." Amanda dug around in her purse, though she hardly needed to refer to her notes. "Juice confessed to killing Lucy Bennett, but only to avoid the death penalty."

"Did no one explain to him that we're no longer allowed to execute people?"

"They said they'd bring it back for him."

Evelyn nodded. "I suppose that's a smart move on Juice's part, then."

"If you want to spend the rest of your life in prison." Amanda opened her notebook. "He confirmed Kitty is Andrew Treadwell's daughter."

"Well." She smiled smugly. "Our black sheep theory was correct."

"I wouldn't hold my breath for a commendation," Amanda advised. "Here's the best part: Juice said that Hank Bennett came to see him a week or so before Lucy disappeared."

Evelyn grunted. "God, that man would rather climb a tree and lie than stand on the ground and tell the truth." She took the pen off her desk and stood up to write on the puzzle wall. "Saw sister one week prior to disappearance," she called out, writing down the words under Hank Bennett's name. "What else did Juice say?"

"Hank Bennett told him to cut Kitty off heroin."

"You mean Lucy?"

"No, I mean Kitty."

Evelyn turned around. "Why would Hank Bennett want Juice to cut Kitty off heroin?"

Amanda pulled a Sergeant Hodge. "That's an interesting question."

Evelyn groaned as she looked back at the puzzle. "Maybe Andrew Treadwell sent Hank Bennett to get Kitty cleaned up."

"Maybe."

Amanda could tell she wasn't convinced. "Okay, try this: Trey Callahan at the Union Mission said that Kitty stuck out from the other girls. She was obviously from an upper class. It wouldn't take much poking around to find out who her people were. Maybe Juice tried to blackmail Treadwell, and Treadwell sent Hank Bennett to do his dirty work." She scanned her notes. "Juice said it himself, that Bennett offered him money to get Kitty off the Boy."

Evelyn breathed a heavy sigh. "Bennett went to bribe Juice about Kitty, but then he saw that his sister was there?"

"Juice said that Bennett didn't see Lucy that time, but who knows? They all lie."

"Yes, they do." Evelyn bent down and studied the yellow page with the timeline drawn out. "We need to update this. Call it out to me."

"Thanks for taking the hard part." Amanda flipped through her notes as Evelyn waited. "Okay. The letter for Lucy Bennett comes to the Union Mission. We have both Trey Callahan and Juice confirming that."

Evelyn took out a new piece of blue construction paper, stuck it on the wall, and wrote THE LETTER across the center. "Did Juice know what it said?"

"That he wanted to see his sister. That he missed her. Juice took it for a load of bull."

“Look at me, agreeing with a pimp.”

Amanda continued, “Hank Bennett shows up at the mission a few days later and talks to Trey Callahan. Then, presumably soon after, he goes to Juice on his street corner. He sees Kitty instead. He tells Juice to cut Kitty loose. He doesn’t ask about his sister.” She squinted at her scribbles. “Juice made a point of telling me that he told Bennett to wait around for a few minutes, that Lucy would be right along, but Bennett didn’t wait.”

Evelyn guessed, “So, seeing Kitty put finding Lucy on the back burner for our boy lawyer.”

“Evidently,” Amanda concurred. “Then, two weeks later, Lucy is gone. A week or so after that, Kitty is gone. And then Mary disappeared after that.” Amanda looked up from the notebook. “Three girls gone. But why?”

“Tell me so I can stop writing,” Evelyn shook a cramp out of her hand before she finished the updating. Finally, she stood back and stared at the timeline. They both did. The puzzle was sprawling now, different bits of information floating around without a seeming connection. “I feel like we’re missing something.”

“Okay—” Amanda stood up. Pacing sometimes helped her think. “Let’s think about it this way: Bennett was trying to get in touch with his sister. His father was dead. His mother wanted to see her daughter, to let her know what had happened. So Hank goes to the streets looking for Lucy, only he finds Kitty Treadwell.”

“All right.”

“Bennett said that he sent Lucy the letter in August. He remembered it because he’d just graduated law school and his father was recently deceased. Later, he told us that he was a first-year associate at Treadwell-Price.”

“Oh-h-h.” Evelyn drew out the word. She picked up her pen and wrote down the approximate dates. “Bennett sees Kitty whored out on the street and parlays that into a job with Treadwell-Price?” She smiled. “That’s a top firm. A job there sets you up for life. I can totally see that weasel trying to work his sister’s tragedy to his own benefit.”

“Right.”

Evelyn sat back down in the chair. “But what does this have to do with Jane Delray? And why would Bennett lie about the ID? What does he gain from Lucy being dead? Oh!” She excitedly jabbed the pen in the air. “Insurance. I was looking at it from the wrong angle. Of course there’s no policy on Lucy. Bennett told us himself—his father’s dead, the mother’s just as good as, which leaves the estate and whatever policies the parents have to the children.” She sat up in the chair. “Maybe Bennett wanted to see Lucy in order to get her to sign away her claim to the estate. That happened with one of Bill’s clients last year. The old man was batty as a fruitcake. His children got him to sign away every last dime.”

“Hank Bennett certainly strikes me as an opportunist.”

“And besides, what would be the alternative?” Evelyn asked. “That Bennett killed Jane Delray? We saw him two days ago. His hands were perfectly clean. No cuts or bruises, which is exactly what you’d get if you attacked somebody.”

Amanda remembered the skin under Jane Delray’s fingernails. “She scratched her assailant. You would think he’d have a mark on the back of his hands or his

neck or face.”

“Unless she scratched his arm. His chest. He was wearing a three-piece suit. Who knows what was under there?” Evelyn blew out a puff of air. “I don’t see Hank Bennett strangling a prostitute to death, then throwing her off the roof of Techwood Homes. Do you?”

Amanda didn’t know what the man was capable of. “I just get a bad feeling about him.”

“Me, too.”

They both stared at the wall. Amanda let her gaze wander, picking up different names out of order. She said, “Juice told me that Kitty was renting out her apartment to the other girls.”

“I guess she gets that entrepreneurial spirit from her father.”

“The next logical step would be to interrogate Andrew Treadwell and Hank Bennett.”

“Or, we could flap our hands and fly to the moon.”

“We should go back to Trey Callahan at the Union Mission. Juice said that he’s friends with the guy who runs the soup kitchen.”

Evelyn’s mouth dropped open in surprise. “Is it just me, or does everyone lie to us?”

“They lie to the men, too. No one tells you the truth if you have a badge.”

“Well, I suppose we should tell Betty Friedan we’ve finally achieved some parity.”

Amanda smiled.

“We should talk to the soup kitchen guy, too.”

“We still don’t know who Butch’s CI is. Someone at Techwood identified Jane Delray as Lucy Bennett.”

Evelyn took a clean sheet of paper out of her desk drawer. “Okay, first thing tomorrow: Union Mission, then the soup kitchen, then Techwood to show around the photographs of the girls. Do you think we could sneak a picture of Hank Bennett?” She tapped her pen on the desk. “I know a gal over at the driver’s license bureau. I bet we can get his photograph that way.”

Amanda looked at her friend. She was showing the same mixture of excitement and purpose that Amanda had felt all week. Something about working this case made them forget the danger involved. She said, “Two people warned me off this today.”

“Landry?”

“Three, then. Holly Scott and Deena Coolidge. They both told me that I was crazy to be doing this.”

Evelyn chewed her lip. She didn’t have to say that the women were right.

Amanda asked, “Are we really going to keep doing this?”

Evelyn stared back at her rather than respond. They both knew that they should stop. They both knew what was on the line. Not just their jobs. Their lives. Their futures. If they were fired from the police force, no one else would hire them. They would be pariahs.

“Girls!” Bill Mitchell called. “Supper’s on.”

Evelyn stood up. She squeezed Amanda’s hand. “Pretend it’s wonderful, whatever it is.”

Amanda didn’t know whether Evelyn was referring to Bill’s supper or the mess

they were getting themselves into. Either way, she couldn't help but feel admiration as she followed the other woman into the hallway. Evelyn was either the most upbeat person the world had ever offered or the most delusional.

"Ladies." Kenny was standing beside the hi-fi with a record in his hands. "What's your pleasure?"

Evelyn smiled back at Amanda as she headed toward the kitchen, leaving her to answer the question.

Kenny suggested, "Skynyrd? Allman Brothers? Clapton?"

Amanda figured she might as well get this out of the way. "I'm sorry to say I'm more Sinatra."

"Do you know that I saw him at Madison Square Garden last year?" Kenny smiled at her surprise. "I flew up to New York just to see the show. I was three rows back. He came into the ring like a champ and belted on for hours." Kenny thumbed through the record collection. "Here you go. I let Bill borrow this six months ago. I doubt he's even looked at it." Kenny showed her the record sleeve. *The Main Event—Live.*

Bill called, "Dinner's getting cold."

Amanda waited for Kenny to put on the record. The overture played softly through the speakers. Kenny held out his arm and escorted her to the dining room. Evelyn was sitting in her husband's lap. He patted her bottom. She kissed him before getting up. "Amanda, the wine is lovely." She took a hefty sip from her glass. "You shouldn't have."

"I'm glad it's palatable. I had a feeling the man at the store was misleading me."

"I'm sure you're an excellent sommelier." Kenny pulled out a chair. Amanda sat down, letting her purse slide to the floor. Kenny's hand brushed across her shoulder before he sat down opposite his brother.

Amanda held her wineglass to her mouth as she exhaled a breath of air between her lips.

Bill asked, "What were you two gals up to? Should I be worried you're going to wallpaper the house with construction paper?"

"Maybe." Evelyn raised an eyebrow as she took another sip of wine. "We've got this case that's probably going to get us both fired."

"More time with my gal," Bill exclaimed. He hardly seemed worried as he stabbed a dry-looking piece of roast and put it on her plate. "Have you been mouthing off or making trouble?" He forked another piece of roast for Amanda. "Or both?"

Evelyn said, "We're likely going to get a black man out of jail."

Kenny laughed. "Making friends wherever you go."

"No kidding." Evelyn finished her glass of wine. "This particular fella is called Juice."

"Like the football player?" Bill topped off Amanda's glass, then refilled Evelyn's. "Rushed for seventeen hundred yards in '68."

"Seventeen hundred *nine*," Kenny corrected. "Ran 171 against Ohio State in the Rose Bowl."

"To football." Bill raised his glass.

"Hear, hear." Kenny followed suit. They clinked their glasses in a toast. Amanda felt a warmth spread through her body. She hadn't realized how tense

she was until the wine made her relax.

Evelyn said, "The non-football Juice seems to have a crush on Amanda." She winked across the table. "Says she's a fine-lookin' woman."

"A very astute man." Kenny winked at Amanda, too. She took a large drink of wine to cover her embarrassment.

"He's a pimp," Evelyn said. "We met him at Techwood Homes last week."

Amanda felt her heart lurch in her chest, but Evelyn kept talking.

"He runs white women."

"My favorite kind." Bill refilled Amanda's glass. She hadn't realized she'd finished the first one already. Amanda looked down at the food on her plate. The vegetables had obviously been frozen. The meat was overcooked. Even the roll was burned around the edges.

"This prostitute, Jane—" Evelyn rolled her eyes. "Her apartment was not what you'd call tidy. What was it you said, Amanda? 'I'll look for back copies of *Good Housekeeping*'?"

The men laughed, and Evelyn continued the story. "She was an absolute terror to deal with."

Amanda sipped from her wineglass, which she kept pressed to her chest as she listened to Evelyn talk about the Techwood apartment, the mouthy whore. They all laughed when she mimicked Jane Delray's trashy accent. There was something about the way Evelyn told the story that made it sound funny instead of frightening. She could be relaying the plot of a television sitcom where two plucky gals stick their noses where they don't belong and end up escaping through wit and humor.

"Exit, stage left," Amanda said.

They all laughed, though Evelyn's smile wasn't quite as genuine. She tugged at the back of her hair.

Bill reached out and affectionately slapped away her hand. "You're going to snatch yourself bald."

Amanda asked, "Was it hard getting your hair cut?"

Evelyn shrugged. Obviously, it had been, but she said, "After Zeke, I didn't have time for it."

The wine had made Amanda brazen. She asked Bill, "Did you mind?"

He took Evelyn's hand. "Anything that makes my girl happy."

"I cried for at least an hour." Evelyn laughed, though her heart wasn't into it.

"I think it was closer to six," Bill said. "But I like it."

"It's very stylish," Kenny offered. "But long is nice, too."

Amanda patted the back of her hair. She was worse than Evelyn.

"Why don't you let it down?" The request came from Kenny. Amanda was both surprised and deeply embarrassed. She was also dangerously close to complete inebriation, which was probably why she complied with the request.

Amanda silently counted out the bobby pins as she pulled them from her hair. Five, six, seven. There were eight total, plus the hair spray, which made her fingers sticky as she ran them through her hair. It draped to the middle of her back. Amanda cut the ends once a year. She only kept it down in the winter, and then only at night when she was alone.

Evelyn sighed. "You're so pretty."

Amanda finished her wine. She was already dizzy. She should at least eat a

dinner roll to absorb some of the alcohol, but she didn't want to hear the sound of her own chewing. The room was quiet except for the record playing. Sinatra singing "Autumn in New York."

Bill picked up the bottle and topped them off again. Amanda thought to cover the glass with her hand, but she couldn't make herself move.

The phone rang in the kitchen. Evelyn startled. "Gosh, who could be calling this late?"

Amanda couldn't be alone in the room like this. She followed Evelyn into the kitchen.

"Mitchell residence."

Amanda pulled back her hair, twisting it around the crown. She stuck the bobby pins back in. Her movements were clumsy. Too much wine. Too much attention.

"Where?" Evelyn asked. She pulled the long telephone cord across the room and got a pen and paper out of the drawer. "Say that again." She scribbled as she spoke. "And when was this?" She made some noises, encouraging the caller to continue. Finally, she said, "We'll be right there," and hung up.

"Right where?" Amanda asked. She kept her hand on the kitchen counter. The wine had pickled her brain. "Who was that?"

"Deena Coolidge." Evelyn folded the piece of paper in half. "They've just found another body."

Amanda felt her focus snap back. "Who?"

"They don't know yet. Blonde, thin, pretty."

"That sounds familiar."

"They found her at Techwood Homes." Evelyn pushed open the door to the dining room. "Sorry, boys, we need to step out."

Bill smiled. "You're just trying to get out of doing dishes."

"I'll do them in the morning."

They exchanged a look. Amanda realized that Bill Mitchell wasn't as naïve as she had first imagined. He saw through his wife's funny stories the same as Amanda.

He raised his glass in a toast. "I'll wait up for you, my love."

Evelyn grabbed Amanda's purse before letting the door swing closed. "I'm drunk as a lord," she muttered. "I hope I don't end up driving us into the creek."

"I'll drive." Amanda followed her out the kitchen door.

Instead of heading to the car, Evelyn went to the shed. The men had finished the job except for the painting. Evelyn ran her hand along the top of the door trim and found the key. She tugged on the chain to turn on the light. There was a safe bolted to the floor. Evelyn had to try the combination three times before she finally got it open. "I think we drank that whole bottle between us."

"Why did Deena call you?"

"I asked her to let me know if anything else came up." Evelyn pulled out her revolver. She checked there was ammunition in the cylinder, then snapped it back into place. She took out the speed-loader, then shut the safe door. "Let's go."

"Do you think you'll need that?"

Evelyn tucked the revolver into her purse. "I'm never going anywhere without it again." She grabbed the shelf as she stood up. Her eyes closed as she oriented

herself. "They're probably going to give us both DUIs."

"That'll hardly make us stand out."

Evelyn pulled off the light and locked the door. Amanda took deep breaths of air as she walked to her car, trying to clear her head.

Evelyn said, "You know this means Juice didn't do it."

"Did we ever really think he did?"

"No, but now they'll know, too."

Amanda climbed into the car. She threw her purse into the back seat as she waited for Evelyn to get in. The drive to Techwood wasn't a long one, especially at eight o'clock in the evening. There was no traffic on the road. The only people who stayed in Atlanta after dark were the ones who had no business being there. Which was a good thing considering Amanda's state of intoxication. If she accidentally hit a pedestrian, no one was likely to care.

The traffic lights were flashing yellow as she traveled up Piedmont Road. Amanda took the steep curve that turned into Fourteenth Street, then slowed for the blinking light before turning left on Peachtree. Another right on North and she was following the same pattern they'd worn last week: past the Varsity, over the interstate, left on Techwood Drive, and straight into the hell of the projects.

Several police cruisers were blocking the path to their usual berm. Amanda parked behind a familiar Plymouth Fury. She glanced inside the car as she passed. Wadded-up packs of cigarettes. A half-empty bottle of Johnnie Walker. Crushed cans of beer. She followed Evelyn toward the buildings. Again, Rick Landry was standing in the middle of the courtyard. His hands were on his hips. His face twisted with anger when he saw Amanda and Evelyn.

"Whatta I gotta do, beat it into you broads?" He looked ready to do just that, but Deena Coolidge stopped him.

"Y'all ready?"

Landry glared at her. "Ain't nobody called for a pickaninny, Sapphire."

She puffed out her chest. "You need to get your cracker ass out my face before I pimp you up to Reggie."

Landry tried to stare her down, but Deena, who was at least a foot shorter than him, stood her ground. Landry finally relented, but not without mumbling "Cunts" as he stomped away.

Deena asked, "Y'all wondering what him and Butch are doing here when they're both on day shift? Because I sure am."

Amanda looked at Evelyn, who nodded. It did seem strange.

Deena said, "Pete's around back with the body, but I've got somebody for you to talk to first."

Neither of them spoke as they followed Deena into the building. The hall was packed with women and children dressed in housecoats and pajamas. Their faces were guarded and frightened. They had probably been settled down for the night when the police cars showed up. They'd all left their front doors open. The lights from the cruisers filled the apartments. Amanda was very conscious that hers and Evelyn's were the only white faces as Deena took them deeper into the building.

Only one apartment door on the floor was closed. Deena knocked on it. They waited for a chain to slide back, deadbolts to turn. The old woman who opened the door was dressed in a black skirt and jacket. Her white blouse was crisply

starched. She was wearing a fine black hat with a short veil that hung to the top of her eyebrows.

“Whatchu doin’ dressed up for church, Miss Lula?” Deena asked. “I told you these gals just want to talk. They ain’t gonna drag you down to the jail.”

The old woman stared at the floor. She was cowed by their presence, that much was evident. Even when she stepped back so that they could enter, it was obvious that she was doing so under great duress. Amanda felt deeply ashamed as she walked into the apartment.

Deena suggested, “Why don’t you get us some tea, dear?”

Miss Lula nodded as she headed into the other room. Deena indicated the couch, which was a pale yellow and absolutely spotless. In fact, the living room was remarkably tidy. The one chair that faced the small television had a ruffled skirt and a doily. Magazines were neatly stacked on the table. The rug on the floor was clean. Pictures of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Jack Kennedy faced each other on the wall. There were no cobwebs in the corners. Even the stench of the building had not managed to permeate the space.

Still, neither Evelyn nor Amanda sat down. They were too mindful of the setting. As spotless as this woman’s apartment seemed, it was still surrounded by filth. You might as well drag a clean blanket through a mud puddle and expect it to remain unscathed.

They heard a kettle start to boil in the kitchen.

Deena’s tone was firm. “Y’all best both be sitting your white asses down by the time she comes back in here.”

Deena took the chair by the television. Reluctantly, Evelyn sat on the couch. Amanda joined her, keeping her purse clutched in her lap. Both of them sat on the edge of the cushions—not from fear of contamination, but because they were on duty. Years of wearing utility belts around their waists had made it impossible for them to sit back in their seats.

Amanda asked, “Who called in the body?”

Deena nodded toward the kitchen. “Miss Lula did. She’s been here since they integrated the place. They moved her over from Buttermilk.”

“Why does she think we’re going to arrest her?”

“Because you’re white and you have a badge.”

Evelyn mumbled, “That’s never impressed anybody before.”

Miss Lula was back. She had taken off her hat, revealing a shock of white hair. The china cups and saucers on her silver tray rattled as she brought the set into the living room. Instinctively, Amanda stood to help. The tray was heavy. She lowered it to the coffee table. Deena relinquished her chair to the old woman. It was a neat trick. Deena carefully smoothed down the back of her pants, probably checking for insects. A roach traveled across the wall behind her. Deena shuddered.

“Would you ladies like some cookies?” Miss Lula offered. Her voice was unexpectedly refined. There was almost the tinge of an English accent to it, like Lena Horne’s.

Evelyn answered, “Thank you, no. We’ve just had supper.” She reached toward the teapot. “May I?”

Miss Lula nodded. Amanda watched Evelyn pour four cups of tea. It was the strangest thing she’d ever been a part of. Amanda had never been a guest in a

black person's home. Usually, the point of her visit was to get in and get out as quickly as possible. She felt as if she was in one of those Carol Burnett sketches that was trying for social commentary rather than humor.

Deena said, "Miss Lula used to be a teacher at the Negro school off Benson."

Amanda offered, "My mother was a teacher. Elementary school."

"That was my field as well," Miss Lula answered. She took the cup and saucer Evelyn offered. Her hands were old, the knuckles swollen. There was a slight ash tone. She pursed her lips and blew on the tea to cool it.

Evelyn served Deena next, then Amanda.

"Thank you." Amanda could feel the heat through the china, but she drank the scalding tea anyway, hoping the caffeine would help chase away the wine.

She looked up at the photos of Kennedy facing King, again taking in the orderly apartment that Miss Lula called home.

When Amanda had worked patrol, some of the men made a game of terrorizing these old people. They'd roll their cruisers up behind them in the street and purposefully backfire the car. Grocery bags were dropped. Hands flew into the air. Most of them would fall to the ground. The backfire sounded like a gunshot.

"Now." Deena had waited until they'd all had some tea. "Miss Lula, if you could tell these women what you told me?"

The old woman cast down her eyes again. She was obviously troubled. "I heard a commotion in the back."

Amanda realized the woman's apartment faced the rear of the complex. It was the same area where Jane Delray had been found three days ago.

Miss Lula continued, "I peered out the window and saw the girl just lying there. She had obviously passed." She shook her head. "Terrible sight. No matter their sins, no one deserves that."

Evelyn asked, "Was there anyone else back there?"

"Not as far as I could tell."

"Do you know what the noise was? The one that made you look out the window?"

"Perhaps it was the rear door banging open?" She didn't seem sure, though she nodded as if that was the only explanation that made sense.

Amanda asked, "Have you noticed anyone strange hanging around?"

"No more so than usual. Most of these girls had evening visitors. They generally came in through the back door."

That would make sense. None of the men probably wanted to be seen. Amanda asked, "Did you recognize the girl you saw out back?"

"She's from the top floor. I don't know her name. But I said from the beginning that they should not have been allowed to live here."

Deena supplied, "Because they're prostitutes, not because they're white."

Miss Lula said, "They were operating their business out of the apartment. That is contrary to the housing laws."

Evelyn put down her cup of tea. "Did you see any of their customers?"

"Occasionally. As I said, they mostly used the back door. Especially the white men."

"They saw both white and black men?"

"Frequently one after the other."

They were all silent as they considered the statement.

Evelyn asked, "How many women were living up there?"

"At first it was the young one. She said her name was Kitty. She seemed nice enough. She gave candy to some of the children, which was allowed until we realized what she was doing up there."

"And then?" Amanda asked.

"And then another woman moved in. This was at least a year and a half ago, mind you. The second girl was white, too. Looked very similar to Kitty. I never got her name. Her visitors were not as discreet."

"Is that the woman you saw through your window tonight? Kitty?"

"No, a third one. I've not seen Kitty in a while. Nor have I seen the second one in some time. These girls are very transitory." She paused, then added, "Lord help them. It's a difficult path they've chosen."

Amanda remembered the licenses she'd tucked into her purse. She unzipped her bag and pulled them out. "Do you recognize any of these girls?"

The old woman took the licenses. Her reading glasses were neatly folded on the side table, resting atop a well-read Bible. They all watched as she unfolded the glasses, slid them onto her face. Carefully, Miss Lula studied each license, giving each girl her undivided attention. "This one," she said, holding out the license for Kathryn Treadwell. "This is Kitty, but I assume you know that by her name."

Amanda said, "We've been led to believe that Kitty was renting out the space to other girls."

"Yes, that would make sense."

"Did you ever talk to her?"

"Once. She seemed to think very highly of herself. Apparently, her father is very politically connected."

"She said that to you?" Evelyn asked. "Kitty told you who her father was?"

"Not in so many words, but yes. She made it clear she didn't really belong here. But then, do any of us?"

Amanda couldn't answer the question. "Do the other girls look familiar?"

The woman scanned the license again. She held up Jane Delray's. "The quality of men changed quite a bit for this one. She was not as discriminating as—" She held up Mary Halston's photo. "This one had a lot of repeat customers, though I would not call them gentlemen. She's the girl out back." She read the name. "Donna Mary Halston. Such a pretty name considering the things she did."

Amanda heard Evelyn suck in her breath. They were both thinking of the same question. Amanda asked, "You said Mary had repeat business?"

"Yes, that's correct."

"Did you ever see a white man who was about six feet tall, sandy blond hair, long sideburns, wearing a sharply tailored suit, probably in some shade of blue?"

Miss Lula glanced at Deena. When she handed back the licenses to Amanda, her expression was blank. "I'll have to think on that. Let me get back to you tomorrow."

Amanda felt her brow furrow. Either the wine was wearing off or the tea was kicking in. Miss Lula's apartment was at the end of the hallway. It was at least ten yards from the stairwell, even farther from the back door. Unless the old woman spent her days sitting behind the building, there was no way she could

note the comings and goings of the girls or their visitors.

Amanda opened her mouth to speak, but Deena interrupted her.

"Miss Lula," she said. "We appreciate your time. You've got my number. Get back to me on that question." She put her saucer down on the tray. When Evelyn and Amanda didn't move, she grabbed their teacups and placed them beside hers. "We can let ourselves out." She did everything but clap her hands to get them moving.

Amanda led the way, clutching her purse to her chest. She was going to turn to say goodbye, but Deena pushed them out the door.

The hallway had emptied. Still Amanda kept her voice low. "How could she —"

"Give her until tomorrow," Deena said. "She'll find out whether or not your mystery man was here."

"But how could she—"

"She's the queen bee," Deena told her, leading them up the hallway. She didn't stop until she reached the exit door. They stood in the same spot where Rick Landry had threatened Evelyn. "What Miss Lula told you isn't what she's seen. It's what she's heard."

"But she didn't—"

"Rule number one of the ghetto: find the oldest biddy been around the longest. She's the one running the place."

"Well," Evelyn said, "I did wonder why she had a shotgun under the couch."

Amanda asked, "What?"

"That thing was loaded, too." Deena pushed open the door.

The crime scene was cordoned off with yellow tape. There were no lights back here, or at least no lights that were functioning. The bulbs on the light poles had all been broken, probably with rocks. Six patrolmen took care of the problem. They stood in a ring around the body, the butts of their Kel-Lites resting on their shoulders to illuminate the area.

The grounds behind the building were as desolate as the front. Red Georgia clay was packed hard by the constant pounding of bare feet. There were no flowers back here. No grass. One lone tree stood with its tired branches hanging down. Just below the tree was the body. Pete Hanson blocked the view with his wide frame. Beside him was a young man of about the same height and stature. Like Pete, he was wearing a white lab coat. He tapped Pete on the shoulder and nodded toward the women.

Pete stood up. He had a grim look on his face. "Detectives. I'm glad you're here, though I say that with reservations given the circumstances." He indicated the young man. "This is one of my pupils, Dr. Ned Taylor."

Taylor gave them a stern nod. Even in the low illumination, Amanda could see the green tint to his skin. He looked as if he might be ill. Evelyn wasn't much better.

Deena suggested, "Pete, why don't you run Amanda through this?"

Amanda supposed she should feel proud of her lack of squeamishness, but it was starting to feel like one more secret she would have to keep about herself.

Evelyn volunteered, "I'll go check the apartment. Maybe Butch and Landry missed something."

Deena harrumphed. "I'd bet my next paycheck on it."

"This way, my dear." Pete cupped his hand beneath Amanda's elbow as he led her toward the dead woman. The six officers holding flashlights seemed puzzled that Amanda was there, though none of them asked questions, probably in deference to Pete.

"If you would?" Pete got down on one knee, then helped Amanda kneel beside him. She smoothed down her skirt so that her knees would not grind against the dirt. Her heels were going to get scuffed. She hadn't exactly dressed for this.

Pete said, "Tell me what you see."

The victim was face down. Her long blonde hair draped down her shoulders and back. She was wearing a black miniskirt and red T-shirt. Her hand rested on the ground a few inches from her face. The nails were polished bright red.

Amanda said, "Same as the other victim. All ten fingernails expertly manicured."

"Correct." Pete pulled back the woman's stringy blonde hair. "Neck's bruised, though I'm going to guess the hyoid wasn't broken."

"She wasn't strangled to death?"

"I believe there's something else going on." He pulled up the red T-shirt. There was a line of injuries down the woman's side, almost like a dress seam had been ripped open. "These lacerations run the length of her body."

Amanda saw the pattern duplicated on the girl's leg. She had mistaken the damage for the seam in a pair of stockings. Likewise, the outside of the victim's arms showed the marks. It was like a McCall's pattern, where someone had tried to tear apart the stitches joining the front to the back of her body.

Amanda asked, "What—who—would do that?"

"Two very good questions. Unfortunately, my answer to both is that I have no idea."

Amanda didn't so much ask as wonder aloud, "You told Deena to call us, to get us here."

"Yes. The manicured fingernails were similar. The setting. I thought there was more, but upon further examination ..." He started to pull up the miniskirt, then changed his mind. "I must warn you, even I was startled. I haven't seen this in a few years."

Amanda shook her head. "What do you mean?"

He pulled up the skirt. There was a knitting needle between the girl's legs.

Amanda didn't need to be coached this time. Automatically, she found herself taking deep breaths, filling her lungs, then slowly pushing out all the air.

Pete shook his head. "There's absolutely no reason for a girl to have to do this anymore."

Amanda noticed, "There's no blood."

Pete sat back on his heels. "No, there's not."

"You would expect to see blood, wouldn't you? From the knitting needle?"

"Yes." Pete pushed open the legs. One of the officers moved back a step. He nearly tripped over a broken tree limb. There were a couple of nervous laughs, but the man righted himself without incident. He trained the beam of his flashlight on the victim's legs.

Pasty white thighs. No blood.

Amanda asked, "Are her fingerprints on the knitting needle?"

Despite the circumstances, Pete smiled at her. "None. It was wiped clean."

"She didn't do this to herself."

"Not likely. She's been cleaned up. Someone brought her here."

"The same place our other victim was found."

"Not exactly, but close." He pointed to a spot several feet away. "Lucy Bennett was found over there."

Amanda looked back up at the building. Miss Lula's apartment was on the far end. She couldn't see the tree from her window. She certainly couldn't see where Jane Delray was found. Deena was right. There was someone else—or a series of someone elses—who'd seen everything but were too afraid to tell.

"Ned," Pete called. "Take her feet, I'll get her shoulders."

The young doctor did as he was instructed. Carefully, they rolled the victim over onto her back.

Amanda looked at the girl's face. The damage was incomprehensible. Her eyelids were shredded. Her mouth was torn to pieces. Still, there was enough left to recognize her. Amanda unzipped her purse and found the license, which she handed to Pete.

"Donna Mary Halston," he read. "Lives here?" He looked up at the building. "Top floor, I'm assuming. Same as Lucy Bennett."

Amanda shuffled through the licenses and found Lucy Bennett's. She handed this to Pete and waited.

"Hm." He studied the photo carefully. He was obviously mindful of the six patrolmen when he told Amanda, "This girl is unfamiliar to me."

Amanda handed him Jane Delray's license.

Again, he studied the photo. A deep sigh came out like a groan. "Yes, this one I recognize." He handed both licenses back to Amanda. "Now what?"

She shook her head. It felt good to have Pete weigh in on the identities, but his validation wasn't going to change much.

The back door opened. Evelyn shook her head. "Nothing in the apartment. It's still a mess, but I don't think anyone's—" She stopped. Amanda followed her gaze to the knitting needle. Evelyn put her hand to her mouth. Instead of turning away, she looked up at the tree. Then she looked down at the girl again.

"What is it?" Amanda asked. Something was obviously wrong. She stood up and joined Evelyn. It was the same as the construction paper puzzle. Sometimes a change in perspective was all it took.

The tree limb was broken. The girl lay on the ground. Her child had been aborted.

"Oh, my God." Amanda realized, "Ophelia."

Present Day

SUZANNA FORD

The darkness. The cold. The noise.

Air sucking in and out, like a car zooming through a tunnel.

She couldn't take it anymore. Her body ached. Her mouth was dry. Her stomach was so empty that she felt as if the acids were eating a hole in her belly.

Meth.

That was what had brought her here. Brought her low. She had fallen too far. She had put herself in the gutter. She had brought herself to this place.

Dear Jesus, she prayed. If you get me out of here, I will worship You every day. I will exalt Your name.

The claustrophobia. The absolute darkness. The unknowing. The fear of suffocation.

Way back when they were still a family, her father had taken them all on a trip to Wales. There was a mine there, something from thousands of years ago. You had to wear a hard hat to go into the tunnels. They were small because people weren't as tall back then. They were narrow because most of the workers were children.

Suzanna had gone in twenty feet before she started freaking out. She could still see sunlight from the opening, but she'd nearly pissed herself running back toward the entrance.

That was what it felt like now. Trapped. Hopeless.

I will praise You. I will spread Your word. I will humble myself before You.

Arms couldn't move. Legs couldn't move. Eyes couldn't open. Mouth couldn't open.

Meth will never touch my lips, my nose, my lungs, ever again, so help me God.

The tremble started slow, coursing through her body, straining her muscles. Her fingers flexed into a fist. She clenched her shoulders, her teeth, her ass. The threads pulled. The pain was excruciating. Hot needles touching raw nerves. Her heart was going to explode in her chest. She could rip herself away. She was stronger than this. She could rip herself away.

Suzanna tried. She tried so hard. But each time, the pain won.

She couldn't make the skin tear. She couldn't make the thread break.

She could only lie there.

Praying for salvation.

Dear Jesus—

Present Day

TUESDAY

Will awoke with a start. His neck cracked as he stretched it side to side. He was at home, sitting on his couch. Betty was beside him. The little dog was on her back. Legs up. Nose pointed toward the front door. Will glanced around, looking for Faith. She'd driven him home from the morgue. She'd gone to get him a glass of water and now, judging by the clock on the TiVo, it was almost two hours later.

He listened to the house. It was quiet. Faith had left. Will didn't know how he felt about that. Should he be relieved? Should he wonder where she had gone? There was no guidebook for this part of his life. No instructions he could follow to put it all back together.

He tried to close his eyes again, to go back to sleep. He wanted to wake up a year from now. He wanted to wake up and have all of this over.

Only, he couldn't get his eyes to stay closed. Every time he tried, he found himself staring back up at the ceiling. Was that what it had been like for his mother? According to the autopsy report, her eyes had not always been sewn closed. Sometimes, they had been sewn open. The medical examiner posited in the report that Will's father would have to stay close by during these periods. He would have to use a dropper to keep her eyes from drying out.

Dr. Edward Taylor. That was the name of the medical examiner. The man had died in a car accident fifteen years ago. He'd been the first investigator Will had tried to track down. The first dead end. The first time Will had felt relief that there was no one around to explain to him exactly what had happened to his mother.

"Hey." Faith came out of his spare bedroom. He could see that the light was still on. His books were in there. All his CDs. Car magazines he'd collected over the years. Albums from way back. It had probably taken Faith less than ten seconds to figure out which items were most out of place. She held the books in her hand. *The New Feminist Hegemony. Applied Statistical Models: Theory and Application. A Vindication of the Rights of Women.*

He said, "You can go home now."

"I'm not leaving you alone." She put his mother's textbooks on the table as she sat in the recliner. The file was on the table, too. Will had left it there this morning. Faith had probably paged through everything while he was sleeping. He should've felt angry that she'd been prying, but there was nothing left inside of him. Will was utterly devoid of any emotion. He'd felt it happen when he first

saw Sara at the morgue. His initial impulse was to weep at her feet. To tell her everything. To beg her to understand.

And then—nothing.

It was like a stopper being pulled. All of the feeling had just drained out of him.

The rest flashed in his mind like a movie preview that gave away every plot twist: The battered girl. The painted fingernails. The ripped skin. The sound of Sara's breath catching when Will told her—told everyone—that his father was to blame.

Sara was a verbal woman, outspoken at times, and not usually one to hold back her opinion. But in the end, she'd said nothing. After nearly two weeks of living with that inquisitive look in her eyes, there were no questions she wanted to ask. Nothing she wanted to know. It was all laid out in front of her. Amanda was right about the autopsy. Will shouldn't have been there. It had been like watching his mother being examined, processed, catalogued.

And Angie was right about Sara. It was too much for her to handle.

Why had he thought for even a second that Angie was wrong? Why had he thought Sara would be different?

Will had just stood there in the morgue, frozen in time and place. Staring at Sara. Waiting for her to speak. Waiting for her to scream or yell or throw something. He would probably still be there but for Amanda ordering Faith to take him home. Even then, Faith had to grab Will's arm and physically pull him from the room.

Close-up on Sara. Her face pale. Her head shaking. Fade to black.

The end.

"Will?" Faith asked.

He looked up at her.

"How did you get into the GBI?"

He weighed the question, trying to spot her end game. "I was recruited."

"How?"

"Amanda came to my college."

Faith gave a tight nod, and he could tell she was chasing a train of thought he couldn't pin down. "What about the application?"

Will rubbed his eyes. There was still white grit in the corners from tearing apart the basement.

Faith pressed, "The background screening. All the paperwork."

She knew about his dyslexia. She also knew he could pull his own weight. "It was mostly oral interviews. They let me take the rest home. Same as you, right?"

Faith's chin tilted up. Finally, she said, "Right."

Will rested his hand on Betty's chest. He could feel her heart beat against his palm. She sighed. Her tongue licked out.

Will asked, "Why did the reporter from *The Atlanta Journal* call Amanda?"

Faith shrugged. "Don't worry about it. I told you I shut down the story."

Will had been so blind. Amanda had fed him the information this morning but he'd been too exhausted to process it. "My records are sealed. There's no way a reporter—or anybody—could know who my father is. At least not legally." He studied Faith. "And even if someone found out, why call Amanda? Why not call me directly? My number is listed. So's my address."

Faith chewed her bottom lip. It was her tell. She knew something that Will did not, and she wasn't going to share it.

Will leaned toward her. "I want you to go to the hotel. He's on parole. He doesn't have a legal expectation of privacy."

Faith didn't need to ask whose hotel room. "And do what?"

Will clenched his fist. The cuts opened up again. "I want you to toss his room. I want you to interrogate him and sit on him until he can't take it anymore."

Faith stared at him. "You know I can't do that."

"Why not?"

"Because we have to build a case, not a harassment suit."

"I don't care about a case. Make him so miserable he leaves the hotel just to get away from you."

"And then what?"

She knew what would happen next. Will would shoot him down in the street like a rabid dog.

She said, "I'm not going to do that."

"I can look up the layout of the hotel. I can go to the courthouse. I can find a way in there and—"

"That sounds like a great way to leave a paper trail."

Will didn't care about a paper trail. "How many men are on the hotel?"

"Five times as many as are sitting outside your house right now."

Will went to the front window. He pushed open the blinds. There was an Atlanta cop car blocking his driveway. A G-ride was in the street. Will slammed his hand against the blinds. Betty barked, jumping up from the couch.

He went to the back of the house. He opened the kitchen door. A man was sitting in the gazebo Will had built last summer. Tan and blue GBI regs. Glock on his hip. He had his feet propped up on the railing. He waved as Will slammed the door.

"She can't do this," Will said. "She can't sit on my house like I'm some kind of criminal."

Faith asked, "Why didn't you ever tell me about him?"

Will paced across the room. His body was suddenly filled with adrenaline. "So I can be another notch in your serial killer collection?"

"Do you really think I'd turn your life into a game?"

"Where's my gun?" His keys were on his desk. His phone. The Glock was missing. "Did you take my gun?"

Faith didn't answer, but he noticed that her thigh holster was gone. She'd locked her gun in the car. She didn't trust him not to take it.

Several thoughts came into Will's head. Punching a hole in the wall. Kicking over his desk. Breaking the windows in Faith's car. Taking a bat to that asshole sitting in his gazebo. In the end, Will could only stand there. It was the same thing that had happened at the morgue. He was too exhausted. Too overwhelmed. Too handled. "Just leave, Faith. I don't need you babysitting me. I don't want you here."

"Too bad."

"Go home. Go home to your stupid kid and get the hell out of my business."

"If you think being a dick is going to chase me away, you don't know me very well." She sat back in the chair, arms crossed over her chest. "Sara found semen

in the girl's hair."

Will waited for her to continue.

"There's enough for a DNA profile. Once it's in the system, we can match it against his."

"That'll take weeks."

"Four days," she told him. "Dr. Coolidge put a rush on it."

"Then arrest him. You can hold him for twenty-four hours."

"Which means he'll bail out and disappear before we can pick him up again."

Her voice had the annoying tone of someone trying to be reasonable. "APD put six guys on the hotel. Amanda probably has ten more. He won't be able to take a shit without us knowing."

"I want to be there when you arrest him."

"You know Amanda won't allow that."

"When you interrogate him." Will couldn't help himself. He started begging. "Please let me see him. Please. I have to see him. I have to look him in the eye. I want to see his face when he realizes that I got away. That he didn't win."

Faith put her hand over her heart. "I swear to God, Will. I swear to you on the lives of my children that I will do everything in my power to make sure that happens."

"It's not enough," Will said. He didn't just want to look his father in the eye. He wanted to beat him. He wanted to kick out his teeth. To slice off his cock. To sew shut his mouth and eyes and nose and beat him until he drowned in his own vomit. "It's not enough."

"I know it's not," Faith said. "It'll never be enough, but it'll have to do."

There was a knock on the door. Will didn't know who he was expecting when Faith opened the door. Amanda. Angie. Some cop telling him that Will's father had killed again.

Anyone but the person who was actually there.

Sara asked Faith, "Everything okay?"

Faith nodded, picking up her purse by the door. She told Will, "I'll call you the minute I know anything. I promise."

Sara shut the door behind her. Her hair fell in soft curls around her shoulders. She was wearing a tight black dress that wrapped around her body. Will had seen her dressed up before, but never like this. She was wearing extremely high heels with a black leopard print. They did something to her calf that sent a tightness into his groin.

She said, "Hi."

Will swallowed. He could still taste plaster in his throat.

Sara walked around the couch and sat down. She slid off her heels and tucked her legs underneath her. "Come here."

Will sat down on the couch. Betty was between them. She jumped down. Her toenails clicked across the floor as she headed into the kitchen.

Sara took his hand. She must've noticed the cuts and blisters, but she didn't say anything. Will couldn't look at her. She was so beautiful that it was almost painful. Instead, he stared at the coffee table. His mother's file. Her books.

He said, "I guess Amanda told you everything."

"No, she didn't."

Will wasn't surprised. Amanda loved torturing him. He pointed to his mother's

things. "If you want to—" Will stopped, trying to keep his voice from cracking. "It's all there. Just go ahead and read it."

Sara glanced down at the file, but said, "I don't want to read it."

Will shook his head. He didn't understand.

"You tell me about her when you're ready."

"It would be easier if—"

She reached out to touch his face. Her fingers stroked his cheek. She moved closer. He felt the heat of her body as she pressed against him. Will put his hand on her leg, felt the firm muscle of her thigh. The tightness came back. He kissed her. Sara's hands went to his face as she kissed him back. She straddled him. Her hair draped across his face. He could feel her breath on his neck.

Unfortunately, that was the extent of his feelings.

She asked, "Do you want me to—"

"No." He pulled her back up. "I'm sorry. I'm—"

She put her fingers to his lips. "You know what I really want to do?" She climbed off him, but stayed close. "I want to watch a movie where robots hit each other. Or things blow up. Preferably from robots hitting each other." She picked up the remote and turned on the set. She tuned in the Speed channel. "Oh, look. This is even better."

Will could not think of a time in his life when he'd felt more miserable. If Faith had not taken his Glock, he would've shot himself in the head. "Sara, it's not—"

"Shh." Sara took his arm and wrapped it around her shoulder. She rested her head on his chest, her hand on his leg. Betty came back. She jumped into Will's lap and settled in.

He stared at the television. The Ferrari Enzo was being profiled. An Italian man was using a lathe to hollow out a piece of aluminum. Nothing the announcer said would stay in Will's head. He felt his eyelids getting heavy. He let out a slow breath.

Finally, his eyes stayed closed.

This time, when Will woke up, he wasn't alone. Sara was lying on the couch in front of him. Her back curved into his body. Her hair tickled his face. The room was dark except for the glow of the television set. The sound was muted. Speed was showing a monster-truck rally. The TiVo read twelve past midnight.

Another day passed. Another night come. Another page turned in the calendar of his father's life.

Will couldn't stop the thoughts that came into his head. He wondered if Faith still had his Glock. He wondered whether the patrol car was still blocking his driveway or the asshole was still in his gazebo.

He had a Sig Sauer in the gun safe that was bolted inside his closet. His Colt AR-15 rifle was disassembled beside it. Ammunition for both was stacked in a plastic box. Will worked the rifle in his mind—magazine, bolt catch, trigger guard. Winchester 55-grain full metal jacket.

No. The Sig would be better. Closer. Muzzle to the head. Finger on the trigger. Will would see the terror in his father's eyes, then the glassy, vacant stare of a dead man.

Sara stirred. Her hand snaked back and stroked the side of his face. Her

fingerprints lightly scratched the skin. She breathed a contented sigh.

Just like that, Will felt the anger start to drain away. Again, it was similar to what had happened at the morgue, but instead of feeling empty, he felt full. A calmness took over. The clamp around his chest started to loosen.

Sara leaned back into him. Her hand pulled him closer. Will's body was much more responsive this time. He pressed his mouth to her neck. The fine hairs stood at attention. He could feel her flesh prickle under his tongue.

Sara turned her head to look at him. She gave a sleepy smile. "Hey."
"Hey."

"I was hoping that was you."

He kissed her mouth. She turned to face him. She was still smiling. Will could feel the curve of her lips against his mouth. Her hair was tangled underneath her. He shifted and felt a sharp pain in his leg. It wasn't a pulled muscle. It was Angie's ring. He still had it in his pocket.

Sara mistook his reaction for a recurrence of his earlier problem. She said, "Let's play a game."

Will didn't need a game. He needed to get Angie out of his head, but that wasn't exactly news he could share.

She held out her hand. "I'm Sara."

"I know."

"No." She still had her hand out. "I'm Sara Linton."

And apparently, Will was a moron. He shook her hand. "Will Trent."

"What do you do for a living, Will Trent?"

"I'm a ..." He glanced around for an idea. "I'm a monster-truck driver."

She looked at the TV and laughed. "That's creative."

"What are you?"

"A stripper." She laughed again, as if she'd shocked herself. "I'm only doing it to pay my way through college."

If Will's stupid wedding ring wasn't in his front pocket, he could've invited Sara to slip her hand inside to get some money for a lap dance. Instead, he had to settle on telling her, "That's commendable." He shifted onto his side, freeing up his hand. "What are you studying?"

"Umm ..." She grinned. "Monster-truck repair."

He trailed his finger between her breasts. The dress was low-cut, designed in such a way that it opened with little effort. Will realized she had worn it for him. Just like she'd let her hair down. Just like she'd squeezed her feet into a pair of high-heel shoes that could probably break her toes.

Just like she'd been at the autopsy. Just like she was here now.

He said, "I'm actually not a monster-truck driver."

"No?" Her breath caught as he tickled his fingers down her bare stomach.
"What are you?"

"I'm an ex-con."

"Oh, I like that," she said. "Jewel thief or bank robber?"

"Petty theft. Destruction of private property. Four-year suspended sentence."

Her laughter stopped. She could tell he wasn't playing anymore.

Will took in a deep breath and slowly let it go. He was doing this now. There was no going back. "I was arrested for stealing food." He had to clear his throat so the words could get out. "It happened when I was eighteen."

She put her hand over his.

"I aged out of the system." Mrs. Flannigan had died the summer Will's eighteenth birthday rolled around. The new guy who ran the home had given Will a hundred dollars and a map to the homeless shelter. "I ended up at the downtown mission. Some of the guys there were all right. Most of them were older and—" He didn't finish the sentence. Sara could easily guess why a teenager didn't feel safe there. "I lived on the streets ..." Again, he let his voice trail off. "I hung out at the hardware store on Highland. Contractors used to go there in the mornings to pick up day workers."

She used her thumb to stroke the back of his hand. "Is that where you learned how to fix things?"

"Yeah." He'd never really thought about it, but it was true. "I made good money, but I didn't know how to spend it. I should've saved up for an apartment. Or a car. Or something. But I spent it on candy and a Walkman and tapes." Will had never had money in his pocket before. There was no such thing as an allowance when he was growing up. "I was sleeping on Peachtree where the library used to be. This group of older guys rolled me. They beat me down. Broke my nose, some of my fingers. Took everything I had. I guess I'm lucky that's all they did."

Sara's grip tightened around his hand.

"I couldn't work. My clothes were filthy. I didn't have anywhere to bathe. I tried to beg for money but people were scared of me. I guess I looked like a junkie." He told Sara, "I wasn't, though. I never did drugs. I never did any of those things."

She nodded.

"But I was so hungry. My stomach hurt all the time. I was dizzy from it. Sick. Afraid to go to sleep. Afraid I'd get rolled again. I went into this all-night pharmacy that used to be on Ponce de Leon. Plaza Drugs, right beside the movie theater?" Sara nodded. "I walked straight in and started taking food off the shelves. Little Debbies. Moon Pies. Anything with a wrapper. I tore it open with my teeth and shoved it into my mouth." He swallowed, his throat feeling raw. "They called the cops."

"They arrested you?"

"They tried." He felt shame welling up in his throat. "I started swinging my fists, trying to hit anything. They stopped me real fast."

Sara stroked back his hair with her fingers.

"They handcuffed me. Took me to jail. And then—" He shook his head. "My caseworker came in. I hadn't seen her in six, maybe seven months. She said she'd been looking for me."

"Why?"

"Because Mrs. Flannigan left me some money." Will still remembered his shock when he heard the news. "I was only allowed to use it for college. So—" He shrugged. "I went to the first college that would take me. Lived in the dorm. Ate in the cafeteria. Worked a part-time job on the grounds. And then I got recruited into the GBI, and that was it."

Sara was quiet, probably trying to absorb it all. "How did you pass the background check?"

"The judge said she would expunge my record if I graduated from college."

Fortunately, the woman hadn't specified anything about his grades. "So I did and she did."

Sara was quiet again.

"I know it's bad." He laughed at the irony. "I guess in the scheme of things, it's not the worst thing you've heard about me today."

"You were lucky you got arrested."

"I guess."

"And I'm lucky that you got into the GBI, because I never would've met you otherwise."

"I'm sorry, Sara. I'm sorry I brought all this down on you. I don't—" He felt the words getting jumbled up in his mouth. "I don't want you to be scared of me. I don't want you to think that I'm anything like him."

"Of course you're not." She wrapped her hand around his. "Don't you know that I'm in awe of you?"

Will could only look at her.

"What you've been through. What you've endured. The man you've become." She placed his hand over her heart. "You chose to be a good person. You chose to help other people. It would've been so easy to go down the wrong path, but at every step, you chose to do the right thing."

"Not always."

"Often enough," she said. "Often enough so that when I look at you, all I can think about is how good you are. How much I want you—need you—in my life."

Her eyes were a clear green in the glow of the television. Will couldn't believe that she was still there beside him. Still wanted to be with him. Angie had been so wrong. There was no guile inside of Sara. No meanness. No spite.

If he were truly a good man, he would've told Sara about Angie. He would've confessed and gotten it over with. Instead, Will kissed her. He kissed her eyelids and her nose and her mouth. Their tongues touched. Will moved on top of her. Sara's leg wrapped around his. She deepened the kiss. Will felt the guilt slip away easily—too easily. All that he could think about was his desire, his need to be inside of her. He felt almost frantic as he started to undress her.

Sara helped him with her clothes. He ended up tearing the dress. She was wearing a lacy black bra that easily unclasped. Will kissed her breasts, used his tongue and teeth until she let out a deep moan. He traced his tongue down, biting and kissing the smooth skin. Sara gasped when he pulled down her underwear and pushed apart her legs. She tasted like honey and copper pennies. Her thigh rubbed against his face. Her fingernails dug into his scalp. She pulled him back up and started kissing him again. Sucking his tongue. Doing things with her mouth that made him start to shake. Will pushed himself inside of her. She moaned again. She gripped his back. Will forced himself to go slow. Sara took him in deeper with each thrust.

Her lips brushed his ear. "My love," she breathed. "My love."

July 15, 1975

LUCY BENNETT

The contractions started with the sunrise. He'd cut open her eyes, but not her mouth. Lucy could feel the thread tugging her lips as she groaned from the pain.

Her arms and legs were spread open, her body aligned straight down the center of the mattress. She had already ripped away her right shoulder. Just a few inches, but it was enough. The shock of being able to move had at first dulled the pain. Now, the flesh throbbed. Blood trickled down her arm and chest, pooled beneath her shoulder blade.

Another contraction started to build. Slow, slow, slow and then it erupted and Lucy felt her lips start to tear apart as she screamed in agony.

"Shut up," someone hissed.

The girl in the room next door.

She had spoken.

The floor creaked beneath her feet as she walked to the closed door.

"Shut up," she repeated.

The other girl had learned. She was compliant. She was welcoming. She talked to the man. Prayed with him. Screamed and thrashed and grunted with him. In a child's voice, she suggested he do things that Lucy had not even considered.

And for that, he let her off her leash sometimes.

Like now.

She was talking. Walking. Moving around.

She could leave at any time. Run to get help. Run to the police or her family or anywhere but here.

But she didn't. The other girl was a regular Patty Hearst.

Lucy's replacement.

July 15, 1975

Amanda sat in a back booth at the Majestic Diner on Ponce de Leon. She stifled a yawn. After leaving Techwood last night, she was too wired to asleep. Even Mary Wollstonecraft couldn't send her off. She'd tossed and turned, images of the construction paper puzzle seemingly burned into her retinas. She'd added the new details in her mind: Hank Bennett—liar. Trey Callahan—liar.

And Ophelia. What to make of Ophelia?

The waitress refilled Amanda's cup. She looked at her watch. Evelyn was fifteen minutes late, which was troubling. Amanda had never known her to be tardy. She'd used the pay phone in the back to call the Model City precinct, but no one had answered the phone. Amanda's own roll call had ended almost half an hour ago. She was assigned to Vanessa today, which suited them both. The other woman had decided to treat herself to a day of shopping. That new credit card was burning a hole in her pocketbook.

The door opened and Evelyn rushed in. "Sorry," she apologized. "I had the strangest call from Hodge."

"My Hodge?"

Evelyn waved away the waitress who came to take her order. "He had dispatch send me to Zone One."

"Did anyone see you?"

"No, the station was empty. It was just me and Hodge and his open door." She sat back against the booth. She was obviously flustered. "He wanted me to tell him everything we've been doing."

Amanda felt panic start to build.

"It's okay. He wasn't mad. At least, I don't think he was mad. Who knows with that man? You're absolutely right about his inscrutability. It's unnerving."

"Did he say anything?"

"Nothing. No criticisms. No comments. He just nodded and then told me to go do my job."

"That's the same thing he told me yesterday. To do my job." Amanda asked, "Do you think he was comparing our stories?"

"Could be."

"You didn't hold anything back?"

"Well, I kept Deena's name out of it. And Miss Lula's. I didn't want either of them getting into trouble."

"You told him about Ophelia?"

"No," she admitted. "I told him we were going to circle back on Trey Callahan, but I didn't tell him why. Luther Hodge doesn't strike me as a devotee of William Shakespeare."

"I don't know about that myself, Evelyn. Maybe we're leaping to conclusions.

Trey Callahan quotes a line from Hamlet and then you and I see the victim last night and fill in the blanks. It smacks of too much coincidence.”

“Is there really such a thing as coincidence in police work?”

Amanda couldn’t answer her. “Do you think Hodge will make trouble for us?”

“Who the hell knows?” She threw her hands into the air. “We should get to the mission. Going over it with Hodge again made me think of some things.”

Amanda slid out of the booth. She left two quarters on the table for the coffee and a generous tip. “Like what?”

“Like, everything.” Evelyn waited until they were outside to speak. “This Hank Bennett situation. I think you’re right. I think he’s a snake in the grass, and he used the information he had about Kitty Treadwell to get a job with her father.”

They got into Amanda’s car. She asked, “How would Bennett know there was a relation?”

“Her name was on the apartment door,” Evelyn reminded her. “Even without that, Kitty had a big mouth about her father. Miss Lula knew she was politically connected. Juice knew, too—he even mentioned another sister who was the golden child. It was an open secret on the street.”

“But not higher up the social ladder,” Amanda assumed. “Andrew Treadwell’s a Georgia graduate. I remember reading that in the newspaper.”

Evelyn smiled. “Hank Bennett was wearing a UGA class ring.”

“Georgia Bulldogs, class of 1974.” Once again, Amanda pulled out onto Ponce de Leon Avenue. “They could’ve met at a mixer or a social. All those frat boys are thick as thieves.” She’d interviewed her share for the sex crimes unit. They lied like carpets.

“What’s going on there?” Evelyn pointed at the Union Mission. An APD squad car blocked the entrance.

“I have no idea.” Amanda pulled onto the sidewalk and got out of the car. She recognized the patrolman walking out of the building, though she didn’t know his name. He obviously knew both Amanda and Evelyn. His pace quickened as he headed toward his car.

“Excuse me—” Amanda tried, but it was too late. The man got into his cruiser. Rubber squealed against asphalt as he peeled off.

“And the beat goes on,” Evelyn said. She didn’t seem too daunted as she headed toward the mission entrance. Instead of finding Trey Callahan, they saw a pudgy older man wearing a priest’s collar. He was sweeping broken glass off the floor. The front window had been broken. A brick was among the shards.

“Yes?” he asked.

Evelyn took the lead. “We’re with the Atlanta Police Department. We’re looking for Trey Callahan.”

The man seemed confused. “So am I.”

Amanda gathered they’d missed something. “Callahan isn’t here?”

“Who do you think caused this mess?” He indicated the broken glass. “Trey was supposed to open the shelter last night. He didn’t show up, so one of the girls threw a brick through the window.” He leaned against the broom. “I’m sorry, I’ve never dealt with the police before. Are you gals secretaries? The officer who just left said he would need a typed statement.”

Amanda suppressed a groan. The officer had been giving him the runaround. “We’re not secretaries. We’re plainclothes—”

"Detectives," Evelyn interrupted, sounding very sure of herself. "And we don't type statements. What's your name, sir?"

"Father Bailey. I work at the soup kitchen down the street."

He didn't match the descriptions they'd been given. The priest was only a few inches taller than Amanda. "Are you the only one who works at the kitchen?"

"No, my associate does the cooking. Sometimes, I help with the cleaning, but my main duties are to provide spiritual support." He glanced at the clock on the wall. "I'm actually late, so if you girls—"

Evelyn interrupted, "If you work at the soup kitchen, why are you here?"

"I was supposed to meet with Trey this morning. We coordinate once a month, talk about the girls, who might be in trouble, who to look out for."

"And you pulled in and saw the broken window?"

"And a room full of girls sleeping away the morning when they should've been locked out of the building." He indicated the back of the room. "Trey's office has been rifled. Probably one of the girls."

"Did any of them see anything?"

"I hate to be uncharitable, but none of them are particularly helpful unless it directly benefits themselves."

Amanda remembered, "What about Callahan's girlfriend? She's training to be a nurse at Georgia Baptist."

He studied her for a moment. "Yes, I called over there looking for her. Eileen Sapperson. They say she missed her shift last night, too."

"Did the hospital have a home number for her?"

"She doesn't have a home line."

"Do you mind if we—" Amanda indicated Callahan's office. The priest shrugged. He resumed sweeping as they walked to the back of the room.

The office had clearly been tossed, but Amanda wasn't sure whether the perpetrator was a junkie looking for money or a man trying to quickly leave town. Callahan's desk was cleared of all his personal items. No framed photo of his dog and girlfriend. No Slinky. No funk posters. No transistor radio. There were a few joints smoked down to the last centimeter in the ashtray. The drawers hung open. Most important, the stack of typewriter pages was gone.

Evelyn noticed it, too. "Where's his manuscript?"

"I can't imagine a whore using it for anything but toilet paper."

"Callahan got out of here fast. He must've taken the girlfriend."

"On the same night Mary Halston was left dead at Techwood."

"Coincidence?"

Amanda didn't know anymore.

"Let's go talk to the guy at the soup kitchen."

"We can at least ask the priest his name." They walked back into the main room. The priest was gone.

"Hello?" Evelyn called, though they could see every corner of the room. Amanda followed her outside. The sidewalk was empty. No one was in the parking lot. They even checked behind the building. "Well, at least he didn't lie to us."

"That we know of." Amanda walked back toward the Plymouth. The inside of the car was already baking. She turned the key in the ignition. "I'm so sick and tired of being in this car."

"You never really see Columbo driving anywhere."

"I guess Ironside doesn't count."

"I'd like to see what Techwood Homes would make of a cripple in a bread truck."

Amanda pulled out onto the street. "Pepper Anderson just magically appears wherever she needs to be."

"One week, she's a nurse at the hospital. Next week, she's racing on a speedboat. Then she's a go-go dancer, then a flight attendant flirting with some dreamy pilot. Hey—"

"Shut up."

Evelyn chuckled as she leaned her arm on the door. They were both quiet as Amanda drove the few blocks up to Juniper Street.

She asked, "Left? Right?"

"Pick one."

Amanda turned left. She slowed the car, checking each building on the left as Evelyn scanned the right.

They were almost to Pine Street when Evelyn said, "That must be it."

The building was derelict, nothing to indicate it was a church except the large wooden cross stuck in the small patch of yard. It was painted black. Someone had thought to put nails where Jesus's hands and feet would've been. Little red dots of paint indicated His suffering.

"What a dump," Evelyn said.

She was right. The brick façade was crumbling. There were large vertical cracks in the mortar. Graffiti riddled the stoop, which was constructed of dry-stacked cinder blocks. Two of the four downstairs windows were boarded over, but the corresponding windows up top seemed intact.

They both got out of the car and headed toward the building. Amanda felt a breeze from a car passing in the street. It was an Atlanta Police cruiser. The blue light flashed once in greeting, but the driver didn't stop.

The front door to the soup kitchen was open. Amanda smelled herbs and spices as soon as she crossed the threshold. Picnic tables filled the room. Plates and bowls were laid out. Napkins and spoons.

"No sharp objects," Evelyn noted.

"Probably wise." Amanda raised her voice. "Hello?"

"Just a minute," a gruff voice called from the back. They heard pots clattering. Heavy footsteps across the floor. The man came out of the kitchen. Amanda felt gripped by an unexpected fear. They'd learned at the academy that the average door was six feet eight inches high and thirty inches wide. It was a good gauge to estimate a person's height and weight. The man filled the kitchen doorway. His shoulders were almost as wide as the space between the jambs. His head nearly touched the top of the opening.

He smiled. His bottom tooth was crooked. His lips were full. "May I help you, Officers?"

Both of them stood frozen for a second. Amanda reached into her purse, found her badge. She showed it to the man, though he already knew they were cops. Amanda just wanted to say the words. "I'm Detective Wagner. This is Detective Mitchell."

"Please." He gestured to the table. "Have a seat."

He waited politely for them to sit, then took the bench across from them. Again, Amanda couldn't help but make comparisons. The man was almost as wide as both of them put together. Just the sight of his hands gripped together on the table was menacing. He could probably easily wrap his fingers around their necks.

Evelyn took out her notebook. She asked, "What's your name, sir?"

"James Ulster."

"Do you know Trey Callahan?"

He sighed. His voice was so deep that it came out as more of a growl. "Is this about the money he stole?"

"He stole money?" Amanda asked, though it was obvious he had.

"Father Bailey is more mindful of public relations than I am," Ulster explained. "One of the donors on the board noticed that some funds were missing. Trey was to be called to task first thing this morning. I gather he had other plans."

Amanda remembered the phone call Callahan had gotten yesterday when they were in his office. The man had said a donor was on the line. She asked, "They're certain it was Trey who was embezzling money?"

"I'm afraid so." Ulster rested his hands on either side of the bench. He was slumped down, probably out of habit. Such a large man would be accustomed to people feeling intimidated. Though, considering he ran a soup kitchen for Atlanta's huddled masses, his size was probably more of an advantage than not.

Amanda asked, "Do you have any idea where Callahan might have gone?"

Ulster shook his head. "I believe he has a fiancée."

They would have to go to Georgia Baptist next, though Amanda was fairly certain that was a dead end. "You're friends with Mr. Callahan?"

"Did he say that?"

Amanda lied. "He said that you were. Is that wrong?"

"We had theological discussions. We talked about many different things."

"Shakespeare?" Amanda asked. It was a stab in the dark, but it worked.

"Sometimes," Ulster admitted. "Many authors of the seventeenth century wrote in a coded language. It was not a time when subversives were rewarded."

"As in *Hamlet*?" Evelyn asked.

"That's not the best example, but—yes."

"What about Ophelia?"

Ulster's tone took a sharp edge. "She was a liar and a whore."

Amanda felt Evelyn stiffen beside her. She said, "You seem sure of that."

"I'm sorry, but I find the subject matter tiresome. Trey was obsessed with the story. You couldn't often have a conversation without him quoting some obscure line."

That seemed true enough. "Do you know why?"

"It's no secret that he was particularly interested in fallen women. Redemption. Salvation. I'm sure you were treated to one of his lectures on how all of these girls can be saved. He was quite adamant about it, and took it very personally when they failed." Ulster shook his head. "And of course, they do fail. They continually fail. It's in their nature."

Evelyn asked, "Did you ever see Trey acting inappropriately with the girls?"

"I wasn't often at the mission. My work is here. It wouldn't surprise me to

learn that he availed himself. He stole money from a charitable organization. Why would he stop at exploiting fallen women?"

"Did you ever see him angry?"

"Not with my own eyes, but I heard that he had quite a temper. Some of the girls mentioned that he could be violent."

Amanda glanced down at Evelyn's notebook. She wasn't writing down any of this. Maybe she was thinking the same thing as Amanda. Trey Callahan was probably stoned out of his mind most of his waking hours. It was hard to imagine him experiencing anger, let alone acting on it. Of course, they hadn't pegged him for a thief, either.

Evelyn said, "Trey Callahan was writing a book."

"Yes." Ulster drew out the sibilant. "His opus. It wasn't very good."

"You read it?"

"A few pages. Callahan was more suited for the job he had than the job he wanted." He smiled at them. "So many people would better know peace if they just accepted the plans the Lord has for them."

Amanda got the feeling that Ulster was talking to them directly.

Evelyn must've felt the same. Her tone was curt when she asked, "What exactly do you do here, Mr. Ulster?"

"Well, we feed people, obviously. Breakfast is at six in the morning. The lunch hour begins at noon. You'll find the tables start to fill up well before then."

"Those are your only meals?"

"No, we provide dinner as well. That begins at five and is over promptly at seven."

"And then they leave?"

"Most do. Some of them stay the evening. There are twenty beds upstairs. A shower, though the hot water is not reliable. Women only, of course." He made to stand. "Shall I show you?"

"That's not necessary." Amanda didn't want to be trapped upstairs with the man. She asked, "Do you stay here at night?"

"No, there's no need for that. Father Bailey's parish is down the street. He comes by at eleven every evening to lock them in, then he lets them out at six every morning."

Amanda asked, "How long have you worked here?"

He thought it over. "It will be two years come fall."

"What did you do before that?"

"I was a foreman at the railroad yard."

Evelyn indicated the building. "You'll forgive me for saying, but I can't imagine the pay here is on par."

"No, it is not, and what little I make I try to give back."

"You don't get paid for working here—" Evelyn did the math quickly. "Thirteen hours a day?"

"As I said, I take what I need. But it's closer to sixteen hours a day. Seven days a week." He gave an open-handed shrug. "Why would I need earthly riches when my rewards will be in heaven?"

Evelyn shifted on the bench. She seemed as uncomfortable as Amanda felt. "Did you ever meet a working girl named Kitty Treadwell?"

"No." He stared at them blankly. "Not that I can recall, but we have many

prostitutes here.”

Amanda unzipped her purse and found the license. She showed him Kitty’s photograph.

Ulster reached out for the paper. He was careful not to touch her hand. He studied the photograph, then his eyes shifted to the name and address. His lips moved silently, as if he was sounding out the words.

He finally said, “She looks markedly healthier in this photo. I suppose it was taken before she succumbed to the devil of her addiction.”

Evelyn clarified, “So you knew Kitty?”

“Yes, if not by name.”

“When’s the last time you saw her?”

“A month ago? Maybe more.”

That didn’t make sense. Amanda laid out Lucy Bennett’s license, then Mary Halston’s. “How about these girls?”

He leaned over the table and studied them one by one. He took his time. Again, his lips moved as he read the names. Amanda listened to his breathing, the steady inhale and exhale. She could see the top of his head. Dandruff dotted his light brown hair.

“Yes.” He looked up. “This girl. She was here a few times, but she favored the mission. I expect because she had a thing with Trey.” He was pointing to Mary Halston, the murder victim from last night. “This girl.” He pointed to Lucy. “I’m not sure about her. They both look very similar. They are both obviously drug addicts. It is the scourge of our generation.”

Evelyn verified, “You recognize Lucy Bennett and Mary Halston as girls who’ve used this soup kitchen?”

“I believe so.”

Evelyn was writing now. “And Mary was a favorite of Trey Callahan’s?”

“That’s correct.”

“When’s the last time you saw either Lucy or Mary?”

“A few weeks ago? Maybe a month?” Again, he studied the photos. “They both look very healthy in these photographs.” He looked back up, first at Evelyn, then Amanda. “You are both police officers, so I assume you are more accustomed to the ravages of drug abuse. These girls. These poor girls.” He sadly shook his head. “Drugs are a poison, and I do not know why our Lord caused it to be, but there is a certain type who succumbs to this temptation. They tremble before the drug when they should be trembling before the Lord.”

His voice resonated in the open room. Amanda could imagine him holding forth from the pulpit. Or the streets. “There’s a pimp whose street name is Juice.”

“I am familiar with that sinner.”

“He says you sometimes preach to the girls when they’re working?”

“I do the Lord’s work, no matter the danger.”

Amanda didn’t imagine he felt much danger, considering no sane person would be happy to run into a man as large as James Ulster in a dark alley. “Have you ever been to Techwood Homes?”

“On many occasions,” he answered. “I deliver soup to the shut-ins. Techwood is Mondays and Fridays. Grady Homes is Tuesdays and Thursdays. There is another kitchen that services Perry Homes, Washington Heights—”

"Thank you," Evelyn interrupted, "but we're just concerned with Techwood."

"I've heard that there have been some awful things happening there." He gripped his hands together. "It tries the soul to see how those people live. But I suppose we all shuffle off the same mortal coil."

Amanda felt her heart stop mid-beat. "Trey Callahan used that same phrase with us. It's from Shakespeare."

"Is it?" he asked. "Perhaps I picked up his manner of speaking. As I said, he was incessant on the topic."

"Do you remember a working girl named Jane Delray?"

"No. Is she in trouble?"

"How about Hank Bennett? Have you ever met him?" Evelyn waited, but Ulster shook his head. "He's got hair about your color. Around six feet tall. Very well dressed."

"No, sister, I'm afraid I do not."

The radio in Evelyn's purse clicked. There was a muffled call, followed by a series of clicks. Evelyn reached into the bag to turn down the sound, but then stopped when her name came through the speaker.

"Mitchell?" Amanda recognized Butch Bonnie's voice.

"Excuse me," she said, taking out the radio. "Mitchell, ten-four."

Butch ordered, "Twenty-five me your location. Now."

There were more clicks on the radio—a collective response of laughter. Butch was telling them both to meet him outside.

Evelyn told Ulster, "Thank you for speaking with us. I hope you won't mind if we call with any questions?"

"Of course not. Shall I give you my telephone number?"

Her pen nearly disappeared in Ulster's left hand. He gripped it in his fist, not between his thumb and index finger, as he wrote down the seven digits. Above this, he carefully wrote his name. It was more like a child's scrawl. The ballpoint tore through the paper on the last letter.

"Thank you," Evelyn said. She was visibly reluctant to take back the pen. She slid on the cap and closed her notebook. Ulster stood when they did. He offered his hand to each of them. They were all sweating in the heat, but there was something particularly clammy about Ulster's skin. He held their hands delicately, but for Amanda's part, it only served to remind her that he could crush the bones if he so chose.

Evelyn's breathing was shallow as they walked toward the door. "Jesus," she whispered. As relieved as they both were to be away from Ulster, the sight of Butch Bonnie almost sent Amanda back inside. He was obviously livid.

"What the fuck are you two doing?" He grabbed Evelyn by the arm and dragged her down the cinder-block stairs.

Amanda said, "Don't you—"

"Shut your face!" He pushed Amanda against the wall. His fist reared back, but stopped short of punching her. "How many times do you have to be told?" he demanded. "Both of you!" He stepped back. His feet scuffed across the sidewalk. "Jesus Christ."

Amanda pressed her hand to her chest. She could feel her heart punching against her rib cage. And then she saw that Evelyn had fallen. She ran to help her up.

"No." Evelyn stood up on her own. She slammed both hands into Butch's chest.

"What the—" He stumbled back.

She slammed him again. Then again, until he was up against the wall. "If you ever touch me like that again, I will shoot you in the face. Do you hear me?"

Butch looked dumbstruck. "What the hell's gotten into you?"

Evelyn paced back and forth. She was like a caged animal. "I am so sick of you assholes."

"Me?" Butch took out his cigarettes. "Whadabout you broads? How many times you gotta be told to leave this be?" He dug his finger into the pack. "I tried to be nice. I tried to warn you easy. And then I hear you're snooping around my CI. Making trouble. Mr. Nice Guy ain't workin'. What else am I supposed to do?"

"Who's your CI?"

"None of your goddamn business."

Evelyn slapped away the cigarettes. She was so gripped by anger she had trouble speaking. "You know that dead woman is Jane Delray."

His eyes cut to the side. "I don't know shit."

"Who told you to say it was Lucy Bennett?"

"Ain't nobody tellin' me to do nothin'."

Evelyn wouldn't give up. "Juice didn't kill Lucy Bennett."

"You best be careful pining after some nigger in jail." He gave her a condescending look as he picked up his Marlboros. "Jesus, Ev. Why you comin' off like some kind of bull dyke?" He looked to Amanda for help. "Come on, Wag. Talk some sense into Annie Oakley here."

Amanda tasted bile in her throat. She threw out the filthiest thing she could think of. "You motherfucker."

He barked a shocked laugh. "You're motherfuckerin' me?" He fished in his pocket for his lighter. "You wanna know who's mother-fucked?" He lit the cigarette. "You're fucked"—he nodded toward Amanda—"for going to the jail yesterday, and you"—he pointed to Evelyn—"are fucked for putting her up to all this."

"Putting me up to what?" Amanda demanded. "She's not my keeper."

He hissed out a stream of smoke. "You're both gonna be transferred tomorrow. I hope you still got your white gloves for crossing duty."

"I hope you're up for a sex discrimination lawsuit," Evelyn shot back. "You and Landry both."

Smoke snorted out from his nostrils. "You ditzzy bitches throw that around all the time, but you know what? Ain't a one'a you done it yet. Keep cryin' wolf while you're directing traffic." He waved to them over his shoulder as he walked away.

Evelyn stood watching him, her fists clenching and unclenching. For just a moment, Amanda thought she might chase after Butch and jump on his back. Amanda wasn't sure what she would do if this happened. Her fingernails were short but strong. She could probably scratch his eyes. Failing that, she would bite off anything she could get between her teeth.

"I am so sick of this." Evelyn started pacing again. "I am sick of taking bullshit from them. I am sick of being lied to." She kicked the Plymouth's tire. "I'm sick

of not getting a car. I'm sick of people thinking I'm some kind of fucking secretary." She gripped her purse. "Why didn't I shoot him? God, I wanted to shoot him."

"We can do it now." Amanda had never been so ready to do anything in her life. "We'll go find him and do it right now."

Evelyn hefted her purse over her shoulder. She crossed her arms. "I'm not going to prison for that—" She stopped. "What did you call him? Motherfucker?" She gave a surprised laugh. "I didn't know you even knew that word."

Amanda realized her hands were clenched, too. She stretched out her fingers one by one. "I suppose this is what happens when you hang around pimps and whores."

"Crossing guard duty." Evelyn disgustedly huffed out the words. "It's summer. We'll be stuck with all the stupid kids who couldn't hack it during the regular year."

Amanda opened the car door. "Let's go to Georgia Baptist and see if we can find Trey Callahan's fiancée."

"Are you kidding me? You heard what Butch said."

"That's tomorrow. Let's just worry about today."

Evelyn walked around to the other side of the car. "And then what, Scarlett O'Hara?"

"And then we go to Techwood and see if Miss Lula found someone who remembered seeing Hank Bennett." Amanda turned over the ignition. "And then ask her if she's ever seen a giant weird man delivering soup to shut-ins."

Evelyn clutched her purse in her lap. "Ulster admitted that he's in and out of Techwood Homes. Mondays and Fridays. The same days our victims showed up."

"He lied to us." Amanda pulled out onto the street. "How could he read Trey Callahan's manuscript if he can barely read the name on a license?"

"You noticed that, too?" Evelyn said, "He didn't sound retarded."

"Maybe he's just a slow reader."

"Butch said we were messing with his CI. Do you think that's Ulster? Father Bailey? I wonder where that weasel scurried off to. Locking those girls in at night. It's a regular Triangle Shirtwaist Factory. Have you ever?"

"Ulster seemed pretty eager to put Trey Callahan in the frame for all this. The Ophelia line. That bit about his temper."

"You clocked that, too?" Evelyn rested her elbow on the door. "I know we're all Christians here, but I don't like the way Ulster uses it. Like it makes him better than everyone else. Did you pick up on that?"

Amanda was only certain of one thing. "I think James Ulster is the scariest man I've ever met in my life. There's something evil about him."

"Exactly," Evelyn agreed. "Did you see how big his hands are?"

Amanda felt a shudder working its way up her spine.

Evelyn said, "Someone higher up is working against us."

"I know," Amanda mumbled.

"Butch is connected, but not enough to get us transferred. It has to be somebody who knew you were talking to Juice at the jail yesterday. Who knew we were talking to Ulster today. And Father Bailey. And Trey Callahan. Or,

maybe I stirred up something checking the DNFs.” She chewed her lip. “Whatever we did, it pissed off someone enough to get us yanked off the street and tied to crossing duty.”

“I know,” Amanda repeated. She waited for Evelyn to say more, but the woman had probably jumped to the same conclusion as Amanda. Duke Wagner wasn’t officially back in uniform, but he was already pulling strings.

Amanda looked at her watch. Eight-fifteen in the evening. Nighttime brought no relief from the summer heat. If anything, it gave the humidity reason to come out and play. Amanda felt as if her sweat was sweating. Mosquitoes circled her head as she stood in front of the phone booth on the corner of Juniper and Pine. She left the door open so that the light would not come on. The dime felt greasy between her fingers. Amanda dropped the coin into the slot, then slowly dialed her father’s number.

She’d left Duke’s house fifteen minutes ago. Amanda had cooked his supper. She’d listened with half an ear as he’d relayed the day’s news, delivered the latest updates on his case. It was just a matter of time before Duke was back at his old post. Just a matter of time before Amanda was back under his thumb. She had only nodded—nodded as she watched him eat, nodded as she washed the dishes. An overwhelming sadness had taken hold. Every time she opened her mouth to speak, she shut it for fear of crying.

Duke picked up the telephone on the first ring. His voice was gravelly, probably from too many after-dinner cigarettes. “Hello?”

“Daddy, it’s me.”

“You home?”

“No, Daddy.”

He waited, then asked, “Car break down?”

“No, sir.”

She heard his recliner squeak. “What is it? I know something’s bothering you. You were sulking all night.”

Amanda caught her reflection in the chrome of the pay phone. She was twenty-five years old. She had touched a dead person last weekend. She had stared down a pimp yesterday morning. Helped examine a dead girl last night. She had stood up to Butch Bonnie in the street. She should be able to have a frank conversation with her father.

She asked, “Why did you have me transferred to crossing guard duty?”

“What?” He seemed genuinely surprised. “I didn’t transfer you. Who the hell transferred you?” She could hear papers rustling, a pen clicking. “Give me the jackass’s name. I’ll talk to him about a transfer.”

“You didn’t do it?”

“Why would I transfer you out when I’m gonna be back at my old squad in less than a month?”

He was right. What’s more, if Duke was displeased with someone, he generally told them to their face. “I’m on crossing duty, starting tomorrow.” She’d already called dispatch to verify it was true. “Along with Evelyn Mitchell.”

“Mitchell?” His tone changed. “What’re you doing with that pushy broad? I told you to stay away from her.”

“I know you did, but we’re working a case together.”

He grunted. "What kind of case?"

"Two girls have been murdered." She added, "White girls. They lived at Techwood Homes."

"Whores, I guess?"

"Yes, they were."

He was silent, obviously thinking. "This have something to do with that nigger got charged for killing a white girl?"

"Yes, sir."

She heard the flick of his lighter, a huff of air as he exhaled. "That why you were at the jail yesterday morning?"

Amanda couldn't swallow past the lump in her throat. She saw her life starting to disappear before her eyes. Her apartment. Her job. Her freedom.

Duke said, "Heard you stared that coon down. Locked yourself in a room with him."

Amanda didn't answer. Hearing Duke say the words made her realize how crazy she had been. How stupid. She was lucky she'd escaped with her life.

Duke asked, "Were you scared?"

She knew he would see through a lie. "I was terrified."

"But you didn't let him see it."

"No, sir."

She heard him take another long drag on his cigarette. "I guess you think you're going to be out late tonight?"

"I—" Amanda didn't know what to say. She glanced down the street. The moon was almost full in the sky. The black wooden cross cast a shadow across the sidewalk in front of the soup kitchen. "We're staking out a possible suspect."

"We?"

She let the question go unanswered.

"What evidence do you got?"

"Nothing," she admitted. "Just—" She searched for a better explanation, but could only come up with, "Women's intuition."

"Don't call it that," he ordered. "Call it a hunch. You feel it in your gut, not between your legs."

Amanda didn't know what to say other than, "All right."

He coughed a few times. "That's Rick Landry's case you're poking around, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"I wouldn't trust that idiot to find his asshole in a snowstorm." His chuckle turned into a sharp cough. "If you're out late, you'll need your sleep. I'll get myself breakfast tomorrow morning."

The phone clicked in her ear. Amanda stared at the receiver as if the plastic mouthpiece could explain to her what had just happened. She didn't look up until a pair of headlights flashed for her attention.

Evelyn's Falcon station wagon smelled of candy and cheap wine. She smiled as Amanda settled into the passenger's seat. "You okay?"

"Just puzzled." She told Evelyn about the phone call with her father.

"Well." Evelyn sounded circumspect. "Do you think he's telling the truth?"

"Yes." Duke was a lot of things, but he was not a liar.

"Then he must be telling the truth."

Amanda knew that Evelyn would never trust Duke. She could understand why. As far as the other woman was concerned, he was cut from the same cloth as Rick Landry and Butch Bonnie. And maybe he was, but he was still Amanda's father.

Evelyn stared down the street at the soup kitchen. "Is Ulster even in there?"

"He's cleaning up." Amanda had walked by earlier and seen James Ulster lifting a large soup pot off the table. His back was to her, but she'd still quickened her step. "There's a green van parked behind the building. I called in the license plate—it's registered to the church. There were some religious tracts in the front seat, a Bible on the dash. It has wooden crates in the back, a bunch of ropes. I guess he uses them to keep the food from spilling."

"Delivering food to the needy. That sounds like a serial killer to me."

"Surely you can think of one?"

Evelyn wasn't up for teasing. "Driving over here, part of me felt like I was going to my own funeral." She crossed her arms low on her waist. "Our last day on the job, or at least our real job. The job we want to do. I don't think I can fit into my crossing guard uniform anymore. I thought that thing was retired."

Amanda didn't want to talk about it. "Did you call Georgia Baptist?"

"Callahan's fiancée is named Eileen Sapperson so at least we were told the truth about that. She didn't show up for work this morning. No home phone number. No address. Another Doug Henning magical disappearance."

"Another dead end," Amanda noted. Miss Lula hadn't been able to find anyone at Techwood who remembered seeing a man fitting Hank Bennett's description, and while plenty of people knew the hulking Mr. Ulster, none of them had ever seen him cause trouble. It was hard to make enemies of people to whom you were bringing a hot meal.

Evelyn said, "James Ulster is at Techwood every Monday and Friday, the same days the victims were found."

"He's in and out so much that no one would notice him," Amanda added. "He knew Kitty, at least. He knew enough about Mary Halston to say that Trey had a thing for her. He probably knew Lucy Bennett, too."

"He's the only one who puts the girls as alive recently. Jane Delray, Hank Bennett, Trey Callahan, Juice—they all say the three girls have been gone at least a year."

"Maybe Ulster is Butch's CI. He could've said Lucy Bennett was dead so her brother would stop looking for her."

"Was he really looking for her?" Evelyn asked. "As far as we know, he stopped when he found Kitty. And none of this explains why Hodge sent us out in the first place. Or who transferred us if it wasn't your father. Any of it."

Amanda couldn't bear the thought of spinning it all around again. No matter how many times they talked it through, the construction paper puzzle would likely never be solved. Evelyn had her family to go home to. Amanda had her schoolwork, a major paper to write. They had never really been assigned this case, and tomorrow, their authority would be no greater than that conferred upon them by screaming school-aged adolescents.

Evelyn said, "I was thinking—what would happen if I really did file a sexual discrimination suit?" She rested her hand on the steering wheel. "What would they do? The law is on my side. Butch is right. We can't keep threatening it

without following through. It's lost its teeth."

"You'd never get promoted again. They'd stick you at the airport, which is only marginally more humiliating than crossing duty." Amanda felt the need to tell her, "But I would testify for you. I saw what Rick did. And Butch. They had no right to do that."

"Oh, Mandy, you're such a good friend." She reached out and grabbed Amanda's hand. "You've made this stupid job almost bearable."

Amanda looked down at their hands. Evelyn's were so much more elegant than her own. "You've never called me Mandy before."

"You don't really seem like one."

Amanda didn't feel like one anymore. Did a Mandy go into a jailhouse and rattle a pimp? Did a Mandy stand up to bullies and call them nasty names?

Evelyn said, "You know, I was so scared of you when Hodge first sent us on that call."

Amanda didn't have to ask why. If this week had taught her anything, it was that the Wagner name was not the asset she once believed.

Evelyn said, "But you turned out to be so swell. If there's anything good that came out of this, it's our friendship."

Amanda had been fighting weepiness all night. She could only nod.

Evelyn squeezed her hand before letting go. "I don't have many friends. Any friends, really."

"I find that hard to believe."

"Oh, I used to have lots of them." She twisted her fingers into her hair. "Bill and I would go to parties every weekend. Two or three. Sometimes four." She let out a long sigh. "Everyone thought it was a gas when I joined the force, but then they saw I wasn't going to quit and suddenly there was nothing we could talk about. I didn't want to swap recipes or plan bake sales. They couldn't understand why I would want to do a man's job. You should hear my mother-in-law on the subject." She laughed ruefully. "This job changes you. It changes how you think, how you see the world. I don't care what the boys say. We *are* cops. We live it and breathe it as much as they do."

"You don't see Butch and Landry out here right now."

"No, they're probably home with their families."

Amanda doubted that. "Their mistresses, more likely."

"Hey, that's him." They saw Ulster locking the front door of the building. The darkness did him no favors. He was a hulking man. Amanda could not imagine anyone putting up much of a struggle against such raw power.

He glanced up the street. Both Amanda and Evelyn ducked, but Ulster didn't seem to notice the red station wagon, or if he did, he didn't think much of it. In retrospect, the car—with its children's toys in the back and crayons melted into the carpet—was the perfect cover.

Amanda held her breath as she waited for Ulster to reappear. It felt like hours but was only minutes before Evelyn finally said, "Here he comes."

The green van turned onto Juniper. They stayed hunched down as it passed. Evelyn cranked the key. The engine sputtered, then caught. She pushed the knob to make sure the headlights were off, then swung the nose out into the street and smoothly entered the opposite lane.

"You're getting better at this," Amanda said.

"Last hurrah," she muttered.

There were no streetlights on Juniper. The moon was enough to drive by, and where she couldn't see, Evelyn coasted her way through.

Ulster took a left onto Piedmont Avenue. He drove deep into Bedford Pine. The stench of Buttermilk Bottom filled the car, but they kept the windows down.

"Where is he going?" Evelyn asked.

Amanda shook her head. She had no idea.

The van braked at the last minute, taking a sharp turn onto Ralph McGill. Amanda directed, "Cut over to Courtland."

Evelyn had to reverse to make the turn. "Do you think he spotted us?"

"I don't know." Their headlights were still off. The car's interior was dark. "Maybe he's just being careful."

"Why would he be careful?" Evelyn sucked in her breath. The green van was up ahead. "There he is."

They followed the van up Courtland. The road was a straight shot. Evelyn hung back at least a hundred yards. When the van turned onto Pine, the lights from Crawford Long Hospital illuminated the interior. They saw Ulster's unmistakable frame. Evelyn slowed, peering down the street before making the turn to follow him. The lights from the expressway made the going more difficult. He turned onto Spring Street.

"Evelyn," Amanda said.

"I know." She followed him up North Avenue. Past the Varsity. Over the expressway. He was going to Techwood. "Get my radio."

Amanda found Evelyn's purse on the back seat. The revolver was cold in her hands. She passed this to Evelyn, who kept one hand on the wheel as she slid the gun underneath her leg.

Amanda clicked the radio. "Dispatch?"

There was no answer.

"Dispatch, this is unit sixteen. Over?"

The radio clicked. "Unit twenty-three to unit sixteen," a man's voice said. "You gals need some help?"

Amanda gripped the radio in her hand. She had called for dispatch, not some hillbilly out on patrol.

"Copy sixteen?" the man asked. "What's your locale?"

Amanda spoke through gritted teeth. "Techwood Homes."

"Repeat, please."

Amanda enunciated the words. "Tech. Wood. Homes."

"Copy that. Perry Homes."

"Jesus," Evelyn hissed. "He thinks this is a joke."

Amanda clutched the radio as hard as she could, wanting to break it over the man's head. She put her finger to the button, but couldn't bring herself to press it.

"Amanda," Evelyn mumbled. Her voice had a tone of warning.

Up ahead, the green van didn't slow to turn on Techwood Drive. Instead, it continued straight, going into the heart of the ghetto.

"This isn't good," Evelyn said. "There's no reason for him to be here."

Amanda didn't bother to vocalize her agreement. They were in a part of town that no one—black, white, cop, or criminal—willingly entered after dark.

The van turned again. Evelyn slowed, nosing into the turn, making sure they weren't sitting ducks. Just ahead, they saw the van's taillights glowing softly. Ulster obviously knew where he was going. His pace was slow and deliberate.

Amanda tried the radio again. "Dispatch, sixteen going north on Cherry."

The man in unit twenty-three answered. "What's that, sixteen? You wanna gimme your cherry?"

There was more clicking as the radio was jammed.

Dispatch cut through the chatter. "Ten-thirty-four, all units. Sixteen, repeat your ten-twenty."

Evelyn said, "That's Rachel Foster." The women in dispatch were the only ones who could override the nonsense. Evelyn grabbed the radio. "Sixteen heading north on Cherry. Possible thirty-four on a green Dodge van. Georgia license plate—" She squinted at the van. "Charlie, Victor, William, eight-eight-eight."

Rachel said, "Verify ten-twenty, unit sixteen?"

Amanda took the radio so Evelyn could return both hands to the wheel. "Verify Cherry Street, Dispatch. Heading north."

"Are you kidding me?" Rachel's tone was terse. She knew the streets better than most cops on the road. "Sixteen?"

The car was silent. They both stared at the green van heading deep into the ghetto. Was Ulster leading them into a trap?

"Sixteen?" Rachel repeated.

Amanda said, "Verify heading North on Cherry."

Static filled the seconds. Rachel said, "Give me five minutes. Hold your location. Repeat, hold."

Amanda put the radio in her lap. Evelyn kept driving.

Amanda asked, "Why did you report the van as possibly stolen?"

"All we need is whoever that cowboy is on unit twenty-three rushing in here with lights and sirens."

"Maybe that wouldn't be such a bad thing." Amanda had never been in this part of town. She doubted any white woman ever had. There were no street signs. No lights on inside the houses that dotted either side of the street. Even the moon seemed to glow less brightly here.

The van took another left. The air felt too thick. Amanda had to breathe through her mouth. The street was lined with junker cars on both sides. If Evelyn followed Ulster, there would be no way to hide the station wagon from him. In the end, they didn't need to. The van's brake lights flashed as he slowed down and turned into the driveway of a clapboard house. As with the others, there were no lights on inside. Electricity was a luxury in this part of town.

"Are they abandoned?" Evelyn asked, meaning the houses. Some of them were boarded up. Others were so dilapidated that the roofs had caved in.

"I can't tell."

They both sat in the car. Ulster got out of the van and entered the house. Neither woman knew what to do. They couldn't very well kick down the door and go in guns blazing.

Amanda said, "Rachel should've radioed back by now."

Evelyn kept her hands gripped around the steering wheel. They both stared at Ulster's house. A light came on in one of the back rooms. It cut a sliver of white

across the front of the green van parked in the driveway.

Evelyn's voice was little more than a whisper. "Would you think I was a coward if I said we should call in unit twenty-three?"

Amanda had been wondering how to ask the same question. "He could tell Ulster the van was reported stolen."

"And ask to look around inside the house."

And get shot in the face. Or chest. Or punched. Or stabbed. Or beaten.

"Do it," Evelyn said.

Amanda pressed the button on the radio. "Twenty-three?" There was only static. Even the clicks were gone. "Dispatch?"

"Shit," Evelyn cursed. "We're probably in a pocket." There were dead spots all over the city. Evelyn put the car in reverse. "It was working the last block over. We can—"

A scream pierced the air. It was feral, terror inducing. Something inside of Amanda recoiled. Her body broke out in a cold sweat. Every muscle tensed. The sound triggered a primitive urge to flee.

"My God," Evelyn gasped. "Was that an animal?"

Amanda could still hear the sound echoing in her ears. She'd never heard anything so terrifying in her life.

Suddenly, the radio came to life. "Sixteen? Twenty-three here. You foxes reconsider my offer?"

"Thank God," Evelyn whispered. She pressed the button, but didn't have time to speak.

The second scream was like a knife cutting straight through Amanda's heart. It wasn't an animal. It was the desperate cry of a woman begging for help.

The radio crackled. "Sixteen, what the hell was that?"

Amanda's purse was on the floorboard. She reached inside and pulled out her revolver. She grabbed the door handle.

Evelyn's foot slipped off the brake. "What are you doing?"

"Stop the car." It was rolling back. "Stop the car."

"Amanda, you can't—"

The woman screamed again.

Amanda pushed open the door. She stumbled as she got out of the car. Her knee dug into the asphalt. Her hose ripped. She couldn't stop herself. Wouldn't stop herself. "Get twenty-three. Get everybody you can." Evelyn yelled for her to wait, but Amanda kicked off her shoes and started running.

The woman screamed again. She was in the house. Ulster's house.

Amanda tightened her grip on the revolver as she ran down the street. Her arms pumped. Her vision tunneled. She slipped as she rounded into Ulster's driveway. Her hose bunched up at the balls of her feet. She slowed. The front door was shut. The only light was toward the back of the house.

Amanda tried to quiet her breathing, keeping her mouth open, taking in gulps of air. She squeezed past the van. She crouched down low, though no one could see her. The house blocked the moonlight, painting everything in shadow. She pointed her revolver straight ahead, finger on the trigger, not on the side like they had taught her, because she was going to shoot anybody who walked into her path.

The scream came again. It wasn't as loud this time, but it was more desperate.

More frightened.

Amanda steeled herself as she approached the open window. The light was coming through a pair of heavy black curtains. She could hear the woman moaning with each breath. Almost mewling. Carefully, Amanda peered through the part in the curtains. She saw an old washstand. A sink. A bed. The woman was there. Sitting up. Blonde hair streaked red. Emaciated but for her distended belly. The skin on her arms and shoulders was a bloody pulp. Her lips and eyelids were torn where she'd ripped them open. Blood coated every inch of her skin—her face, her throat, her chest.

The girl screamed again, but not before Amanda heard something behind her.

A shoe scuffing on concrete.

Amanda started to turn, but a large hand grabbed her from behind.

July 15, 1975

LUCY BENNETT

Her shoulders were free, but she did not care.

Her arms were free, but she did not care.

Her waist, her hips—free for the first time in over a year.

But she did not care.

Could not care.

There was only the baby delivered from her body. The beautiful little boy. Ten fingers. Ten toes. Perfect blond hair. Perfect little mouth.

Lucy ran her finger along his lips. The first woman to touch him. The first woman to open her heart and feel the absolute joy that was this creature.

She wiped the slime from his nose and mouth. She lightly rested her palm on his chest and felt his beating heart. Flutter, flutter, like a butterfly. He was so beautiful. So tiny. How had something so perfect grown inside of her? How had something so sweet come out of something so utterly spoiled?

“You’re dying.”

Lucy felt her senses sharpen.

Patty Hearst.

The second girl. The other woman from the other room.

She stood in the doorway, afraid to come in. She was dressed. He let her wear clothes. He let her walk around. He let her do anything but come into Lucy’s room. Even now, both of them alone, her toes would not cross the threshold.

“You’re dying,” the woman repeated.

They both heard the noises outside the window. Yelling. Gunfire. He would win. He would always win.

The baby cooed, legs kicking up.

Lucy looked down at her child. Her perfect baby. Her redemption. Her salvation. Her one good thing.

She tried to concentrate on his beautiful face, the light flowing back and forth between their bodies.

Nothing else mattered. Not the pain. Not the smell. Not the wheezing breaths coming from her own mouth.

Not the sucking of wind around the large knife sticking out of her chest.

Present Day

WEDNESDAY

Sara woke to the smell of Betty's hot breath. The dog was curled on the couch in front of her, body twisted, snout inches from Sara's face. Sara rolled the little thing over like a baker making bread. Betty's collar tinkled. She yawned.

Will's clothes were on the floor, but he wasn't in the room. Sara put her hand to her face. Touched her lips where Will had touched them. Stroked her throat. Her mouth felt bruised from his kisses. Her skin tingled at the thought of him.

She was in it now. Maybe it had happened back when Will was washing dishes in her mother's kitchen. Or that day at work when Sara had felt completely inconsolable until he gently caressed her hand. Or last night when he had stared at her so intently that she felt as if everything inside her was opening up to him.

No matter when it had happened, the possibility had been rendered fact. Sara was deeply and profoundly in love with Will Trent. There was no walking back from it. No denying it. Her heart had made the decision while her brain was making excuses. She knew it the minute she saw him last night. Sara would do anything to keep him. Accept his secrets. Tolerate his silences. Put up with his awful wife.

Help send his father to death row.

Pete Hanson would be dead by the time the case went to trial. Sara would be called to testify. It would be a capital case. The girl had been kidnapped and murdered, the combination of which met Georgia's legal requirement for seeking the death penalty.

Will's father had meticulously cleaned Ashleigh Snyder, but the man had been behind bars for the last three decades. Television and prison science would've educated him on the forensic progress happening outside his cellblock, but it was highly unlikely that he'd ever heard of hair extensions. Which was ironic, considering the killer's predilection for needle and thread.

The process of weaving hair took hours. A thin cornrow, or "track," was braided in a tight half circle around the back of the head. Then a needle and thread were used to sew in patches of new, longer, fuller hair. Several more rows were added one at a time, depending on how much money and time the woman was willing to spend. It wasn't cheap. The natural hair eventually grew out. The weave had to be tightened every two weeks. More stitches were added each time. Simple shampooing couldn't clean out all the nooks and crevices between the old hair and new.

This was where Sara had recovered traces of semen—tiny dried specks trapped between thin strings of thread. She would eventually have to walk the jury through her discovery, describe the weaving technique and explain why the proteins in seminal fluid fluoresce under black light.

And then the judge would likely hand down a sentence of death by lethal injection.

Sara let out a heavy sigh. She looked at the clock. Six-thirty in the morning. She was supposed to be at work by eight. She found Will's shirt and put it on, buttoning it as she walked into the kitchen.

He was standing at the stove making pancakes. He smiled at her. "Hungry?"

"Very." Sara kissed the back of his neck. His skin was warm. She resisted the urge to wrap her arms around him and declare her love. Will's life was complicated enough right now without Sara putting him on the spot. Telling someone you loved them was tantamount to asking them to repeat the words back.

Will said, "Sorry I don't have any coffee."

Sara sat down at the table. Will didn't drink coffee. He drank hot chocolate every morning, and because that wasn't enough sugar, he usually complemented his beverage with a Pop-Tart. "I'll get some later."

He offered, "I can make eggs if you want."

"No, thank you." Sara rubbed her face with her hands. Her brain wasn't awake yet, but she could tell that there was something wrong. Will was already dressed for work in a navy suit and tie. His jacket was draped over the kitchen chair. His hair was combed. His face was freshly shaven. He seemed happy, which wasn't that unusual, but he was too happy. Too bouncy. He couldn't stand still. His foot tapped as he stood at the stove. When he slid the pancakes onto a plate, his fingers drummed on the counter.

Sara had seen this kind of attitude before. It usually came when someone had made up their mind. The pressure was off. The decision was made. They were all in. Ready to get it over with.

"Madam." He put the plate in front of her.

She smelled it then—oil and cordite. On his hands. On the table.

"Thanks." Sara stood from the chair. She washed her hands at the sink. The smell was stronger now that she was awake and thinking. Will had cleaned up after himself, but not well enough. She wiped her hands with a paper towel. When she opened the cabinet for the trash, she saw the dirty cleaning patches.

Sara closed the cabinet door. She'd grown up around guns. She knew the smell of cleaning oil. She knew Will kept a backup weapon in his safe. She knew the look of a man who'd made up his mind.

She turned around.

Will was sitting at the table, fork in his hand. His plate was dripping with syrup. He talked around a mouthful of pancakes. "I got your gym bag out of the car." He used the fork to point to the bag on the floor. "Sorry about tearing your dress."

She leaned against the sink. "You're working at the airport today?"

He nodded. "Mind if I borrow your car? Mine's acting up."

"Sure." They would be looking for Will's car around the hotel. Sara's BMW was practically nondescript in that part of town.

"Thanks." He shoved another forkful of pancakes into his mouth.

She said, "Let's call in sick today."

His chewing slowed. He met her gaze.

"I want us to go away together," she said. "My cousin has a house on the Gulf we can use. Let's just get out of here. Leave town."

He swallowed. "That sounds nice."

"We can take the dogs and run on the beach every morning." She wrapped her arms around her waist. "And then we can go back to bed. And then we can eat lunch. And then we can go back to bed."

He gave her a forced grin. "That sounds really nice."

"Then let's do it. Right now."

"Okay," he agreed. "I'll drop you off at your place, then go run some errands."

Sara stopped pretending. "I'm not going to let you do it."

Will sat back in his chair. The nervous energy was gone. She watched it slowly leave his body. Now there was only the grief and sorrow that had broken her heart the day before.

"Will—"

He cleared his throat. The sound turned into a cough. His throat worked as he fought back tears. "She was just a student."

Sara bit her lip.

"She was walking to class one night, and he saw her, and he took her, and that was it. Her life was over." He put down his fork. "You know what was done to her. You saw the girl yesterday. He did the same thing to both of them."

Will's cell rang. He grabbed the phone out of his pocket. "Did you arrest him?" The devastation on his face told Sara the answer. "Where?" He listened a few seconds longer, then hung up. "Faith's waiting in the driveway."

"What happened?" Even as she said the words, Sara knew they were pointless. Another body had been found. Another life destroyed. Will's father had killed again.

Will stood. He grabbed his jacket off the back of the chair. He wouldn't look at her. She could practically hear his thoughts: He should've gone through with it. He should've taken his gun and gone to the hotel the minute he heard that his father was free.

He said, "Amanda wants you to come, too."

Sara didn't want to be a burden. Amanda had dragged her into this once before. "Do you want me there?"

"Amanda does."

"I don't care about Amanda. I only want to do what's best for you. Easiest for you."

Will stood in the doorway. He seemed about to say something profound, but then he reached down and retrieved her gym bag. "Try to hurry. I'll be outside."

July 15, 1975

James Ulster grabbed Amanda by the back of the neck. She felt like a kitten snatched by its scruff. Her arms went slack. Her toes lifted from the ground.

And then she remembered the revolver in her hand.

She snaked the gun around her side and pulled the trigger. Once. Twice. Three times. His body jerked as he was hit, but his grip only tightened. She pulled the trigger again. The muzzle flash singed Amanda's side. The gun was ripped from her hand. Ulster grunted. The muzzle was hot enough to burn his flesh. The gun clattered to the ground.

Amanda dropped to her knees, feeling blindly for the weapon. Ulster jerked her up by her arm. She felt like the bone was cracking. Her feet left the ground again. Her back slammed against the house. The breath was knocked out of her. She kicked and clawed as Ulster's hand wrapped around her neck. She dug her fingernails into his skin. His face contorted in rage. Amanda felt dizzy. There wasn't enough breath to fill her lungs.

"Let her go!" Evelyn screamed. She had her Kel-Lite crossed under her revolver. "Now!"

Ulster didn't believe her. He tightened his grip on Amanda.

Evelyn pulled the trigger. Ulster's grip loosened around Amanda's neck. Evelyn fired again. The bullet hit his leg. He dropped Amanda. His arm was bleeding. His side was bleeding. Still, he didn't go down.

"Don't move," Evelyn ordered. But Ulster didn't listen. He walked straight toward Evelyn. She pulled the trigger, but the shot went wild. He slapped the gun out of her hand. His fist swung. Evelyn stepped back, but not fast enough. His knuckles grazed her chin. Evelyn collapsed to the driveway.

"No!" Amanda screamed. She jumped on his back. Her fingernails scratched into his eyes. Instead of spinning around blindly, Ulster fell to his knees, rolled onto his back. His weight crushed Amanda. Breath huffed out of her chest. Still, she wrapped her arm around his neck, locked it tight with the other one. Choke hold. She'd seen it done before. It looked so easy, but no one was really fighting back. No one had over two hundred fifty pounds of muscle to leverage out of the hold. Ulster pulled Amanda's arms apart as easily as a child untying a bow. She fell back hard, her head smashing into the concrete drive.

She kicked and punched. Her blows were useless. He easily pinned her to the ground, trapping her arms at her sides, the weight of his body grinding her tailbone into the concrete. Blood soaked the front of Ulster's shirt, dripped from his mouth. "You must repent, sister." He pressed harder. He was pushing the air out of her body. "Repent to me your sins."

"No," Amanda whispered. "Please."

"Our Father."

She struggled, gulping for air.

"Our Father," he repeated, pressing harder.

Her ribs flexed back into her stomach. Something was tearing inside. She couldn't fight anymore. She could only look up at his cold, soulless eyes.

"Our Father," he said a third time, the beginning of the Lord's Prayer.

Amanda huffed out, "Father."

"Who art in Heaven."

"Who art ..." She couldn't get enough air to speak.

"Who art in Heaven."

"Who—" She pushed up against him, but his weight was like a mountain.

"Please," she panted. "Please."

Ulster lifted up just enough so her chest could draw breath.

"Who art—"

"Who ...," she tried. "Who art ..."

She felt her arms moving of their own volition. Ulster stopped her at first, pressing down his weight again, but then he understood. Carefully, he shifted back a fraction of an inch. Amanda slid out her arm, feeling her flesh scrape against the inseam of his pants. She pulled out the other arm, then clasped her hands together. Fingers laced one into the other. Palms tight. Thumbs outside.

Ulster stared at her intently. There was a smile on his lips. He rocked slowly, his pelvis grinding into hers. She felt as if her hipbone might crack in two. He leaned over more. He wanted to see her, wanted to enjoy the pain on her face.

She whispered, "Our Father ..."

"That's right." His voice slow, as if he was teaching a child. "Who art in Heaven."

"Who art in Heaven." She stopped, gasping for breath.

"Hallowed be—"

The words rushed out. "Hallowed be thy name."

"Thy kingdom come." He leaned over farther, staring down at her face. "Thy kingdom come?"

"Thy—"

Amanda didn't finish the prayer.

Instead, she drove her clenched hands as hard as she could straight up into his neck. Her knuckles smashed into cartilage and bone. His throat flexed. Something snapped. It sounded like a stick breaking.

Hyoid. Just like Pete had shown her.

Ulster dropped on top of her like a pile driver. Amanda tried to push him off. He groaned, but wouldn't budge. He was too heavy to shift. She had to crawl out from under him. His weight was suffocating her. She forced herself to not pass out. To not throw up. To not give in.

Amanda's palms scraped for purchase. She pressed her toes into the concrete. The going was slow, painstaking. Her heart was in her throat. Bile was in her mouth. And then, with one final push, she finally managed to wrench herself free.

Evelyn was still out cold. Her revolver lay in her open hand. The Kel-Lite had rolled to the side.

Amanda reached for the gun, but Ulster grabbed her ankle, jerking her back. Amanda kicked as hard as she could. She felt his nose break under her heel. He let go. Amanda scrambled, pulling herself to her knees, but he grabbed her again. His arms went around her waist. Amanda slammed back her head, going for his broken nose. He faltered, which gave her time to twist around, take aim, and drive her elbow straight into the soft meat of his throat.

The loud crack sounded like a shotgun blast.

Ulster's hands went to his neck. Air whistled into his mouth. Amanda slammed her elbow a second time. Another crack. She did it again. Ulster fell onto his side. He rolled onto his back, wheezing for air. Amanda pushed herself up again. Her arms ached. Her head was pounding. Her chest hurt. Her throat hurt. Everything hurt.

She managed to stand, clutching at the van so that she would not fall back down.

Ulster made a gurgling sound. Blood dribbled from his mouth and nose.

Amanda pressed her bare foot into his neck. The sensation was just as Pete had described, bubbles crackling against the arch of her foot. She leveraged her weight back and forth, watching Ulster's eyes widen in terror, wondering if hers had done the same when he was pressing the life out of her.

"Manda," Evelyn murmured. She was sitting up. Her lip was split. She had her hand to her face. Her jaw was so swollen that the lump showed through her fingers.

"Hey!" A patrolman ran around the van. He screeched to a stop when he took in the scene. "Jesus fucking Christ." His gun was drawn, though it hung limply out in front of him. "What the fuck did you broads do?"

"Amanda." Evelyn's voice was stilted, as if it hurt to talk. She said, "The girl."

Present Day

WEDNESDAY

News vans and reporters scurried like ants on the outer motor court of the Four Seasons. This wasn't just a hotel. High-priced lawyers and money managers filled the office spaces on the upper levels. The residence floors were packed with the rich and famous. Rap singers. TV reality stars. Fame-seeking socialites.

Crime scene tape had been strung along the marble fountain fronting Fourteenth Street. Someone noticed that Faith's turn signal was on. The reporters thronged forward. Will could hear their questions shouted through the closed window. What happened? Why are you here? Can you tell us who the victim is?

They would get the story soon enough. A woman murdered in a high-class hotel room. A paroled killer on the loose. There was not one part of the city this crime didn't touch, from the mayor's office to the Convention and Visitors Bureau.

Will had seen these stories spin out of control before. Every salacious detail would be discussed and analyzed. Rumors would be fed into the machine and regurgitated as fact. The obvious questions would be asked: Who did he kill? Why was he released? The Sunshine Law would be invoked. Files would be photocopied and couriered and Sam Lawson, Faith's ex who worked at the newspaper, would probably be on CNN before night fell.

"Crap," Faith mumbled, nosing her Mini up to the police barricade. The car shook as reporters jockeyed for position. She flashed her badge at the cop on duty.

"The BMW, too," Faith told him, pointing to Sara's car behind them.

The cop made a note on his clipboard, then pushed his way through the crowd to lift the barricade.

A reporter knocked on Faith's window. She mumbled, "Asshole," as she rolled the car forward. She hadn't said much on the ride over. Will didn't know if that was because she didn't know what to say or because Amanda was playing her usual game of hide the details.

Another body. Same M.O. His father nowhere to be found. The new victim was a prostitute. Will knew this with absolute certainty. It was his father's pattern. First a student, then a working girl. He didn't get rid of one unless he had another to take her place.

Will turned around to check for Sara. The BMW followed them inside the barricade. His Sig Sauer was still under her front seat. She wasn't going to stop

him this time. Amanda could put fifty guards on Will and he'd still grab the gun and find his father and shoot him in the head.

Exactly as he should've done last night. This morning. Last week.

So many opportunities missed. His father had lived in this hotel for two months, and he'd somehow managed to come and go with no one being the wiser. He'd managed to abduct two girls. He'd managed to dump one at Techwood and murder another one in his hotel room. All while the police, hotel security, and undercover agents were supposedly watching his every move.

If that bastard could give them the slip, then so could Will. He was nothing if not his father's son.

Faith jerked up the handbrake as she parked behind Amanda's G-ride. Will got out of the car. Sara's BMW stopped in front of two Atlanta police cruisers. There were just as many cops on scene as reporters. He had to push past two uniformed patrolmen to open Sara's door for her. The cameras flashed as she got out of the car. She crossed her arms self-consciously. She was dressed in her yoga pants and his shirt. Hardly work attire. Will took the opportunity to reach in behind her and retrieve his gun from under the seat.

Except the gun wasn't there.

When he looked up, Sara was staring at him.

"Dr. Linton," Amanda said. "Thank you for coming."

Sara shut the car door. She locked it with the key fob, which she put in her shirt pocket. "Is Pete on the way?"

"No. He's testifying in court this morning." Amanda motioned for them to follow her inside. "I appreciate your coming on such short notice. It would behoove us all to get this body quickly removed."

A patrolman opened the side door. There was a whoosh as the air pressure changed. Will had never been inside the hotel before. The lobby was opulent in its excesses. Every surface was a different color of marble. A large staircase dominated the center of the room, splitting into two opposite sides as it reached the second floor. The treads were carpeted. The handrails were polished brass. The chandelier overhead looked as if a crystal factory had exploded.

The setting would've been impressive but for the fact that every shade and variety of police officer filled the lobby. Plainclothes division. Uniformed patrol. Special agents from the GBI. Even a couple of women from vice were there, their gold detective's shields looking incongruous against their skimpy attire.

Amanda told Faith, "Security is pulling footage from the last twenty-four hours. I need you to expedite that."

Faith nodded, heading toward the front desk.

Sara asked, "Have you identified the victim?"

"Yes." Amanda motioned over Jamal Hodge. "Detective, if you could please clear out all but the bare minimum of your people?"

"Yes, ma'am." He walked over to the crowd and raised his arms for attention. Will tuned out the man. He watched Amanda instead. She adjusted the sling on her shoulder as she gave orders to one of the hotel rent-a-cops.

Sara asked, "What is it?"

Will didn't answer. He scanned the lobby, trying to find a senior Atlanta Police officer. No Leo Donnelly. No Mike Geary, the captain in charge of this zone.

Amanda took over the case, Will realized. It didn't make sense. As far as the Atlanta Police Department knew, a dead prostitute had nothing to do with a kidnapped student. He asked Amanda, "What happened?"

Amanda indicated the rent-a-cop. He was in an expensive-looking charcoal suit, but the radio in his hand gave him away. "This is Bob McGuire, head of hotel security. He called it in."

Will shook the man's hand. McGuire was too young to be a retired cop, but he seemed fairly collected considering what had fallen into his lap. He led them toward the elevator, saying, "I got the call from the kitchen this morning. The room service girl said that he wasn't responding to her knock."

Amanda explained, "He's been adhering to a regular schedule."

The elevator doors opened. Will stood back to let Sara and Amanda on first.

McGuire said, "He's been staying here for two months." He waved a keycard over the panel, then pressed the button for the nineteenth floor. "We can track his movements in and out of the room through the software on the door lock. His schedule's been roughly the same since he got here. Room service at six in the morning, then the gym, then he goes back to his room, then he orders room service at noon." He tucked his hands into his pockets. "Once or twice a week, he uses our restaurant for dinner, or eats at the bar. Most nights, he orders room service at six o'clock. Then we don't hear from him until six the next morning."

Amanda noted, "He's keeping to his prison schedule."

Will glanced around the elevator car. The security camera was tucked into the corner. "How long have you been watching him?"

"Officially?" McGuire asked. "Just a few days." He told Amanda, "Your people have been doing most of the heavy lifting, but my folks have supplemented."

"Unofficially?" Will asked.

"Since he checked in. He's a strange man. Very off-putting physically. He never did anything overt, but he made people uncomfortable. And, frankly, the Presidential Suite is four thousand dollars a night. We normally try to find out who our higher-end clients are. I did a little poking around and realized that we needed to keep a closer eye on him."

Amanda asked, "Did anyone talk to him? Socialize with him?"

"As I said, he was off-putting. The hotel staff avoided him whenever possible. We never let the maids go up alone."

"What about other guests?"

"No one mentioned anything."

Will asked, "How did he pay for the room?" The man had been in prison. He wouldn't have a credit card.

McGuire explained, "His bank arranged everything. We're holding a hundred-thousand-dollar deposit against the room."

A bell dinged. The doors opened.

Will stepped aside, then followed them out of the elevator. Sara held his gaze for a few seconds. He nodded for her to go ahead of him.

McGuire said, "There are five other suites on his floor. The Presidential is in the corner. It's around twenty-two hundred square feet."

Three uniformed Atlanta Police officers stood at the end of the hallway. They were at least fifty feet away. The red exit sign glowed over their heads. The suite was directly across from the stairs.

McGuire led them down the hall. "Three of the suites were occupied. Entertainers. There's a concert in town. We arranged for them to be moved to our sister property. I can give you their information but—"

Amanda said, "I'd rather not waste time talking with lawyers."

Will felt a pain in his jaw, running down his neck. His teeth were clamped together. His shoulders tensed. He could hear his own breathing over the Muzak. The thick carpet was soft under his shoes. The walls were painted a deep brown that made the long hallway feel like a tunnel. Chandeliers hung at even intervals. There was a room service cart beside a closed door. No number on the room. The suites were probably the equivalent of three or four rooms. In movies, they always had Jacuzzi tubs and bathrooms the size of Will's house.

She wouldn't be in the tub. She wouldn't be in the bathroom. She would be on the mattress. She would be pinned down like a specimen in a science project.

Another victim. Another woman whose life was over because of a man whose DNA roiled inside of Will.

He had never stayed in a hotel suite before. He had never run on a beach. He had never flown in an airplane. He had never brought home a school report and watched his mother smile. The clay ashtray he'd made in kindergarten had been one of sixteen Mrs. Flannigan received on Mother's Day. All the Christmas gifts under the tree were labeled "for a girl" or "for a boy." The evening Will graduated high school, he'd looked out at the crowd of cheering families and seen only strangers.

Amanda stopped a few feet from the uniformed officers. "Dr. Linton, perhaps you should stay out in the hall for a moment?"

Sara nodded her acquiescence, but Will asked, "Why?"

Amanda stared up at him. She looked worse than she had the day before. Dark circles rimmed her eyes. Her lipstick was smeared.

"All right." For once, Amanda didn't argue. She continued down the hallway.

The cops looked bored with their assignment. Their thumbs were looped through their heavy utility belts. They stood with their legs wide apart to keep their backs from breaking under the weight of their equipment.

"Mimi," Amanda said to the female officer. "How's your aunt Pam?"

"Hating retirement." She indicated the room. "No one's been in or out."

Amanda waited for McGuire to open the door with his keycard. The green light flashed. There was a clicking sound. He held open the door. Sara and Amanda walked in, then Will.

McGuire said, "I'll be in the hall if you need me." There was a metal latch on the doorjamb. He swung it out to catch the door and keep it from locking.

"Well," Amanda said.

They stood in the foyer, looking into a room that was larger than Will's entire house. The curtains were open. Sunlight streamed in. The corner unit offered a panoramic view of Midtown. The Equitable building. Georgia Power. The Westin Peachtree Plaza.

And, in the distance, Techwood.

Two couches and four chairs were arranged around a fifty-two-inch flat-screen television. DVD player. VCR. CD player. There was a galley kitchen. A wet bar. Dining room seating for ten. A large desk with an Aeron chair. A half bath with a telephone mounted on the wall. The toilet paper was folded into a rose. The

faucet was a gold-plated swan, its mouth opened to release a stream of water as soon as its wings were turned.

"This way," Amanda said. The door to the bedroom was half-closed. She used her foot to push it the rest of the way open.

Will breathed through his mouth. He expected to smell the familiar, metallic scent of blood. He expected to find a thin, blonde girl with vacant eyes and perfect fingernails.

What he found instead was his father.

Will's knees buckled. Sara tried to hold him up, but she wasn't strong enough. He slumped against the door. There was no sound in the room. Amanda's mouth was moving. Sara was trying to tell him something, but his ears wouldn't work. His lungs wouldn't work. His vision skewed. Everything took on a red tone, as if he was looking at the world through a veil of blood.

The carpet was red. The curtains. The sun coming through the windows—it was all red.

Except for his father.

He was on the bed. Lying on his back. Hands clasped together on his chest.

He had died in his sleep.

Will screamed in rage. He kicked the door, crushing the handle into the wall. He grabbed the floor lamp and threw it across the room. Someone tried to stop him. McGuire. Will punched him in the face. And then he collapsed to the floor as a baton pounded against the back of his knees. Two cops were on top of him. Three. Will's face was pushed into the carpet. A strong hand kept it there as his arm was wrenched around. A handcuff clamped around his wrist.

"Don't you dare!" Sara yelled. "Stop!"

Her words were like a slap. Will felt his senses come back. He realized what he was doing. That he had been completely and totally out of control.

And that Sara had seen it all.

"Officers," Amanda's tone held a steely warning. "Let him go. Immediately."

Will stopped struggling. He felt some of the pressure lessen. The female cop leaned down so that Will could see her face. Mimi. She asked, "Are we gonna be okay?"

Will nodded.

The key clicked into the handcuffs. His arm was freed. Slowly, they all climbed off him. Will didn't stand immediately. He turned his head to the carpet. He pressed his palms flat to the floor. He sat back on his heels. He was breathless. The sound of his blood pounded in his ears.

"Asshole." Bob McGuire's hand covered his nose. Blood seeped between his fingers.

Amanda said, "Mr. McGuire, I hope you'll excuse us?"

The man looked like he would prefer to kick Will in the teeth.

Mimi offered, "I'll get you some ice." She put her hand to McGuire's elbow and escorted him from the room. The two other cops followed.

"Well." Amanda let out a long sigh. "Dr. Linton, can you estimate time of death?"

Sara didn't move. She was looking at Will. She wasn't mad. She wasn't disgusted. There was a slight tremor to her body. He could tell she wanted to help him. Longed to help him. That she did not make him love her with a

piercing clarity.

Will pushed his hands to the floor. He stood up. He straightened his jacket.

Amanda said, "The last time anyone saw him was approximately seven last night. He called room service to remove his tray. He put the breakfast card on the door."

Room service. Penthouse suites. Dying peacefully in his sleep.

"Dr. Linton?" Amanda said. "Time of death would be very helpful."

Sara was shaking her head even before Amanda finished her request. "I don't have the proper tools. I can't move the body until it's photographed. I don't even have gloves."

Amanda unzipped her purse. "The thermostat was set on seventy when the first unit arrived." She offered Sara a pair of surgical gloves. "I'm sure you can give us something."

Sara looked at Will again. He realized that she was waiting for his permission. He nodded, and she took the gloves. Her face changed as she walked over to the bed. He'd seen this happen many times before. She was good at her job. Good at separating who she was from what she had to do.

Will had witnessed enough preliminary exams to know what Sara was thinking. She noted the position of the body—he was lying prone on the mattress. She noted that the sheet and bedspread were neatly folded down at the foot of the bed. She noted that the victim was dressed in a white, short-sleeved T-shirt and white boxer shorts.

And that beside him on the table was a black velvet manicure kit.

The tools were neatly laid out: nail clippers, a tiny pair of scissors, a nail buffer, three types of metal files, an emery board, tweezers, a clear glass vial that held the white, crescent-shaped clippings of his father's fingernails.

Will had never seen the man in the flesh. His mugshot photo showed swollen features marred by dark bruises. Months after his arrest, a newspaper photographer had managed to snap a blurred image of him leaving the courthouse in shackles. Those were the only two photos Will knew of. There was no background information in his file. No one knew where he was from. No friends came forward. No parents. No neighbors claimed that he had always seemed so normal.

The *AJC* had been two newspapers back then—*The Atlanta Journal* and *The Atlanta Constitution*. Both editions covered the court proceedings, but there was no trial. His father had pleaded guilty to kidnapping, torture, rape, and murder. With the death penalty rendered illegal by the Supreme Court, the only enticement the prosecutor could offer in exchange for not having to prove his case at trial was life with the possibility of parole. That everyone assumed that possibility would never roll around was understood.

So, in the scheme of things, Will supposed his father was lucky. Lucky to miss the ultimate punishment. Lucky the parole board finally released him. Lucky to die on his own terms.

Lucky to kill one last time.

Sara began the examination with his face. That was where rigor always started. She tested the laxity of the jaw, pressed against the closed eyelids and mouth. Next, she checked the fingers, flexed the wrist. The nails glinted in the sunlight. They were trimmed down to the quick. The cuticle on his thumb had

bled before he died.

Sara said, "My best guess—and it's only a guess—is that he died sometime within the last six hours."

Amanda didn't let her off that easily. "Care to hazard a cause of death?"

"Not really. Could be a heart attack. Could be cyanide. I won't know until I get him on the table."

"Surely, there's something else you can tell me about him?"

Sara was visibly annoyed by the question. Still, she answered, "He's in his mid-to-late sixties. He's well nourished, in good shape. His muscle tone is appreciative, even in rigor. His teeth are false, obviously penal-system quality. He has what looks like a scar on his chest. You can see it in the V-neck of his undershirt. It looks surgical."

"He had a heart attack a few years ago." Amanda frowned. "Unfortunately, they managed to save him."

"That might explain the trach scar on his neck." She indicated the metal bracelet on his wrist. "He's diabetic. I'm not going to move his clothes until after he's photographed, but I imagine we'll find injection sites on his abdomen and legs." She took off the gloves. "Is there anything else?"

Faith stood in the doorway. "I have something." She had a computer disc in her hand. She wouldn't look at Will, which told him that the victim's identity came as no surprise. She was a better liar than he'd thought. Or maybe not. At least he understood why she'd been so quiet on the drive over.

Amanda said, "We can watch it in the other room."

The three of them stood in a half circle as they waited for Faith to load the DVD player. Amanda was between Will and Sara. She took her BlackBerry out of her purse. Will thought at first that she was reading her emails, but it was easy to look over her shoulder. The screen was shattered like a spiderweb. He recognized the news site.

Amanda read the headline, " 'Recently paroled con dies in Midtown hotel room.' "

"They were hoping for somebody famous." Faith picked up the remote control. "Idiots."

"The story isn't dead yet." Amanda kept scrolling. "Apparently, a hotel employee tipped them off to a heavy police presence over the last few days." She told Will, "This is why we try to make friends."

"Here we go." Faith pointed the remote at the player. The security camera showed an empty hotel elevator. The recording was in color. Will recognized the gold-inlaid tile on the floor of the car. Faith fast-forwarded through the video, saying, "Sorry, it's not cued."

The lights on the elevator panel flashed, indicating the car was moving down to the lobby. Faith slowed the recording when the doors opened. A woman got onto the elevator. She was thin and tall with long blonde hair and a floppy white hat. She kept her head down as she entered the car. The hat brim covered most of her face. Just her chin showed before she turned around. "Working girl," Faith provided. "Hotel security doesn't know her name, but she's been here before. They recognize the hat."

Will checked the time stamp. 22:14:12. He'd been sleeping on the couch with Sara.

"She has a keycard," Amanda said, just as the woman swiped the card across the pad, the same as Bob McGuire had done. She pressed the button for the nineteenth floor. The doors closed. The woman faced the front of the car, showing the security camera the top of her hat, the back of her slinky, matching white dress. The elevator doors were solid wood. There was no mirrored reflection.

Amanda asked, "Did the lobby cameras pick up her face?"

"No," Faith said. "She's a pro. She knew where the cameras were." The woman got off the elevator. The doors closed. The car was empty again. "She stayed up here for half an hour before coming down again. I checked with APD vice. They say that's about the right amount of time."

Amanda said, "She's lucky she got away with her life."

Faith fast-forwarded the video again, then slowed it when the elevator doors opened. The woman entered the same as before, head tilted down, hat covering her face. She didn't need the keycard to go to the lobby. Her finger pressed the button. Again, she faced the doors, but this time, she reached up and adjusted her hat.

Will said, "Her fingernails weren't painted before."

"Exactly," Faith agreed. "I checked it four times before I came up here."

Will stared at the woman's hands. The nails were painted red, undoubtedly in Bombshell Max Factor Ultra Lucent. According to the crime scene report, it was his father's preferred color. Will said, "There's no nail polish by the bed. Just manicure stuff."

Faith suggested, "Maybe she brought her own?"

"That doesn't seem likely," Amanda told them. "He liked to control things."

Sara offered, "I'll check the other room."

Amanda told Faith, "Security says the girl's been in the hotel before. I want you to comb every second of video they have. Her face has to be on camera somewhere."

Faith left the room.

Amanda pulled a latex glove out of her purse. She didn't put it on, but used it as a barrier between her fingers as she opened the drawers on the desk. Pens. Paper. No Max Factor nail polish with the distinctive pointy white cap.

Amanda said, "This doesn't take two people."

Will checked the galley kitchen. Two keycards were on the counter. One was solid black, the other had a picture of a treadmill on it, probably for the gym. There was a stack of crisp bills. Will didn't touch the money, which he guessed to be around five hundred dollars, all in twenties.

"Anything?" Amanda asked.

Will went behind the wet bar. Swizzle sticks. Napkins. A martini shaker. A Bible with an envelope stuck between the pages. The book was old. The leather cover was worn off the corners, showing the cardboard underneath.

He told Amanda, "I need your glove."

"What is it?" She didn't hand him the glove. Instead, she wiped her palm on her skirt, then forced her hand into the latex. She opened the Bible.

The envelope lay flat against the page. It had obviously been in there for a while. The paper was old. The ink had worn off the round logo in the corner. The typewritten address had grayed with time.

Amanda started to close the Bible, but Will stopped her.

He leaned down, squinting hard to make out the address. Will had seen his father's name enough times to recognize the words. "Atlanta Jail" came just as easily. He'd used one or both in almost every report he'd ever written. The postmark was faded, but the date was clear. August 15, 1975.

He said, "This was mailed a month after I was born."

"So it appears."

"It's from a law firm." He recognized the scales of justice.

"Herman Centrello," she supplied.

His father's defense attorney. The man was a gun for hire. He was also the reason they were here. It was the threat of Centrello's superior courtroom performance that persuaded the Atlanta city prosecutor to offer the plea bargain of life with the possibility of parole.

Will said, "Open it."

In fifteen years, Will had only once seen Amanda's composure crack, and even then, it was more like a fissure. For a split second, she showed something akin to dread. And then just as quickly, the emotion was gone.

The envelope was glued into the spine. She had to turn it over like a page. The glue along the flap had dried long ago. She used her thumb and forefinger to press open the envelope. Will looked inside.

No letter. No note. Just faded ink where some of the words had rubbed off.

Amanda said, "Apparently, it's nothing more than a bookmark."

"Then why did he keep it all these years?"

"No luck." Sara was back. She told them, "No nail polish in the bathroom or the bedroom. I found his diabetic kit. His syringes are in a plastic disposal box. We'll have to have the lab cut it open, but from what I could tell, there's nothing in there that doesn't belong."

"Thank you, Dr. Linton." Amanda closed the Bible. She took out her BlackBerry again. "Will?"

He didn't know what else to do but continue searching the bar. He used the edge of his shoe to open the bottom cabinets. More glasses. Two ice buckets. The minibar was unlocked. Will used the toe of his shoe again. The fridge was full of vials of insulin, but nothing else. He let the door close.

There were at least two dozen liquor bottles on the shelves behind the bar. The mirror backing showed Will's reflection. He didn't look at himself, didn't want to fall down that rabbit hole of comparing himself to his father. He studied the colored labels instead, the shape of the bottles, the amber and gold liquids.

Which was why he noticed that one of the bottles listed at a slight angle. There was something underneath, shimmying it to the side.

He told Amanda, "Pick up this bottle." For once, she didn't ask him why. She took the bottle off the shelf. "It's a key."

Sara asked, "Is it for the minibar?"

Will checked the lock on the refrigerator. "No. It's too big."

Carefully, Amanda picked up the key by the edges. The head was stepped instead of round or angled. There was a number stamped into the metal.

Will said, "That's for a Schlage factory lock."

Amanda sounded perturbed. "I have no idea what that means."

"It's a heavy-duty deadbolt." Will went out into the hallway. The cops were

gone, but McGuire was still there. He held a bag of ice to his nose.

Will said, "I'm sorry about before."

McGuire's curt nod did not indicate forgiveness.

Will asked, "What door in this hotel opens with an actual metal key?"

He took his time lowering the bag of ice, sniffing back blood. "The keycards —"

Amanda interrupted him, holding up the key. "It's to a Schlage deadbolt. Heavy duty. What door in your hotel does this open?"

McGuire wasn't stupid. He got over himself fast. "The only locks like that are in the sub-basement."

Amanda asked, "What's down there?"

"The generators. The mechanicals. The elevator shafts."

Amanda headed toward the elevators. She told McGuire, "Radio your security team. Tell them to meet us down there."

McGuire jogged to keep up. "The main elevators stop in the lobby. You have to go to the second floor in the service elevator, then use the emergency exit stairs behind the spa."

Amanda jabbed the button. "What else is on that floor?"

"Treatment rooms, a nail suite, the pool." The doors opened. He let Amanda on first. "The stairs to the sub-basement are behind the gym."

July 15, 1975

"Amanda," Evelyn repeated.

Amanda stared down at Ulster. Her foot was still jammed into his neck. With the slightest pressure, she could crush his windpipe.

"Amanda," Evelyn said. "The girl."

The girl.

Amanda stepped back. She told the patrolman, "Take him." The man took out his cuffs. He called dispatch on his shoulder mic, sounding as scared as Amanda had felt ten minutes ago.

She wasn't afraid now. The steeliness was back. The fury. The anger. She headed toward the house.

"Wait." Evelyn put her hand on Amanda's arm. The lower half of her face was swollen. It obviously hurt to talk, but she whispered, "There could be someone else."

Not another girl. Another killer.

Amanda found her revolver on the ground. The wooden grip was cracked. She opened the cylinder. One bullet. She looked at Evelyn, who checked her own revolver and held up four fingers. Five bullets between them. That was all they had.

That was all they needed.

The front door was unlocked. Amanda reached in with her hand and turned on the switch. A single bulb hung from an old fixture in the ceiling. The house was shotgun style, one story with a front door that lined up to the back. There were two chairs in the front room. A Bible was open on one of them. A silver bowl of water was on the floor. She was reminded of Easter church services. The women would bring bowls of water and wash the men's feet. She'd washed Duke's every year since her mother died.

The distant wail of a siren broke the silence. Not just one siren. Two. Three. More than she could decipher.

Evelyn joined Amanda as she walked down the hall. The kitchen was straight ahead. Two doors were on their right. One on the left. All closed.

Evelyn indicated the first door. She gripped her revolver in her hand. She nodded that she was ready.

They stood on either side of the closed door. Amanda reached down and turned the knob. She pushed open the door. Quickly, she reached in and flipped up the light switch. A floor lamp came on. There was a metal bed in the middle of the room. The mattress was soiled. Threads jutted up. Broken threads. A washstand. A sink. A chair. A bed table.

On the table was a pair of nail clippers. Cuticle nips. Buffer. Three types of metal files. An emery board. Tweezers. Red Max Factor nail polish with a pointy white cap. A glass vial filled with the crescent-shaped clippings of women's fingernails.

Jane Delray.

Mary Halston.

Kitty Treadwell.

Lucy Bennett.

Filthy rooms. Cracked plaster walls. Bare bulbs in the ceiling. Animal droppings on the floor. The stench of blood and terror.

This house was where he'd kept them.

Evelyn gave a low hiss for her attention. She nodded toward the next door. Amanda saw the patrolman enter the front room. She didn't wait for him. They did not need his help.

She stood to the side of the closed door and turned the knob. The light was already on in the room. Washstand. Sink. Manicure kit. Red polish. Another glass vial of nail clippings.

The girl was slumped against the headboard. Blood spilled in a steady stream down her abdomen. Pink foam bubbled from her mouth. Her hand was wrapped around the large knife in her chest.

"Don't!" Amanda lurched forward, dropping to her knees beside the bed. She covered the girl's hand with her own. "Don't take it out."

Evelyn yelled to the patrolman, "Call an ambulance! She's still alive!"

The girl's throat made a sucking sound. Air whistled around Amanda's hand. The blade was angled to the left, piercing the lung, possibly the heart. The knife was huge, the kind of weapon hunters used to skin their kill.

"Ha ...," the girl breathed. Her body was shaking. Torn threads hung from holes around her tattered lips. "Ha ..."

"It's okay," Amanda soothed, trying to keep the knife steady as she peeled away the girl's fingers.

Evelyn asked, "Is she having a seizure?"

"I don't know."

The girl's hand dropped. The fingers twitched against the mattress. Her breath was stale, almost sour. Amanda's muscles burned as she gripped the handle of the knife, trying desperately to hold it in place. No matter what she did, blood poured steadily from the wound.

"It's all right," Amanda mumbled. "Just hold on a little bit longer."

The girl tried to blink. Pieces of eyelid stuck to her brow. Her arm reached out, fingers flexing as she tried to point to the open door.

"That's right," Amanda felt tears streaming down her face. "We're going to take you out of here. He's not going to hurt you anymore."

She made a noise, a sound between a breath and a word.

"We'll get you out of here."

Again, she made the sound.

"What is it?" Amanda asked.

"Laa ..." The girl breathed. "Vah ..."

Amanda shook her head. She didn't understand.

Evelyn got down beside her. "What is it, sweetheart?"

"Laa," she repeated. "Laa ... vah ..."

"Lover?" Amanda asked. "Love?"

Her head shook in a trembling nod. "Him ..."

Her breath stopped. Her body went limp as the life drained out of her. Amanda couldn't hold her up anymore. Gently, she let the girl fall back onto the bed. Her eyes took on a blank stare. Amanda had never seen another person die before. The room got cold. A breeze chilled her to the bone. It felt as if a shadow hovered above them, then just as quickly, it was gone.

Evelyn sat back on her knees. She spoke quietly. "Lucy Bennett."

"Lucy Bennett," Amanda repeated.

They stared at the poor creature. Her face. Her torso. Her arms and legs. The horrors of the last year were writ large across her body.

"How could she love him?" Amanda asked. "How could she ..."

Evelyn used the back of her hand to wipe away tears. "I don't know."

Amanda stared into the dead girl's eyes. She had seen her through the window just moments ago. The image flashed into Amanda's mind like a scene from a horror movie. The girl on the bed. Her hand at her chest. It was a knife she had been holding. Amanda realized that now.

The sound of the sirens got louder.

"House is clear." The patrolman came up behind them. "What did you—" He saw the body. His hand slapped to his mouth as he ran from the room, retching.

Evelyn said, "At least we were here for her."

Tires screeched in the street. Blue lights flashed.

"Maybe we brought her ... I don't know. Comfort?"

Amanda said, "We were too late to save her."

"We found her," Evelyn said. "At least we found her. At least the last few minutes of her life, she was free."

"It's not enough."

"No," Evelyn said. "It'll never be enough."

The sirens wound down as the cruisers pulled up. They heard talking outside; gruff voices barking orders, the usual palaver of men taking charge.

And something else.

Evelyn obviously heard it, too.

Still, Amanda asked, "What's that noise?"

Present Day

SUZANNA FORD

She knew what the noise was now. The elevators rushing up and down. She heard the wind whistling like a train—up and down, down and up—as the doctor cut the threads with a pair of office scissors.

“You’re going to be okay,” the woman said. She was obviously in charge. She’d been the first to come to Suzanna’s side. The only one who wasn’t afraid of what she had seen. The other guys hung back. She could hear their breathing like steam pushing out of an iron. And then the doctor told one to call an ambulance. Another to get a bottle of water. Another to get a blanket. Another to find some scissors. They jumped to obey, running off so fast that Suzanna could feel the ghosts of their presence long after she could no longer hear their sneakers pounding against the floor.

“You’re safe,” the doctor said. She put her hand to Suzanna’s head. She was pretty. Her green eyes were the first thing Suzanna saw. They looked at her down the blade of the scissors as she carefully snipped apart the threads. She’d covered Suzanna’s eyes with her hand so that the light would not blind her. Her touch was so light when she cut apart Suzanna’s lips that she’d barely felt the metal grazing her skin.

“Look at me. You’re going to be okay,” the woman said. Her voice was steady. She was so damn certain that Suzanna believed her.

And then she saw the man. Hulking. Lurking. He looked different. Younger. But it was still the same guy. Still the same monster.

Suzanna started screaming. Her mouth opened. Her throat scratched. Her lungs shook. She screamed as loud as she could. The noise wouldn’t stop. She screamed even when the man left. She screamed over the doctor’s soothing voice. She screamed when the paramedics came. She didn’t stop screaming until the doctor stuck the needle in.

The drug rushed through her body.

Immediate relief.

Her brain calmed. Her heart slowed. She could breathe again. Taste again. See again. There was no part of her that did not feel it. Her hands, her fingers, her toes, all tingled from the rush.

Release. Salvation. Oblivion.

And Zanna was in love all over again.

Present Day

WEDNESDAY

Sinatra crooned softly through the speakers in Amanda's Lexus, but Will could only hear Suzanna Ford's screams. He had been so relieved to find the girl alive. He'd wanted to weep as Sara freed the girl. His father had hurt her. He'd tried to destroy her. But Will had stopped him. He'd won. He'd finally beaten the old man.

And then Suzanna had taken one look at Will and seen James Ulster come back to life.

He leaned his head into his hand as he stared at the passing cars. They were on Peachtree Road, stuck in the patch of traffic near one of the many strip malls.

Amanda turned down the volume on the radio. Sinatra's voice mellowed even more. She put her hand back on the wheel. The other rested in the sling that was strapped around her shoulder and waist.

She said, "It's supposed to get cold this weekend."

Her throat sounded raw, probably from talking nonstop on her BlackBerry for the last twenty minutes. Hotel security. The Atlanta Police Department. Her own agents at the GBI. No one was going to skate on missing the fact that Ulster's morning trips to the gym were simply an excuse for him to gain access to the stairs that led to the sub-basement. How many times had he gone down there to hurt her? How many opportunities to stop him had been missed?

The girl had been held at least a week. She was dehydrated. Starved. Mutilated. God knows what else.

Amanda said, "Of course, you can't trust the weatherman. Never could."

Will still didn't answer.

The car accelerated as they drove past Amanda's condo. The Regal Park complex was nice, but paled in comparison to its neighbors. They were in the Buckhead fingerbowl. Habersham Road, Andrews Drive, Peachtree Battle—residences on these streets started at two million dollars and jumped sharply north. The area contained the most expensive real estate in the city. The zip code was listed among the top ten wealthiest in the country.

"We could use some rain."

Will looked at the side-view mirror as they approached the heart of Buckhead. An Atlanta PD cruiser was following them. Amanda hadn't told him why and Will couldn't bring himself to ask her. His breathing was shallow. His palms were clammy. There was no explanation for his feelings, just that he knew deep in his soul that something bad was about to happen.

Amanda slowed the car. Horns blared as she took an illegal turn onto West Paces Ferry Road. Her lips parted, but only to take a breath.

He waited for her to say something more about the weather, but her mouth remained closed, her eyes on the road ahead of them.

Will stared out the window again. The dread was making him feel sick. She'd already surprised him once today. It was a cruel thing to do. The shock had almost killed him. What else did she have planned?

Amanda pointed to a sixties-style house with fake Tara columns. The Governor's Mansion. "A tornado cut straight through here a few months before you were born. Took the roof off, cut through Perry Homes."

Will wasn't going to take the bait. "What will happen to his body?"

She didn't ask whom he meant. "No one will claim him. He'll be buried in a pauper's grave."

"He has money."

"Do you want it?"

"No." He didn't want anything from his father. Will would live on the streets again before he took a dime of the man's blood money.

Amanda slowed down for another turn. Will finally asked the question. "Where are we going?"

She signaled for the turn. "Don't you know?"

He studied the street sign. The X in the middle gave it away. Tuxedo Road. They were in the wealthiest part of the wealthiest section. Two million dollars would probably be just enough to cover property taxes for one estate.

"No?" she asked.

Will shook his head.

She made the turn. The car traveled several more yards before she said, "Your juvenile records are sealed."

"I know."

"You don't have your father's name."

"Or my mother's." Will loosened the knot in his tie. He couldn't get enough air. "That reporter with the *AJC*. Faith's ex-boyfriend. He called you—"

"Because I worked on the original case." Amanda glanced at him. "I'm the one who put your father in jail the first time."

"No, you didn't. Butch Bonnie and—"

"Rick Landry." She braked for a steep curve. "They were the homicide detectives. I was in what was euphemistically called Vagina Crimes. If it went into a vagina or came out of one, that was my case." She glanced over again, but only so she could enjoy his reaction. "Evelyn and I did all the work. Butch and Landry took all the credit. Don't be so shocked. It was a common occurrence. I hazard to say it's still going on."

Will couldn't answer even if he wanted to. It was too much to take on board. Too much information. Instead, he stared at the mansions rolling by. Castles. Mausoleums. Finally, he managed, "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because it didn't matter. It was just another case. I've worked on lots of cases over the years. I don't know if you've noticed, but I've been doing this job an awfully long time."

He unbuttoned his collar. "You should've told me."

She was honest for once. "I probably should've told you a lot of things."

The car slowed again. She turned on her blinker and pulled into a long driveway. A Tudor-style house stretched out the length of half a football field, the front entrance peering down a rolling green lawn twice as long as the house was wide. The turf was crisscrossed in a checkered pattern. Azaleas and hosta spilled in rings around the tall oaks.

Will asked, "Who lives here?"

Amanda ignored the question as she pulled up to the closed gate. The scrollwork was painted a gloss black that matched the brick and wrought-iron fence ringing the property. She pressed the intercom button on the security panel.

A full minute passed before a woman's voice said, "Yes?"

"It's Amanda Wagner."

Static came through the intercom, then the sound of a long buzz. The gate started to swing open.

Amanda mumbled, "Swell digs," as she drove up the curving driveway.

"Who lives here?" Will repeated.

"You really don't recognize the place?"

Will shook his head, but there was something familiar about the house. The rolling green hill—tumbling down headfirst, grass stains streaking his pants.

The driveway laced across the front of the house in a gentle arc. Amanda pulled into the circular drive. A large fountain was in the center. Water slapped against a concrete urn. Amanda parked the Lexus parallel to the heavy wooden front doors. They were oversized—at least twelve feet tall—but fit with the scale of the building.

Will checked over his shoulder. The APD cruiser was thirty yards down, hanging back at the end of the driveway. Exhaust trailed from its tailpipe.

Amanda adjusted the sling on her arm. "Button your collar and fix your tie." She waited until he complied, then got out of the car.

Will's shoes crunched on the pea gravel driveway. Water splashed from the fountain. He looked down the vista of the front yard. Had he rolled down that hill? His mind could only recall fragments. None of them felt happy.

"Let's go." Amanda held her purse by the straps as she walked up the front steps. The door opened before she could ring the bell.

An older woman stood in the shadow of the door. She was the prototypical Buckhead Betty—extremely thin in the way of all wealthy women, with a tight face that had obviously been stretched back onto her skull. Her makeup was thick. Her hair was stiff with hair spray. She wore a red skirt with hose and high heels. Her white silk blouse had tiny pearl buttons at the wrist. A red cardigan was draped around her narrow shoulders.

She didn't bother with formalities. "He's waiting for you in his office."

The foyer was almost as large as the lobby of the Four Seasons. Another wide staircase. Another two-story entrance. Dark wooden beams arched into the white plaster ceiling. The chandelier was wrought iron. The furniture was sturdy-looking. The Oriental carpets showed a mixture of dark blues and burgundies.

"This way," the woman said, leading them down a long corridor that ran the width of the house. Their footsteps echoed on the slate tiles. Will couldn't help but look into each room they passed. He felt like a lightbulb kept flashing on in his head. The dining room with its large mahogany table. The delicate china

hanging on the walls in the front parlor. The game room with its billiard table that Will had never been allowed to touch.

They finally stopped at a closed door. She turned the knob, opening it as she knocked. "They're here."

"They?" Henry Bennett stood from his desk. He was impeccably dressed, his blue suit tailored to his body. His mouth opened, then closed. He shook his head, as if to clear his vision.

Will almost did the same. He hadn't seen his uncle in almost thirty years. Henry was just out of law school when Lucy was murdered. He'd tried to keep a connection with his sister's only child, but by law an unmarried man could not adopt an infant. Henry had lost interest by the time Will turned six, which put Will right at the age when no one wanted him. Even Henry. Will had never laid eyes on his uncle again.

Until now.

And he had no idea what he was supposed to say.

Apparently, neither did Henry. "What the—" He was visibly angry. His mouth twisted in disgust as he asked Amanda, "What game are you playing?"

Yet again, Will felt a cold sweat come on. He looked down at the floor, wishing he could disappear. If Amanda thought this was going to be a happy homecoming, she was dead wrong.

"Wilbur?" Henry prodded.

Amanda took over. "Hank, I need to ask you some questions."

"It's Henry," he corrected. He obviously didn't like surprises, just as he obviously did not like Amanda. He couldn't even look at her.

Will cleared his throat. He told his uncle, "I'm sorry that we showed up like this."

Henry stared at him. Will felt an odd sense of déjà vu. Even after all these years, Henry shared similar features with his dead sister. Same mouth. Same high cheekbones. He had all of her secrets, too. All the stories about her childhood, her parents, her life.

And Will had a thin file that told him nothing more than that Lucy Bennett had been brutally murdered.

"Well," the Buckhead Betty said. "This is awkward." She extended her hand to Will. "I'm Elizabeth Bennett. Like in Austen, only older." Her smile was as practiced as the joke. "I suppose I'm your aunt."

Will didn't know what else to do but shake her hand. Her grip was firmer than he expected. "Will Trent."

She raised an eyebrow, as if the name surprised her.

Amanda asked, "How long have you been married?"

"To Henry?" She laughed. "Too long." She turned to her husband, saying, "Let's not be rude, sweetheart. These people are our guests."

Something passed between them, the sort of muted, private exchange that old married couples hone over the years.

"You're right." Henry pointed to the two chairs in front of his desk. "Sit down, boy. Would you like a drink? I need a drink."

"I'm fine," Amanda said. Instead of sitting in front of the desk, she sat on the couch. As usual, she stayed on the edge of the cushion, not leaning back. The leather was old. It creaked under her slight weight.

"Wilbur?" Henry asked. He was standing beside a cart with a full bar.

"No, thank you." Will sat beside Amanda on the couch. The frame was so low that he could easily rest his elbows on his knees. His leg wanted to shake. He felt nervous, like he'd done something wrong.

Henry dropped a piece of ice into a glass. He picked up a bottle of scotch and unscrewed the cap.

Elizabeth sat down in the matching leather chair. Like Amanda, she sat on the edge of the seat, back straight. She opened a silver box on the side table. She took out a cigarette and lighter. Will couldn't remember the last time he'd been around a smoker. The house was large enough to absorb the smell, but the pungent odor of burning tobacco filled his nostrils as the woman lit the cigarette.

"Now." Henry pulled over one of the chairs from his desk. "I assume you came here for a reason. Is it money? I have to warn you, all my cash is tied up right now. The market's been volatile."

Will would've preferred a knife in his groin. "No. I don't want your money."

Amanda said, "James Ulster is dead."

Henry's lips pursed. He got very still. "I'd heard he got out."

"Two months ago," Amanda confirmed.

Henry leaned back in his chair. He crossed his leg over his knee. His glass rested lightly on his palm. He smoothed out the arm of his suit jacket. He said, "Wilbur, I know that despite Ulster's terrible actions, he was still your father. Are you holding up?"

"Yes, sir." Will had to loosen his tie again. The air was stifling. He wanted to leave, especially when the room turned silent. No one seemed to know what to say.

Elizabeth took a deep drag off her cigarette. There was an amused smile on her lips, as if she was enjoying their discomfort.

"Well," Henry said. "As I said, your father was a very bad man. I think we're all relieved to learn of his demise."

Will nodded. "Yes, sir."

Elizabeth tapped the cigarette against the ashtray. "And how is your life, young man? Are you married? Do you have children?"

Will felt a tingling in his arm. He wondered if he was having a heart attack. "I'm doing well."

"What about you, Hank?" Amanda asked. "I saw when you made partner. Three years out of law school and you rocketed to the top of the firm. Old Treadwell certainly took care of you."

Henry finished his scotch. He put the glass on the table. "I'm retired now."

Amanda spoke to Elizabeth. "It must be lovely having him home."

She held the cigarette to her lips. "I cherish every moment."

Another muted exchange, this time between Amanda and Elizabeth Bennett.

Will reached up to unbutton his shirt collar. Amanda touched his elbow to stop him. Elizabeth took another drag off her cigarette. A clock ticked somewhere in the house. The water from the driveway fountain continued its rhythmic sound.

"So." Henry's fingers tapped against his knee. "Wilbur." His fingers stopped tapping. He looked down at his hand. "Was there anything else? I was about to

head off to the club.”

Amanda asked, “How old would Lucy be now?”

Henry kept staring at his hand. “Fifty-three?”

“Fifty-six,” Will said.

Henry straightened his leg. He reached into his pants pocket and pulled out a pair of fingernail clippers. “Wilbur, I was thinking about your mother the other day.” He swiveled the handle. “I suppose news of Ulster’s parole put her in my mind.”

Will felt that familiar clamp start to tighten around his chest.

“Lucy had this friend. Not a pretty girl, but very demure.” Henry lined up the clipper to his thumbnail and pressed the handles together. “I’ll hazard Lucy was a bad example for her. That’s neither here nor there.” He placed the cut fingernail on the table beside the ashtray and started on the next nail. “At any rate, the summer I was home from school, I would hear them giggling in Lucy’s room, listening to records. One day I went in to see what all the racket was, and caught them dancing in front of a mirror, singing into their hairbrushes.” He put the second nail by the first. “Isn’t that silly?”

Will watched him clip the nail of his middle finger. Henry flinched as he cut too close. Still, he managed to remove the tip in one piece. He put the crescent-shaped nail beside the others. When he looked up from his work, he seemed surprised that they were watching him. “I suppose that’s not an interesting anecdote. I just assumed you’d want to know something about your mother.”

Amanda asked, “Do you remember Evelyn Mitchell?”

He grunted at the name. “Vaguely.”

“You know, Evelyn was determined to track Ulster’s money.” She told Will, “This was before the Miami cocaine heyday when the government started requiring banks to report large deposits.”

Henry tucked the clippers back into his pocket. “Is there a point to this?”

Amanda picked up her purse from the floor. The bag was huge. She carried the world on her shoulder. “Ulster lived in a slum, but he had enough money to hire the top defense attorney in the Southeast. It raised some questions. At least among some of us.”

Henry’s tone was arrogant. “Again, I don’t know what this has to do with me.”

“Ulster had a savings account at C&S bank. We knew a gal there. She told us he had less than twenty dollars. He didn’t use a dime of it to pay his lawyer.”

Henry said, “He owned property.”

“Yes, a house in Techwood that he sold in 1995 for four million dollars.” She unzipped her purse. “He was the last holdout. I’m sure the city was pleased when he finally accepted.”

Henry sounded annoyed. “A lot of people made money off the Olympics.”

“Ulster certainly did.” Amanda took a latex glove out of her purse. As usual, she wiped her palm on her skirt. With her arm in a sling, it was more difficult to push her fingers into the latex, but she managed to pull on the glove. And then she reached into her purse again and pulled out his father’s Bible.

Henry laughed when she placed the book on the coffee table. “Are we going to pray for Ulster’s soul?”

Amanda opened the Bible. “Here’s your mistake, Hank.”

He studied the envelope. One shoulder went up in a shrug. “So?”

"This is addressed to James Ulster at the Atlanta Jail." She pointed to the name. "And this logo says Treadwell-Price. Your law firm."

Will was past the point where he could be surprised by Amanda's lies. Less than an hour ago, she'd told him that the letter was from his father's defense attorney.

"So?" Henry shrugged his shoulder again. "There's nothing inside."

Amanda asked, "Isn't there?"

"No, there's not." He seemed very sure of himself. "Obviously, I wrote him a letter giving him a piece of my mind. The man murdered my sister. You can't prove otherwise."

"I can prove what a lazy pig you are."

He gave her a sharp look. "Where do you—"

"You gave this envelope to your girl to type."

He glanced at his wife, but Elizabeth was staring at Amanda. She was smiling again, but there was no warmth in her expression.

Amanda asked, "Do you see your name typed above the Treadwell-Price logo?" She turned the Bible so Henry could see it. "That's what you're supposed to do when you send out a business correspondence. They teach you that in secretarial school."

"My secretary passed away years ago."

"I'm sorry for your loss." She turned the Bible back around. "The thing about those old typewriters—and you wouldn't know this—is the rollers were heavy. If you weren't careful, you could pinch your fingers between them."

Henry straightened the nail clippings on the table. He used the tips of his fingers to move them around. "Again, I ask for your point."

"The point is, you had to line up the envelope just right so the address wouldn't come out crooked. Sometimes you had to twist the envelope back and forth between the rollers to get it straight. It's almost like an old printing press, where you turn the screw to press the ink onto the sheet of paper. Do you still use a fountain pen?"

Henry froze. He finally seemed to get it.

"The ink wasn't dry when you put the check inside." Amanda carefully pinched open the paper. "So, when your girl pressed the envelope between those two heavy rollers, the ink on the check transferred to the inside of the envelope. This envelope." She smiled. "Your name. Your signature. Your money paid to the order of Herman Centrello, the defense attorney working for the man who murdered your sister."

Henry took out his nail clippers again. "That's hardly a smoking gun."

"He kept it all these years," Amanda said. "But Ulster was like that, wasn't he?"

"How should I know what—"

"He didn't care about the money. It was a means to an end. He lived to control people. I bet every time he opened this Bible, all he could think about was how easily one word to the right snitch, one phone call to the right lawyer, could turn your world upside down."

"You have no proof that—"

"You licked the envelope flap to seal the letter, didn't you, Hank? I don't imagine you'd let your girl do that for you. She might wonder why you're

sending such a sizable check to another law firm, care of the man looking to be sent away for murdering your sister.” She smiled. “It must’ve galled you to have to lick your own envelope. How many times has that happened over the years?”

Henry looked frightened, then angry. “You don’t have my DNA to compare.”

“Don’t I?” Amanda leaned forward. “Were you ever scratched, Hank? Did Jane scratch you on the arm or chest while you were strangling her?”

He stood up so fast the chair fell over. “I’d like for you to leave now. Wilbur, I’m sorry you’ve entangled yourself with this—” He cast about for a word. “Lunacy.”

Will unbuttoned his collar. The room was suffocating.

Amanda took off the glove. “You worked out a deal with Ulster, didn’t you, Hank? He got what he wanted. You got what you wanted.”

“I’m calling the police.” He walked to his desk. His hand rested on the phone. “Out of deference to Wilbur, I’m giving you one last opportunity to leave.”

“All right.” Amanda took her time standing. She straightened her sling. She lugged her purse onto her shoulder. But she didn’t head directly for the door. First, she stopped by Henry’s overturned chair. She took the fingernail clippings off the side table.

Henry demanded, “What are you doing?”

“I always wondered about Jane. She wasn’t killed like the other girls. She didn’t have the marks on her body. She was strangled and beaten. You tried to make it look like a suicide, but you were too stupid to know that we could tell the difference.”

Henry didn’t speak. He eyed the fingernails in Amanda’s hand.

“Jane was telling anyone who would listen about the missing girls. So you used Treadwell’s name to pull some strings down at the station house. You thought Jane would be afraid of the police.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You’ve never understood women, have you, Hank? All you did was piss Jane off and make her talk more.” Amanda opened her hand. The fingernails fell to the carpet.

Henry nearly jumped across the desk. He caught himself at the last minute, telling his wife, “Pick those up. Immediately.”

Elizabeth seemed to debate her answer. “Oh, I don’t think so, Henry. Not today.”

“We’ll talk about this later.” He angrily punched the numbers on the phone. “I’m calling the police.”

“They’re right outside,” Amanda told him. “The envelope is enough to arrest you. I know a gal at the lab who’s just dying to get her hands on your DNA.”

“I told you to leave.” Henry hung up the receiver and picked it back up again. Instead of dialing three digits, he dialed ten. He was calling his lawyer.

Elizabeth said, “You’re nothing like him, you know?”

She wasn’t talking to Amanda or Henry. She was talking to Will.

“There’s a kindness about you,” she said. “James was terrifying. He didn’t have to speak, or move, or even breathe. Just being in his presence was like staring into the pit of hell.”

Will stared at the ugly shape of her mouth.

“He said he wanted to save them. Funny how none of them actually lived up

to his promise.” Elizabeth inhaled deeply from the cigarette. “He gave Lucy a chance, at least. A chance to do something good, to bring something pure into the world.”

Will asked, “What are you saying?”

“Girls don’t matter. They never matter.” Her red lipstick had wicked into the deep lines around her mouth. “But you, handsome boy. You were saved from James. Saved from his brutality. His madness. You were our salvation. I hope you’ve earned it.”

Will watched her round off the ash of her cigarette in the ashtray. Her nails were long, painted in a flame red that matched her skirt and sweater.

Amanda said, “They were working together, weren’t they?”

“Not like you’re thinking,” she answered. “Yes, Hank had some fun, but I’m sure you’ve noticed that he doesn’t like to get his hands dirty.”

Henry ordered, “Shut up. Right now.”

She ignored him, telling Will, “He didn’t really want you, but he didn’t want anyone else to have you, either.” She paused. “I’m sorry about that. I really am.”

“I’m warning you, Elizabeth.” Henry’s voice was terse. Sweat rolled down the side of his face.

She continued to ignore her husband, staring at Will with what could only be described as a sinister smile. “He’d get you from the children’s home and bring you here for a day, two days at a time. I would hear you downstairs playing—inasmuch as a child can play without touching anything. Sometimes, I would hear you laugh. You loved rolling down that hill. You’d do it for hours. Down and up again, laughing the whole time. I would start to feel attached to you, and then Henry would take you away, and I was alone again.”

“I don’t—” Will had to stop to catch his breath. “I don’t remember you.”

She held the cigarette to her mouth. Her lipstick ringed the filter. “You wouldn’t. I only saw you once.” She gave a soft laugh. “The other times I was tied up.”

The tinny sound of a woman’s voice came through the telephone receiver in Henry’s hand. He stood holding it from his ear, staring at his wife.

Elizabeth told Will, “It could’ve just as easily been me, you know. I could’ve been your mother. I could’ve—”

Amanda hissed, “Shut up, Kitty.”

She blew out a stream of smoke. The tendrils swirled up into her thin blonde hair. “Bitch, was I talking to you?”

July 15, 1975

There was definitely a noise. A banging sound. Tapping. Amanda wasn't sure. The house was full of men tromping around in heavy shoes, yelling across the rooms. The attic stairs were pulled down. Someone was checking the crawl space. They could see the beam of a Kel-Lite through the planks in the hardwood floor.

Amanda stood in the hallway. "Shut up!" she yelled. "Everyone just shut up."

The men stared at her, not quite knowing what to do.

Amanda heard the noise again. It was coming from the kitchen.

Evelyn pushed past the crowd, fighting to get to the back of the house.

"Hey!" one of them complained.

Amanda followed her into the kitchen. The cabinets were metal. The white laminate countertop had a gold swirl pattern. The appliances dated back to the thirties. The overhead light was a single bulb, the same as in the other rooms.

"Do you hear it?" Evelyn kept her jaw tight. The lump was dark red now, taking up the lower half of her face.

Amanda closed her eyes and listened. There was no banging. No tapping. Nothing. Finally, she shook her head. Evelyn let out a long sigh.

The men in the house had lost their patience. They started talking in low voices that got louder as more of their compatriots arrived on the scene. The front door was wide open. Amanda could see into the street. An ambulance had arrived. The medic jumped out of the back and headed toward the house. A patrolman stopped him and pointed toward the driveway.

James Ulster was still alive. She could hear him moaning through the open window.

"Crawl space is clear," a voice called. "Somebody get me the hell out of here."

Evelyn asked, "You heard it, right?"

"Yes." Amanda leaned against the counter. They both stood there, ears straining for the noise. And then they heard it again. Papers rustling. A thumping. It was coming from under the sink.

Evelyn still had her gun. She held it in front of her. Amanda wrapped her hand around the cabinet knob. She silently mouthed the countdown, "One ... two ... three ...," and opened the door.

No one jumped out. No bullets were fired.

Evelyn shook her head. "Nothing."

Amanda looked into the cabinet. It was much like her own. On one side were the usual cleaning supplies: bleach, a few rags, furniture polish. On the other side was a large kitchen trashcan. It was wedged under the sink, almost too big

for the space.

Amanda was about to close the door, but the trashcan moved.

"Jesus," Evelyn whispered. Her hand went to her chest. "It's probably a rat." They both looked down the hallway. There were at least thirty men on scene. Evelyn whispered, "I'm terrified of rats."

Amanda wasn't crazy about them, either, but she wasn't about to erase everything they'd done tonight by asking some big strong man to help them.

The trashcan moved again. She heard a noise that sounded like a cough.

"Oh, my God." Evelyn dropped her gun on the counter. She got to her knees and tried to pull out the trashcan. "Help me!"

Amanda grabbed the top of the plastic can. She yanked as hard as she could. The edge came free and she saw two eyes staring up at her.

Almond shaped. Blue. Eyelids as thin as tissue paper.

The baby blinked. His upper lip formed a perfect triangle as he smiled up at Amanda. She felt an ache in her heart, as if he was pulling on an invisible string between them. His tiny hands. The fat little dots of his curled toes.

"Oh, God," Evelyn whispered. She wedged her fingers between the trashcan and cabinet, trying to bend back the plastic. "Oh, God."

Amanda reached down to the baby. She cupped her hand to his face. His cheek was warm. He turned his head, leaning into her palm. His hand brushed against hers. His feet came up. They curved as if he was pressing against an invisible ball. He was so impossibly small. And so perfect. So beautiful.

"I've got it." With one last pull, Evelyn finally freed the trashcan. She picked up the boy, holding him close to her chest. "Little lamb," she murmured, pressing her lips to his head. "Poor little lamb."

From nowhere, Amanda felt a flash of jealousy. Tears sprang into her eyes, blurring her vision. Blinding her.

And then came the rage.

Of all the horrors Amanda had seen in the last week, this was the worst. How had this happened? Who had thrown away this child?

"Amanda?" It was Deena Coolidge. The scarf around her neck was blue. She had a white lab coat on. "Ev? What happened? Are you two okay?"

Amanda's bare feet slapped against the floor as she stalked out of the kitchen. She was running by the time she reached the front door. They were loading Ulster into the ambulance. She bolted into the street and pushed the medic out of her way.

Ulster was strapped down to the gurney. His wrists were handcuffed to the metal stiles. His clothes had been cut open. A bloody bandage was taped to his side, another to his leg. Gauze was wrapped around his arm. His throat was as red as Evelyn's jaw.

The EMT said, "We need to trach him. He's not getting enough air."

"We found him," Amanda told Ulster. "We beat you. *I* beat you."

Ulster's wet lips curved into a self-satisfied smile. He could barely breathe, but he was still laughing at her.

"Amanda Wagner. Evelyn Mitchell. Deena Coolidge. Cindy Murray. Pam Canale. Holly Scott. You remember those names. You remember the names of the women who brought you down."

Air wheezed from Ulster's mouth, but he was shaking with laughter, not fear.

She had seen the look in his eyes a million times before—from her father, from Butch and Landry, from Bubba Keller. He was amused. He was humoring her.

All right, doll. Run along now.

Amanda stood on the bottom rung of the gurney so she could loom over Ulster the same way he had loomed over her.

“You’re never going to see him.” He blinked as her spit flew into his eye. “He’ll never know you. I swear before God he’ll never know what you did.”

Ulster’s smile would not fade. He took a deep breath, then another. His voice was a strangled gasp. “We’ll see.”

July 23, 1975

ONE WEEK LATER

Amanda smiled as she pulled into the parking lot of the Zone 1 station house. A month ago, she would've laughed if someone suggested that she'd be happy to be back here. A week of crossing guard duty had taught her a hard lesson.

She took one of the far spaces in the back of the lot. The engine knocked when she turned the key. Amanda checked the time. Evelyn was running late. Amanda should go inside the squad and wait for her, but she was thinking of this as their triumphant return. Having to spend five days in the grueling heat dressed in a wool uniform while lazy children tromped in and out of traffic had not negated the fact that they had caught a killer.

Amanda unzipped her purse. She took out the last report she was ever going to type for Butch Bonnie. She hadn't done it out of kindness. She'd done it because she needed to make sure it was right.

Wilbur Trent. Amanda had named the baby because no one else would. Hank Bennett did not want to sully his family's name. Or perhaps he didn't want the legal entanglement of Lucy having an heir. Evelyn had been right about the insurance policies. With Hank Bennett's parents dead and his sister murdered, he was now the sole beneficiary to their estate. He'd let the city bury his sister in a pauper's grave while he walked away from probate court a millionaire.

So, it fell to Amanda to buy Wilbur his first blanket, his first tiny T-shirt. Leaving him at the children's home had been the most difficult thing Amanda had ever done in her life. More difficult than facing down James Ulster. More difficult than finding her mother hanging dead from a tree.

She would keep her promise to Ulster. The child would never know his father. He would never know that his mother was a junkie and a whore.

Amanda had never written fiction before. She was nervous about the details she'd put into Butch's report, the blatant lies she'd told about Lucy Bennett's life before her abduction.

The boy could never know. Something good had to come out of all this misery.

"What's the skinny?" Evelyn stood outside the car. She was dressed in brown slacks and a checkered orange shirt that buttoned up the front. The bruise on her jaw had started to yellow, but it still blackened the bottom half of her face.

Amanda asked, "Why are you dressed like a man?"

"If we're going to be running around the city, I'm not going to ruin another pair of perfectly good pantyhose."

"I don't plan on doing much running anymore." Amanda tucked the report back into her purse. She zipped the bag closed quickly. She didn't want Evelyn to see the application she'd requested from the Georgia Bureau of Investigation. Her father had gotten his old job back. Captain Wilbur Wagner would be running Zone 1 again by the end of the month.

Evelyn frowned sympathetically as Amanda got out of the car. "Did you go by the children's home again this morning?"

Amanda didn't answer. "I need to wash my hands."

Evelyn followed her to the back of the Plaza Theater.

Amanda gave a heavy sigh. "I only said that so you would leave me alone."

Evelyn held open the exit door, releasing the pornographic grunts of *Vixen Volleyball*. The two men standing in the lobby looked very startled to see them.

"Your wives send their regards," Evelyn told them, heading toward the bathroom.

Amanda shook her head as she followed. "You're going to get us shot one of these days."

Evelyn picked up their earlier conversation. "Sweetie, you can't keep looking in on him every day. Babies need to bond with people. You don't want him getting attached to you."

Amanda turned on the faucet. She looked down at her hands as she washed them. That was exactly what she wanted with Wilbur, but she couldn't quite bring herself to say the words. It was hopeless. She was twenty-five and single. There was no way the state would let her adopt. And they were probably right not to.

Evelyn asked, "Did you get that slide with the skin on it from Pete?"

She patted her face with cold water. She had the sealed evidence envelope in her purse. "I still don't know why it matters."

"Pete's right about the science. They can't use it now, but maybe one day." She added, "You don't want it getting lost in lockup. They'll throw it out in five years."

Amanda turned off the sink. "If we had the death penalty, none of this would matter."

"Amen." Evelyn took her compact out of her purse. "Where are you going to put the envelope?"

"I have no idea." She couldn't very well walk into the bank and ask for a safe deposit box without Duke's signature. "How about your gun safe?"

"It should stay with the baby. Get Edna to hide it somewhere." She smiled. "Make sure she doesn't lock it in the pantry."

Amanda laughed. Edna Flannigan had a reputation around child services, but she was a good woman who cared about the kids. She had taken a shine to Wilbur. Amanda could tell. He was an easy baby to love.

"Can I have one of your textbooks?"

Evelyn stopped powdering her nose. "Why?"

"Edna said we could leave some stuff for the baby to have when he grows up. I thought we could ..."

Evelyn knew about the story of Lucy Bennett, star student. She'd helped craft it, giving some inside details about Georgia Tech so the lies seemed more plausible. "If I give you one of my statistics books, will you promise to stop

moping?”

“I’m not moping.”

Evelyn snapped her compact closed. “We need to talk about our next case.”

“What’s that?”

“The DNF. We can look into those murders.”

“Are you forgetting Landry’s the one who got us busted to crossing guards?” Duke had found him out in two phone calls. Landry was drinking buddies with the commander who’d signed off on the transfer. It wasn’t a conspiracy so much as a male chauvinist pig who couldn’t take two women trying to do his job. “That’s all we need to do is put ourselves in his crosshairs again.”

“I’m not afraid of that blowhard.” She fluffed her hair in the mirror. “We saved a life, Amanda.”

“We lost three, maybe four.” God knew where Kitty Treadwell was. Probably buried in the city dump. Not that her father cared. Andrew Treadwell refused to return their phone calls, let alone admit that he had a second daughter. “And neither one of us came out unscathed.”

“But we know people now. We have sources. We have a network. We can work cases just like the boys—even better.”

Amanda could only stare at her. The grunting sounds from the porn movie only added to the ridiculousness of her statement. “Is there anything you can’t put a positive spin on?”

“Hitler. World hunger. Redheads—I just don’t trust them.” Evelyn checked her makeup again. Amanda did the same, frowning at what she saw. Evelyn wasn’t the only one who was bruised. Amanda’s neck was still ringed dark from Ulster’s hands. Her ribs were tender to the touch. The cuts on her palms and the soles of her feet were just starting to scab.

Evelyn caught her eye in the mirror.

War wounds.

They were both smiling as they left the bathroom.

Evelyn asked, “Did I tell you about that Green Beret in North Carolina who murdered his entire family?”

“Yes.” Amanda held up her hand to stop her. “Twice. I would rather talk about the case again than hear the details, thank you very much.”

The lobby was empty. Evelyn stopped. She put her hands on her hips. “You know the insurance policies still bother me.”

Hank Bennett. She couldn’t let it go.

Evelyn pressed, “Bennett went to the mission looking for Lucy. It follows that he’d end up at the soup kitchen and meet James Ulster.”

“Maybe they met, but to say they were working together ...” Amanda shook her head. “Why? What would be the point?”

“Bennett gets his sister out of the picture so she can’t inherit his parents’ money. He keeps Kitty Treadwell for himself—and her money, because you know there has to be some.”

“You think Hank Bennett’s hiding Kitty somewhere.” It wasn’t a question. She’d been beating that dead horse all week. “To what end?”

“To blackmail Andrew Treadwell.” She had a smile on her face. “Mark my word, Hank Bennett’s going to be running that firm one day.”

Amanda sighed. She wondered if Evelyn’s magazines were to blame for these

crazy conspiracies. “Kitty Treadwell is buried somewhere in a shallow grave. Ulster took them to kill them, not rehabilitate them.”

“Someone put that baby in the trashcan.”

Amanda didn’t have an answer for her. Part of Lucy’s body was still sewn to the mattress when they found her. Pete Hanson couldn’t give them an exact window for the time between Wilbur’s birth and Lucy’s death. They could only assume the girl had been free at some point and hidden the baby.

And then Ulster had come home and sewn her back down?

Evelyn said, “I just feel like we’re missing something.”

Amanda didn’t want to feed the flame, but she had the same bad feeling. “Who else could’ve helped him?” she asked. “Trey Callahan was caught in Biloxi with his fiancée.” The man claimed that he’d only stolen the money from the mission in order to self-publish his book. “Obviously, Ulster was trying to frame Callahan with all that Ophelia stuff. Don’t you think if there was a second killer, then Ulster would’ve framed that person instead?”

“How about this: where’s the money coming from?”

Herman Centrello. Evelyn was determined to find out how James Ulster was paying for the best criminal defense lawyer in the Southeast.

Amanda shook her head. “Why does it matter? No lawyer in the world can get him out of this. Ulster was caught red-handed. His bloody fingerprints are on the knife.”

“He’ll skate on the other girls. We don’t have anything to tie him to Jane or Mary. We don’t have Kitty’s body—if it’s out there. Ulster could eventually get paroled. That’s why you need to hold on to that slide. Maybe the science will be ready for it by then.”

“He’ll be in his sixties. He’ll be too old to walk, let alone hurt anybody.”

Evelyn pushed open the exit door. “And we’ll be retired little grannies, living with our husbands in Florida, wondering why our children never call.”

Amanda wanted to hold on to that image. She wanted to think about it tonight when she tried to go to sleep and all she could see was that condescending look in Ulster’s eyes. He’d been laughing at her. He was holding something back, and he knew that it gave him power over everyone else.

Evelyn asked, “Did Kenny call you?”

Amanda let her blush be her answer. She adjusted her purse over her shoulder as they walked toward the station. There was a commotion going on by the front door. Two cops were wrangling with a wino. He already had a resisting-arrest turban. His hands waved wildly as he was jerked back by his collar.

Amanda said, “We actually wanted to come back to this.”

Evelyn looked at her watch. “Crap, we’re late for roll call.”

So much for their triumphant return. Luther Hodge would probably put them on desk duty all week. Amanda hated filing, but at least she’d have Evelyn to commiserate with. Maybe they could look at some of the cases on the missing black girls. There was no harm in putting together another construction paper puzzle.

“Hey!” The wino was still struggling as they walked to the entrance of the station. One of the patrolmen smacked him on the ear. The man’s head jerked like a sling.

The squad was as smoke-filled and dingy as usual. The room looked the same:

crooked rows of tables crossing the room, white on one side, black on the other. Men in front, women in back. Hodge was at the podium. Everyone was seated for roll call.

But for some reason, they started to stand.

First, it was some of the white detectives, then slowly the blacks stood from their tables. It went around the room in a slow wave, ending with Vanessa Livingston, who, as usual, was sitting in the last row. She gave them both a thumbs-up. Her teeth showed in a proud grin.

Evelyn seemed momentarily stunned, but she kept her head high as she walked into the room. Amanda tried to do the same as she followed. The men cleared a path for them. No one spoke. They didn't whistle. They didn't make catcalls. Some of them nodded. Rick Landry was the only one who remained seated, but standing beside him was Butch Bonnie, who seemed to have some grudging respect in his eyes.

Then the moment was ruined as the wino was thrown into the squad room. He jumped up from the floor, screaming, "I'll sue you motherfuckers!"

The room tensed. The drunk's eyes widened as he realized he was facing down a room full of cops. He nervously glanced at Amanda, then Evelyn. "Uh ... s'cuse the language, ladies."

"Shee-it." Butch took the toothpick out of his mouth. "They ain't no ladies, fella. They're the po-lice."

The room heaved a collective sigh. Jokes were passed around. The drunk was wrangled out the door. Hodge banged the podium for silence.

Amanda fought the smile on her lips as she walked to the back of the room. She could feel Evelyn behind her, knew she was thinking the same thing.

Finally—acceptance.

Present Day

WEDNESDAY

Will sat on the wooden bench at the top of the rolling hill. He rested his elbows on his knees. He looked down at the street as the police cruiser pulled out of the driveway. His father a murderer. His uncle a murderer. Will had it on both sides.

Footsteps crunched across the gravel driveway. Amanda put her hand on his shoulder, but only to help herself sit.

They both stared into the empty street. Seconds turned into minutes. Will could hear a white noise in his ears. A humming that made it impossible for his brain to hold on to any one thought.

Amanda gave a heavy sigh. "Evelyn's never going to let me live this down. She always thought there was someone else."

"Is she going to testify against him?"

"Kitty?" Amanda shrugged with her good shoulder. "I doubt it. If she was going to talk, she would've done so years ago. I have a feeling she's still too much under Henry's control." She gave a rueful laugh. "You've come a long way, baby."

Will couldn't pretend he was all right with all this. He couldn't brush off tragedy with a wry comment the way Amanda did. "Tell me what happened. The truth."

Amanda stared at the front lawn, the vast green space that was larger and better tended than most public parks. She obviously needed time to collect her thoughts. Honesty wasn't a natural act for Amanda Wagner. Will could tell it took effort.

Finally, she said, "You know that there were two victims. Your mother and Jane Delray."

"Right." Will had found the reference in his father's file. There wasn't enough evidence to tie James Ulster to the murder of Jane Delray, but it was assumed that he was guilty of the act. "It was his pattern. He takes two and decides which one to keep."

"There were two other girls. Mary Halston and Kitty Treadwell."

Will gripped together his hands.

She said, "Your mother and Mary Halston showed the same damage. The sewing. The needle marks. But Jane was different. She wasn't abducted. Her murder was spur-of-the-moment. She was strangled, then thrown from the roof so that her death would look like a suicide."

"Henry?"

"I wasn't sure until I saw that check. What I said was the absolute truth. It bothered Evelyn that Ulster had a high-priced lawyer. Frankly, it bothered me. Ulster was never interested in material things. He wanted control, and I guess making Hank mail him that check at the jail exerted some control."

"Henry's going to skate on the envelope. You know the check isn't enough."

"Henry's DNA is going to match evidence from Jane Delray's case. I called the gal who's in charge of archival evidence the minute I heard your father was out. It's a miracle the chain of custody was still intact, or we'd never be able to use it."

"What's the evidence?"

"It's what I said in there. Jane scratched her attacker. It's going to match Henry's DNA from the envelope."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Aren't you?"

Will had seen his uncle's face. He was sure.

"What about Kitty?"

"I can only give an educated guess. Ulster got her off heroin. Hank kept her to leverage money out of Treadwell." She nodded back toward the house. "Not a bad plan, as you can see."

Will looked at the house. *Mansion* wasn't even the right word for it. *Museum*, maybe. *Prison*.

Amanda asked, "Is there anything else you want to know?"

There was a lifetime of questions. "Why are you making me pull teeth?"

"Because this is difficult for me, too, Will."

He hadn't considered that. For all her bluster, Will knew that Amanda was close to this. Her first case. Her first homicide. She tried to act like it was nothing, but the fact that they were both sitting here right now belied that assertion.

Eventually, she said, "Hank always hated women. I imagine he hated Lucy for her independence. Her free spirit. That she made choices for herself. She was going to school. Living in Atlanta. Hank thought women should stay in their place. Most men did back then. Not all of them, but—" She shrugged her shoulder again. "All you need to know is that your mother was a good person. She was smart and independent, and she loved you."

A cable truck drove down the street. Will could hear the hum of the wheels on the road. He wondered what it felt like to live in a mansion, to watch the rest of the world pass you by.

Amanda said, "Everyone I interviewed at the school loved her."

Will shook his head. He'd heard enough.

"She was funny and kind. She was very popular. All of her professors were devastated when they heard what happened. She had great promise."

He tried to swallow the glass in his throat.

"I was there when she died." Amanda paused again. "Her last words were for you, Will. She said that she loved you. She wouldn't let go until she was certain we heard her, until she knew that we understood that with every breath in her body, she loved you."

Will pressed his fingers into his eyes. He wasn't going to cry in front of her. There would be no going back from that.

"She hid you in the trashcan to save you from your father." Amanda paused. "Evelyn was there. We found you together. I don't think I've ever been so angry in my life. Not before or since."

Will swallowed again. He had to clear his throat to speak. "Edna Flannigan. You knew her."

"A lot of my cases took me to the children's home." Amanda adjusted the strap on her sling. "No one told me she'd passed away. When I found out—" She looked Will straight in the eye. "Trust me, her replacement was duly punished for his actions."

Will couldn't help but take some pleasure in the thought of Amanda annihilating the man who'd kicked him out into the street. "What was in the basement? What were you looking for?"

She stared back at the lawn, letting out a long sigh. "I wonder if we'll ever know."

Will remembered the scratches in the coal chute. He'd assumed they had been made by an animal, but now he knew it was probably one of Amanda's old broods. "Someone went back there while we were at the hospital."

"Really?" Amanda pretended to be surprised.

Will tried to let her know he wasn't a complete idiot. There was no way a slide had been in police custody for thirty-seven years. "Archival evidence."

"Archival evidence?" She had an infuriating smile on her lips, and he knew she was back in full dissembling mode before she even opened her mouth. "Never heard of it."

"Cindy Murray," he continued. Will's caseworker, the woman who'd helped him get off the streets and into college.

"Murray?" Amanda drew out the name, finally shaking her head. "Doesn't ring a bell."

"Captain Scott at the jail—"

She chuckled. "Remind me to tell you stories about the old jail sometime. It was awful before Holly cleaned it up."

"Rachel Foster." Amanda still called on the federal judge to sign off on her warrants. "I know you're friends with her."

"Rachel and I came up together. She worked dispatch, the night shift, so she could go to law school during the day."

"She expunged my record when I graduated from college."

Amanda would only say, "Rachel's a good gal."

Will couldn't help himself. He had to find at least one crack. "I've never known you to go on another GBI recruiting trip. Not once in fifteen years. Just the one where you got me to sign up."

"Well." She adjusted the sling again. "No one really enjoys those trips. You talk to fifty people and half of them are illiterate." She smiled at him. "Not that that's a bad thing."

"Did I get it from him?" He couldn't look at her. Amanda knew about his dyslexia. "My problem?"

"No." She spoke with certainty. "You saw his Bible. He was constantly reading."

"That girl—Suzanna Ford. She saw—"

"She saw a tall man. That's all. You're nothing like him, Will. I knew James

Ulster. I talked to him. I looked him in the eye. There's not a drop of your father inside of you. It's all Lucy. Everything about you comes straight from your mother. You have to believe me on that, at least. I wouldn't waste my time on you otherwise."

Will clasped his hands in front of him. The grass was lush beneath his feet. His mother would be fifty-six years old now. Maybe she would've been an academic. Her textbooks were well read. Words were underlined. Asterisks were scribbled in the margins. She might have been an engineer or mathematician or a feminist scholar.

He had spent so many hours with Angie talking about the what-ifs. What if Lucy had lived? What if Angie's mom hadn't taken that overdose? What if they hadn't grown up in the home? What if they'd never met each other?

But his mother had died. So had Angie's, though it'd taken longer. They'd both grown up in the home. They'd been connected to each other for nearly three decades. Their anger was like a magnet between them. Sometimes it pulled them together. Most times it pushed them apart.

Will had seen what it took to hold on to resentment that long. He read it in Kitty Treadwell's emaciated body. He saw it in the arrogant tilt of his uncle Henry's chin. And sometimes, when she didn't think anyone was looking, he saw it flash in Amanda's eyes.

Will couldn't live like that. He couldn't let the first eighteen years of his life ruin the next sixty.

He reached into his pocket. The metal of the wedding ring was cold against his fingers. He held it out to Amanda. "I want you to take this."

"Well." She pretended to be embarrassed as she took the ring. "This is rather sudden. Our age difference is—"

Will tried to take it back, but she wrapped her hand around his.

Amanda Wagner was not an affectionate woman. She rarely touched him in kindness. She punched his arm. She smacked his shoulder. She'd even once pulled back the safety plate on a nail gun and feigned surprise when the nail shot through the webbing between his thumb and index finger.

But now, she held on to his hand. Her fingers were small, her wrist impossibly tiny. There was clear polish on her fingernails. Age spots dotted the back of her hand. Her shoulder leaned into his. Will gently returned the pressure. Her grip tightened for just a second before she let go.

She said, "You're a good boy, Wilbur."

Will didn't trust himself to respond without his voice cracking. Normally, he would've made a joke about crying like a girl, but the phrase was a contradiction to the woman sitting beside him.

Amanda said, "We should go before Kitty turns the hose on us." She dropped the ring into her purse as she stood from the bench. Instead of hefting the bag onto her shoulder, she gripped it in one hand.

Will offered, "Do you want me to carry that?"

"For God's sakes, I'm not an invalid." She pulled the bag onto her shoulder, as if to prove a point. "Button your collar. You weren't raised in a barn. And don't think we've had our last conversation on the subject of your hair."

Will buttoned his collar as he walked with her to her car.

Kitty Treadwell stood at the open front door, watching them carefully. A

cigarette hung from her lips. Smoke curled up into her eye.

She said, "I paid the property taxes."

Amanda was reaching for the car door. She stopped.

"On the Techwood house." Kitty walked down the stairs. She stopped a few feet from the car. "I paid the taxes. Worth every penny. It chapped Henry's ass when James sold it."

"Mine, too," Amanda admitted. "Four million dollars is quite a profit."

"Money's the only thing Henry understands." Kitty took the cigarette out of her mouth. "I thought it would go to Wilbur."

"He doesn't want it," Amanda said.

"No." Kitty smiled at Will. It gave him a cold feeling inside. "You turned out better than all of us. How on earth did that happen?"

Will couldn't answer her. He couldn't even bear to look at her.

Amanda asked, "Hank met Ulster at the soup kitchen?"

Kitty reluctantly turned back to Amanda. "He was looking for Lucy. He wanted to make sure she wouldn't lay claim to their parents' estate. It must've seemed like a match made in heaven." She held the cigarette to her lips. "They struck a grand bargain. Hank gave him Lucy, no strings attached. In return, Ulster got me off the dope. Though I don't recommend his methods." She smiled as if this was all a joke. "I suppose James thought Lucy was a good trade. A fallen angel with no parents or family to make a stink." She huffed out some smoke. "And besides, Mary wasn't really doing it for him anymore."

"Why did he kill her?"

"Mary?" Kitty shrugged. "She couldn't be broken. Something about being pregnant changes you. At least it seems that way from the outside. Commendable, but look where it got her."

"And Jane Delray?"

"Oh, they fought constantly about Jane. Henry wanted her out of the way. She wouldn't shut up. She kept telling anyone who would listen about Lucy, about Mary, about me. I suppose I was lucky I didn't meet the same end. I was constantly throwing around my father's name." She stuttered a laugh. "As if anyone in the ghetto gave a rat's ass who my father was."

"They fought about it?" Amanda echoed.

"James didn't care who that little slut talked to. He got quite high and mighty about it, unsurprisingly. He was doing the Lord's work, after all. He wasn't a hired killer. God was going to protect him."

Amanda made the obvious connection. "You were kept in the house with Lucy."

"Yes. I was there the whole time." She seemed to be waiting for Amanda to ask another question. "The entire time."

Amanda said nothing.

"Anyway." Kitty tapped some ash onto the driveway. "I reconciled with my father at the end." She huffed a bitter laugh. "More money for Henry's coffers. What's the saying? God doesn't close a door without first nailing shut all the windows?"

Amanda offered, "If you testify, I can—"

"You can't really do anything. We both know that."

"You can leave him. You can leave him right now."

“Why would I do that?” She seemed genuinely perplexed. “He’s my husband. I love him.”

Her matter-of-fact tone was as shocking as anything Will had heard today. She really seemed to want an answer.

Amanda asked, “How could you? After all he did?”

Kitty snarled out a long stream of smoke. “You know how it is with men.” She flicked the cigarette into the yard. “Sometimes it’s criminal what a woman has to do.”

Present Day

ONE WEEK LATER

Sara's greyhounds had been spoiled rotten. Will had started giving them cheese, which Sara had discovered the hard way. Apparently, it was an ongoing thing. The dogs were obsessed. The minute they recognized Will's street, they started pulling on their leashes like huskies running the Klondike. By the time she got to his driveway, Sara's arms felt as if they'd been ripped out of the sockets.

She gripped the leashes in one hand as she dug around in her pocket for the key to Will's house. Thankfully, his Porsche pulled up behind her. He waved as he pulled past. The dogs pounced.

"Look at you," Will cooed. He rubbed the dogs up and down. "Aren't you good boys?"

"They're nasty," Sara said. "No more cheese."

Will was laughing when he stood up. "Dogs need cheese. They can't find it in the wild."

Sara opened her mouth to counter his argument, but he kissed her so long and so well that she didn't care anymore.

Will smiled down at her. "Did you hear back from your cousin?"

"We can have his beach house the whole week."

His smile turned into a grin. He took the leashes. The dogs were considerably better behaved as they led Will up the walkway. Sara couldn't help but think how much better Will looked. He was back at his real job. He was sleeping through the night. He wasn't so shell-shocked anymore.

Will waited until Sara had closed the front door to let the dogs off their leashes. They bolted to the kitchen, but Will didn't follow them. He told Sara, "Henry's arraignment is next week."

"We can postpone the beach if—"

"No."

She watched him empty his pockets, putting his keys and money on the desk. "How's the case going?"

"Henry's fighting it, but you can't argue with DNA." He slid his paddle holster off his belt. "What about you? How was your day?"

"I need to tell you something."

He looked wary. Sara couldn't blame him. He'd had enough bad news lately.

"Your father's tox screen came back."

Will straightened the pen on his desk. "What did they find?"

"He had Demerol in his bloodstream. Not a lot."

He gave her a careful look. "Pills?"

"Medical grade, injectable."

He asked, "How much is not a lot?"

"He was a big guy, so it's hard to be sure. I'd guess enough to make him relax but not knock him out completely." She said, "They found the vial in the refrigerator under the bar. There was a syringe in the disposal box with residue. His fingerprints were on both."

Will rubbed the side of his face with his fingers. "He never used drugs before. That was his thing. He was against them."

"You know how bad prisons are. A lot of people change their minds about drugs when they get inside."

"Where would he get liquid Demerol?"

Sara cast about for an explanation. "The prostitute who visited him the night before could've brought it. Did the police ever find her?"

"No," Will answered. "They never found the nail polish, either."

Sara knew Will hated loose ends. "Maybe she stole it. Most of those girls are addicts. They're not having sex with twenty to thirty men a day because it's fun."

"What was the cause of death?" He seemed wary of saying the word. "Overdose?"

"His heart wasn't in great shape. You know these things aren't always conclusive. The medical examiner listed natural causes, but he could've had other drugs on board—inhaled something, swallowed something, had a bad reaction. It's impossible to test for everything."

"Did Pete handle the case?"

"No, he's taken medical leave. It was one of his assistants. He's a smart guy. I trust him."

Will kept working his jaw. "Did he suffer?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "I wish I could tell you."

Betty barked. She pranced around Will's feet. "I'd better feed them."

He headed toward the kitchen. Sara followed him. Instead of picking up the bowls and getting out the cans from the cabinet, Will stood in the middle of the room.

There was a padded envelope on his kitchen table. A bright red lipstick print kissed the center. Sara instantly recognized Angie Trent's handiwork. She'd found a note with the same lipstick kiss on her car every morning this week. She doubted very seriously that Angie had written "Whore" inside, but she asked Will anyway, "What does she want?"

"I have no idea." Will sounded angry, then defensive, as if he could control his wife. "I changed the locks. I don't know how she got in."

Sara didn't bother to respond. Angie was an ex-cop. She knew how to pick a lock. Working vice, she'd learned how to skate back and forth across the lines with impunity.

Will said, "I'll throw it away."

Sara tried to quell her irritation. "It's all right."

"No, it's not." Will picked up the envelope. It wasn't sealed. The flap opened.

Sara jumped back, though what clattered onto the table was hardly dangerous. At least not anymore.

The prostitute at the Four Seasons had been the last person to see Will's father alive. She knew the regular girls. She knew how they dressed, where they picked up their johns. More important, she knew that adjusting her hat in full view of the elevator security camera would draw attention to her recently manicured fingernails.

And that still wasn't enough.

Like a cat leaving a dead animal on its owner's doorstep, Angie Trent had taken a souvenir from the crime scene so that Will would know exactly what she'd done for him.

Glass bottle. Pointy white cap.

Bombshell red.

It was the missing bottle of Max Factor nail polish.

to Vernon—
for directing my sails

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Ben Hecht said, “Trying to determine what is going on in the world by reading newspapers is like trying to tell time by watching the second hand of a clock.” With that in mind, I perused many 1970s editions of both the *Atlanta Journal* and *Atlanta Constitution*, whose archives offered a fascinating glimpse into the daily lives of Atlantans. The *Atlanta Daily World* offered a sometimes countervailing and often more in-depth take on the same events. *Atlanta* magazine provided a great source for historical context, including their “best of” issues as well as a shockingly hilarious profile of the swingin’ Riverbend apartment complex. Back issues of *Cosmopolitan* magazine gave tips on hairstyles, celebrities, and achieving sexual satisfaction—so different from what they focus on today. *Newsweek*, *Time*, *Ladies’ Home Journal*, and the Sears catalogue were also great guides for apparel and decorating. AtlantaTimeMachine.com showcases myriad before and after photos of city hotspots. There are an alarming number of 1970s TV commercials on YouTube that sucked away hours of my life that I will never get back. My only consolation is that the posters spent more time uploading them than I did watching them.

I enlisted Daniel Starer at Research for Writers to help pull material I needed for this story. I thought this was a brilliant cheat on my part until the volumes of research arrived on my doorstep and I realized that I would then have to read everything. (A full list can be found on my website.) Dan also located a man named Robert Barnes, who filmed a documentary on the Atlanta Police Force in 1975. Robert, an Atlanta native, was kind enough to send me a copy of the film, which shows much of the Atlanta skyline and features lots of helicopter shots of Techwood Homes and downtown. He also shared his memories of growing up in Atlanta, for which I am very grateful.

I spent many hours either online or in person at the Atlanta History Center, the Auburn Avenue Research Library, the Georgia Tech Library, the Georgia State University Pullman Library, and the Library of Congress. (Hey, didja notice all these places have “library” in their names? Maybe we really do need libraries after all.)

To say I hit paydirt at the Atlanta History Center is an understatement. It was there that I first found mention of Patricia W. Remington’s *Policing: The Occupation and the Introduction of Female Police Officers* (University Press of America, 1981). This dissertation is based on Remington’s year-long field study of the Atlanta Police Force in 1975. She rode along on beats. She often watched interrogations. They even trusted her with a revolver. From Ms. Remington’s work, I was able to cull staff rotations, statistical data, organizational structure, and socioeconomic details of the Atlanta force. As the focus of the study was on women officers, there were several transcripts of interviews performed with both male and female police officers regarding

women on the force. Many of the ten-codes, slang (“hummy,” “trim,” and “crack”), and often horrendous practical jokes officers played came from Remington’s observations.

Though I used the dissertation as a starting point, I also spoke with several women police officers who came up in the 1970s. Marla Lawson at the GBI is as entertaining a storyteller as I’ve ever heard. I would also like to thank law enforcement officers Dona Robertson, Barbara Lynch, and Vickye Prattes for driving all the way into Atlanta to talk with me. SL, EC, and BB gave me insider knowledge on how things still work (or don’t) in various Georgia forces. And, though men don’t exactly get the star treatment in this book, I would like to thank, as always, Director Vernon Keenan and John Bankhead at the GBI. Actually, I would like to thank all the officers out there who take care of the rest of us. Y’all are doing the Lord’s work.

I feel I should mention Reginald Eaves, who features prominently in this story. Eaves has long been a controversial figure in Atlanta politics. A 1978 test-rigging scandal forced him out of the police force. In 1980, he was elected to the Fulton County Commission. By 1984, he was under investigation for extortion and eventually imprisoned in 1988. And, yet ... there’s no denying that under Commissioner Eaves, Atlanta saw its crime rate drop significantly. He increased recruit training, instigated a formal path to promotion, and made all officers take “crisis intervention” classes to learn how to better deal with domestic cases. He focused most of his resources on black-on-black crime, saying, “No matter how poor you are, there is no excuse for knocking a lady in the head or stealing her purse.” To me, this makes Eaves a quintessential Atlanta politician.

Though some still think of the 1970s as a decade of love and freedom, women of that time were generally still facing an uphill battle. Opening a checking account, getting a car loan or mortgage—even signing a lease—were out of reach for many American women unless their fathers or husbands co-signed. (Don’t get ahead of yourself, New York City. It wasn’t until 1974 that gender discrimination in housing was legally barred.) In 1972, it finally became legal for unmarried women to use the Pill, though some still had a difficult time finding a doctor who would write the prescription and a pharmacist to fill it. The Sex Discrimination Act of 1975, meant to put a finer point on the Equal Pay Act of 1963, highlighted the fact that women were earning only 62 percent of men’s salaries. The APD, as all police forces, had to follow the law, so policing was one of the few jobs for women that gave them both economic and social power.

That was the extent of the progressive side of policing. Most men—and many women—felt that women should not be police officers. The stories about people laughing when a female officer came on scene are true. Women were routinely set up to fail, and punished when they did not. There were many areas of law enforcement where women were strictly verboten. This is not to say that men were entirely the problem. A 1974 article in the *Atlanta Constitution* talks about phone calls coming into the station—all from women—saying they’d seen a woman stealing a police car. They could not fathom that the “thief” was actually a female police officer who was driving the car on her beat. (Another quote, this one from H. L. Mencken: “Misogynist: a man who hates women as much as women hate one another.”)

Thank you, Valerie Jackson, for giving me a glimpse into Mayor Maynard Jackson's thinking during his first term. The statements he made on behalf of women and minorities are commonplace among politicians these days, though seldom followed through in the way Mayor Jackson managed. I think I speak for many Atlantans when I say that his legacy lives on in so many positive ways.

Vernon Jordan was extremely helpful in giving context to the story. I thank you, sir, for your insightful suggestion, which gave me the key to unlocking the narrative. You kept saying you couldn't tell me much, but you pretty much told me everything. I'm certain I'm not the only person on whom you've had this effect.

Linda Fairstein is not just one of my favorite authors, but a woman who served on the front lines of New York City's first sex crimes unit. Her groundbreaking work was made possible by the same LEAA grants that benefited many women in policing. Linda, I applaud your efforts to pay it forward for women all over the country.

Special thanks goes to Jeanene English for showing me how hair weaves work. Kate White, you constantly remind me of the great things women can accomplish when we support each other. I would especially like to thank Monica Pearson (nee Kaufman) for one of the more pleasant afternoons of my life. Emily Saliers, thank you for telling me about your Atlanta. Though I've never had the honor of meeting Tyne Daily or Sharon Gless, any woman my age knows this story holds a special debt of gratitude to both.

As usual, Dr. David Harper helped make Sara and Pete look like they know what they are doing. I feel I should say something about Grady Hospital, the largest public hospital in the country. This H-shaped behemoth is a testament to the best and worst of us. The ER Sara works in is nothing like the real Grady ER, mostly because it would take thousands of pages to do justice to the wash of humanity packed into the halls on a daily basis. My hat is off to the Grady doctors and nurses for running toward the problems instead of away from them.

Henrik Enemark, my Danish translator, sent me some groovy photos of his high school trip to Atlanta. Ineke Lenting, my Dutch translator, was also a tremendous help. Marty, curator of the Pram Museum, answered a strange question quickly and unblinkingly. Kitty Stockett lent her name to a prostitute (maybe this will finally get her work the attention it deserves). Pam Canale was the big winner of the "Have Your Name Appear in Karin Slaughter's Next Book" auction to benefit the Dekalb County Public Library system. Diane Palmer put a wicked idea into my head. Debbie T., thank you for your continuing help with capturing Will's world. Beth Tindall at Cincinnati Media has long been my webmaster and BFF. Victoria Sanders, Angela Cheng Caplan, and Diane Golden are the best team a gal could ask for. Thanks, too, to Kate Elton, my good friend and longtime editor, for making my job so easy. Jennifer Hershey, Libby McGuire, Cindy Murray, Gina Centrello, and Susan Corcoran—thanks for bringing home the bacon and frying it up in the pan.

My father regaled me one night with tales from the underbelly of 1970s Atlanta. He put me onto Mills Lane and the kidnapping case (as well as Mike Thevis, who will certainly show up in other stories, though I am hesitant to ask my father about his connection to the man who changed the face of American porn). I am grateful to my sister, Jatha Slaughter, for talking to me so openly

about her life. And to D.A.—as always, you are my heart.

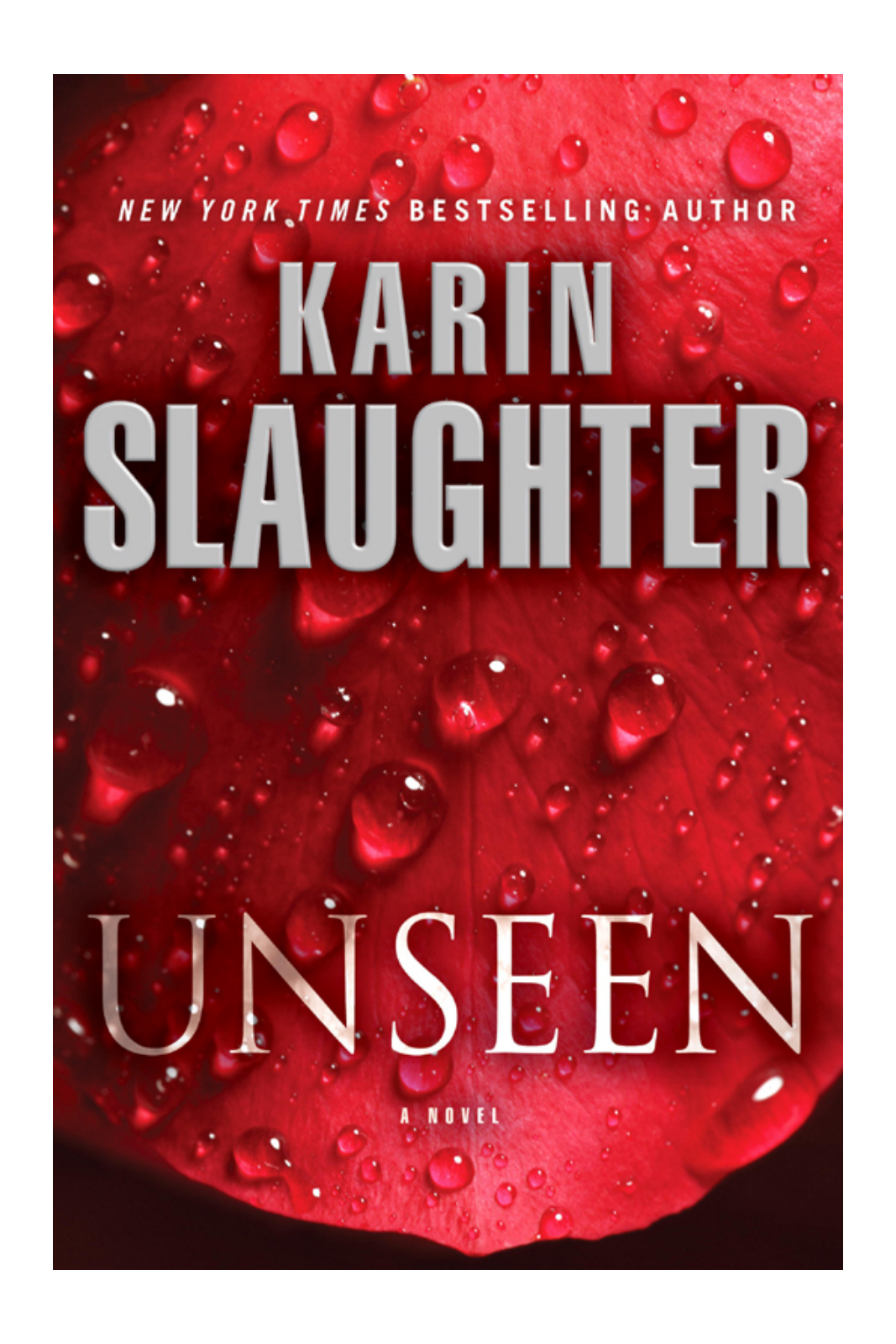
History is a dangerous thing, especially in the hands of a novice. In researching this novel, I came to understand that no one sees the past in the same way. For Atlanta, there is the white perspective, there is the black perspective, and then, there are the (at times, polar opposite) perspectives of the men and women within these categories. Extrapolate this to the melting pot of our current population and you can begin to understand why, as a writer, I chose to settle on one point of view.

That being said, I'm a novelist, not a historian. I don't claim to be an expert on Atlanta in the 1970s—or present day, for that matter. I have certainly taken liberties with some details. (There were no five-story buildings at Techwood Homes. Monica Kaufman, like Spike, Snoopy's brother, did not show up in Atlanta until August of 1975. You will probably get arrested if you hang out in front of the Four Seasons too long looking for that marble fountain.) My main focus in writing this book was to tell a good story. I understood from the beginning that there were several traps inherent in being a southern woman writing about race and gender issues. Please know I worked very hard to make sure everyone—no matter race, religion, creed, gender, or national origin—was equally maligned.

Karin Slaughter

Atlanta, Georgia

www.karinslaughter.com



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KARIN
SLAUGHTER

UNSEEN

A NOVEL

The image shows the front cover of the novel 'Unseen' by Karin Slaughter. The cover is divided into two main vertical sections. The left section is a light gray background with a pattern of soft, out-of-focus water droplets. The right section is a darker gray background with a pattern of sharp, in-focus water droplets. The author's name 'KARIN SLAUGHTER' is printed in a white, serif font at the top of the right section. The title 'UNSEEN' is printed in a large, bold, white, sans-serif font in the center of the right section. Below the title, the words 'A NOVEL' are printed in a smaller, white, sans-serif font. At the bottom of the left section, there is a small black square logo followed by the text 'DELACORTE PRESS' and 'NEW YORK' in a small, black, sans-serif font.

KARIN
SLAUGHTER

UNSEEN

A NOVEL


DELACORTE PRESS
NEW YORK

Unseen is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2013 by Karin Slaughter Publishing, LLC
Excerpt from *Cop Town* copyright © 2014 by Karin Slaughter Publishing, LLC
Busted copyright © 2014 by Karin Slaughter Publishing, LLC

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by Delacorte Press, an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc., New York.

DELACORTE PRESS and colophon are registered trademarks of Random House, Inc.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Slaughter, Karin
Unseen : a novel / Karin Slaughter.
p. cm.

This book contains an excerpt from the forthcoming title *Cop Town* by Karin Slaughter. This excerpt has been set for this edition only and may not reflect the final content of the forthcoming edition.

eBook ISBN: 978-0-345-53948-9

1. Government investigators—Fiction. 2. Undercover operations—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3569.L275U57 2013
813'.54—dc23 2013005812

www.bantamdell.com

Cover design: Carlos Beltrán

v3.1_r2

Contents

Master - Table of Contents

Unseen

Title Page

Copyright

Chapter 1: Wednesday: Macon, Georgia

Chapter 2: Thursday: Atlanta, Georgia

Chapter 3

Chapter 4: Macon, Georgia: Seven Days Ago—The Day of the
Raid

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7: The Day Before the Raid

Chapter 8: Thursday

Chapter 9

Chapter 10: Friday

Chapter 11: Four Days Before the Raid

Chapter 12: Friday

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15: Five Days Before the Raid

Chapter 16: Friday

Chapter 17: Macon, Georgia: Five Days Later

Dedication

Acknowledgments

Other Books by This Author

About the Author

1.

WEDNESDAY

MACON, GEORGIA

Detective Lena Adams winced as she pulled off her T-shirt. She took her police badge out of her pocket, along with her flashlight and an extra clip for her Glock, and tossed them all onto the dresser. The time on her phone showed it was almost midnight. Lena had rolled out of bed eighteen hours ago and now all she wanted to do was fall back in. Not that she'd done that much lately. For the past four days, just about every waking hour had been wasted sitting at a conference room table answering questions she'd answered the day before and the day before that—navigating the usual bullshit that came from having to justify your actions to Internal Affairs.

“Who led the raid into the house?”

“What intelligence were you acting on?”

“What did you expect to find?”

The internal investigator for the Macon Police Department had the dour, lifeless personality of a career pencil pusher. Every day, the woman showed up dressed in the same style black skirt and white blouse, an outfit that seemed more appropriate for greeting diners at an Olive Garden. She nodded a lot, frowned even more as she took notes. When Lena didn't answer quickly, she'd check the tape recorder to make sure it was picking up the silences.

Lena was certain the questions were designed to provoke an outburst. The first day, she had been so numb that she'd just answered truthfully in the hope that it would soon be over. The second and third days, she'd been less forthcoming, her level of

irritation rising with each passing minute. Today, she had finally exploded, which seemed exactly what the woman had been waiting for.

“What do you think I expected to find, you miserable bitch?”

If only Lena hadn't found it. If only she could take a razor and slice the images out of her brain. They haunted her. They flickered into her vision like an old movie every time she blinked. They filled her with a constant, unrelenting sorrow.

Lena started to rub her eyes, then thought better of it. Six days had passed since she'd led her team on the raid, but her body was still a walking reminder of what had happened. The bruise fingering its way across her nose and underneath her left eye had turned a urine-yellow. The three stitches holding together the cut in her scalp itched like a rash.

Then there were the things that no one could see—Lena's bruised tailbone. Her aching back and knees. The roil in her stomach every time she thought about what she'd discovered in that desolate house in the woods.

Four dead bodies. One man still in the hospital. Another who would never wear the badge again. Not to mention the terrible memory she would probably end up taking to her grave.

Tears came into Lena's eyes. She bit her lip, fighting the urge to let the grief have its way. She was exhausted. The week had been hard. Hell, the last three weeks had been hard. But it was over now. All of it was over. Lena was safe. She would keep her job. The rat squad investigator had scurried back to her hole. Lena was finally home where no one could stare at her, question her, probe and prod her. It wasn't just Internal Affairs. Everyone wanted to know what the raid had been like, what Lena had found in that dark, dank basement.

And Lena wanted nothing more than to forget all about it.

Her cell phone chirped. Lena exhaled until her lungs were completely empty. The phone chirped a second time. She picked it up. There was a new text message.

VICKERY: u ok?

Lena stared at the letters on the screen. Paul Vickery, her partner.

She tapped reply. Her thumb hovered over the keyboard.

The distant rumble of a motorcycle shook the air.

Instead of typing out a response, Lena held down the power

button until the phone turned off. She placed it on the dresser beside her badge.

The roar of the Harley-D's twin-cam engine vibrated in her ears as Jared gunned the bike so he could make it to the top of their steep driveway. Lena waited, following the familiar sounds: the engine cutting, the metallic groan of the kickstand, the heavy tread of boots as her husband made his way into the house, tossed his helmet and keys onto the kitchen table even though she'd asked him a million times not to. He paused for a moment, probably to check the mail, then continued toward their bedroom.

Lena kept her back to the door as she counted off Jared's footsteps down the long hallway. His stride sounded tentative, reluctant. He'd probably been hoping Lena would be asleep.

Jared stopped at the doorway. He was obviously waiting for Lena to turn around. When she didn't, he asked, "You just get in?"

"I stayed late to finish." It wasn't a complete lie. She'd hoped Jared would be asleep, too. "I was about to take a shower."

"All right."

Lena didn't go into the bathroom. Instead, she turned to face him.

Jared's gaze flickered down to her bra, then quickly back up again. He was dressed in his uniform, his hair twisted into a peak from the helmet. He was a cop with the Macon PD, too—a motorman, one rank below Lena and twelve years younger. Neither one of these things used to bother her, but lately, every inch of their lives was a provocation.

He leaned against the doorjamb, asking, "How'd it go?"

"They cleared me to go back to work."

"That's good, right?"

She replayed his words in her head, trying to decipher the tone. "Why wouldn't it be?"

Jared didn't respond. There was a long, uncomfortable silence before he asked, "You want a drink?"

Lena couldn't hide her surprise.

"I guess it's okay now, right?" He tilted his head to the side, forced his lips into a tight smile. He was a few inches taller than Lena, but his muscular frame and athletic grace made him seem larger.

Usually.

Jared cleared his throat to let her know that he was waiting.

She nodded. “ ’Kay.”

Jared left the room, but his need lingered—surrounding her, almost suffocating her. He *needed* for Lena to break down. He *needed* for her to lean on him. He *needed* her to show him that what happened had affected her, had altered her in some tangible way.

He couldn't see that not giving in was the only thing that kept her from falling completely apart.

Lena took her pajamas out of the dresser. She heard Jared moving around the kitchen. He opened the freezer door, rummaged around for a handful of ice. Lena closed her eyes. Her body swayed. She waited for the cubes to hit glass. Her mouth watered in anticipation.

She clenched her jaw. Forced open her eyes.

She wanted the drink too badly. When Jared came back, she would put the glass down, wait a few minutes, prove to herself that she could do without it.

Prove to him that she didn't need it.

Her hands ached as she unbuttoned her jeans. The day of the raid, she'd gripped her shotgun so hard that her fingers had felt like they were permanently curled. She wasn't sure why everything still ached. She should be better now, but her body was holding on to the hurt. Holding on to the poison that was eating her up inside.

“So.” Jared was back. This time, he came into the room. He poured a large vodka as he walked toward her, the bottle gurgling as the liquid splashed into the glass. “You're back on duty tomorrow?”

“First thing.”

He handed her the glass. “No time off?”

Lena took the drink and downed half of it in one gulp.

“I guess that's the same as when ...” Jared's voice trailed off. He didn't have to say when. Instead, he looked out the back window. The dark panes showed his reflection. “I bet you get your sergeant's stripes off this.”

She shook her head, but said, “Maybe.”

He stared at her—waiting. Needing.

She asked, “What are they saying at the station?”

Jared walked to the closet. "That you've got balls of steel." He dialed the combination on the gun safe. Lena watched the back of his neck. There was a pink line of sunburn where his helmet didn't protect the skin. He must've known she was watching, but he just took his holster off his belt and stored his gun beside hers. Near hers. He didn't even let their guns touch.

She asked, "Does it bother you?"

He shut the safe door, spun the combination. "Why would it bother me?"

Lena didn't say the words, but they were screaming in her head: *Because they think I'm tougher than you. Because your wife was taking down some very bad guys while you were toodling around on your bike giving tickets to soccer moms.*

Jared said, "I'm proud of you." He used his reasonable voice, the one that made Lena want to punch him in the face. "They should give you a medal for what you did."

He had no idea what she'd done. Jared only knew the highlights, the details Lena was allowed to share outside closed doors.

She repeated the question. "Does it bother you?"

He paused for a second too long. "It bothers me that you could've been killed."

He still hadn't answered the question. Lena studied his face. The skin was unlined, fresh. She'd met Jared when he was twenty-one, and in the five and a half years since, he'd somehow started looking younger, like he was aging in reverse. Or maybe Lena was getting older more quickly. So much had changed since those early days. In the beginning, she could always tell what he was thinking. Of course, since then, she'd given him plenty of mortar to build up a wall around himself.

He started unbuttoning his shirt. "I think I'm gonna go put those cabinets together."

She gave a startled laugh. "Really?" The kitchen had been torn apart for three months, mostly because Jared found a new reason every weekend to not work on it.

He let his shirt drop to the floor. "At least Ikea will know I'm still the man of the house."

Now that it was out there, Lena didn't know how to respond. "You know it's not like that." Even to her own ears, the excuse sounded weak. "It's just not."

“Really?”

Lena didn’t answer.

“Right.” Jared’s cell phone started to ring. He pulled it out of his pocket, checked the number, and declined the call.

“That your girlfriend?” Lena didn’t like the thinness in her tone. The joke wasn’t funny. They both knew that.

He rummaged through the dirty-clothes basket and found his jeans, one of his T-shirts.

“It’s almost midnight.” Lena looked at the bedside clock. “Past midnight.”

“I’m not sleepy.” He dressed quickly, tucking his phone into his back pocket. “I’ll keep the noise down.”

“You need your phone to put the cabinets together?”

“The charge is low.”

“Jared—”

“It won’t take long to finish.” He smiled that fake smile again. “Least I can do, right?”

Lena smiled back, holding up her glass in a toast.

He didn’t leave. “You should get in the shower before you fall down.”

She nodded, but couldn’t stop her eyes taking in the way the T-shirt clung to his chest, followed the definition of his abs. The vodka had given her a nice buzz. Her body was finally starting to relax. There was something about the way Jared was standing that brought old memories rushing back. Lena let her mind wander to a place she usually kept blocked off—the town where she’d lived before she moved with Jared to Macon, the city where she’d first learned how to be a cop.

Back in Grant County, Jared’s father had taught Lena everything she knew about being a police officer. Well, almost everything. Lena had a feeling the tricks she’d learned after Chief Jeffrey Tolliver’s death would’ve pissed him the hell off. For all the times he crossed the line, Jeffrey sure came down hard on Lena whenever he caught her skipping near it.

“Lee?” Jared asked. He had Jeffrey’s eyes, the same way of tilting his head to the side while he waited for her to answer him.

Lena finished the drink, though her head was swimming. “I love you.”

It was Jared’s turn to give a startled laugh.

She asked, “Aren’t you going to say you love me back?”

“Do you want me to?”

Lena didn't answer.

He gave a resigned sigh as he walked over to her. She was dressed in nothing but her bra and underwear, but he kissed her on the forehead the same way he did with his sister. “Don't fall asleep in the shower.”

Lena watched him go. He'd been wearing the same dirty T-shirt a lot lately. There were spots of yellow paint on the back and shoulders from where he'd started remodeling the spare bedroom three weeks ago.

Lena had told him not to paint the walls, to wait another few weeks—not because he had at least ten other projects in the house that needed to be finished first, but because it was bad luck.

Jared never listened to her.

Of course, she never listened to him, either.

Lena took the vodka bottle with her into the bathroom. She put the empty glass on the back of the toilet and drank straight from the bottle, her head tilting back. Probably not wise considering the pain pills she'd taken as soon as she walked through the front door, but Lena wasn't feeling particularly smart at the moment. She wanted the amnesia to come. She wanted the pills and the alcohol to erase everything from her mind—what had happened before the raid, during the raid, after. She wanted it all blanked out so that she could lie down and see darkness instead of that silent flickering movie that had haunted her for the last six days.

She put the bottle down on the back of the toilet. Her fingers felt thick as she pinned up her hair. Lena stared at her reflection in the mirror. There were dark circles under her eyes, and not just from the bruise. She pressed her fingers to the glass. Her face was starting to show the things she'd lost.

The number of bodies she'd left in her wake.

Lena looked down. Without realizing, she had pressed her palm to her flat stomach. As recently as nine days ago, there had been the beginning of a swell. Her pants had been tight. Her breasts had been sore. Jared hadn't been able to stop himself from touching her. Sometimes, Lena would wake up and find his hand resting on her belly, as if he was laying claim to what he'd created. The life he'd put inside of her.

But of course the life didn't stay there. His hand couldn't stop

the wrenching pain that had ripped Lena from a deep sleep. His words couldn't comfort her as the blood flowed. In the bathroom. At the hospital. On the drive home. It was a red tide that left nothing but death in its wake.

And every time she walked by that fucking spare bedroom with its bright yellow walls, she was gripped by such a cold hate for him that she shivered with rage.

Lena stared up at the ceiling. She held her breath for a moment before letting it whisper out like a dark secret. Everything was getting to her today. The loss, the grief. The vodka and pills weren't helping. Would never help enough.

She searched for the cap to the bottle, but couldn't find it. Lena pulled open the door. The bedroom was empty. Jared's clothes were on the floor, exactly where they'd dropped when he took them off. Lena picked up his shirt. She smelled exhaust from the road, sweat and grease from riding all day. His pants still had his wallet in the back pocket. She took it out and put it on the bedside table. His front pockets were full. A handful of change. A small tin of Burt's beeswax to keep his lips from getting windburned. A couple of twenties, his driver's license, and three credit cards, all held together by a green rubber band. A small black velvet pouch that he kept his wedding ring in.

Lena dug her finger inside the pouch and pulled out the gold ring. Jared had stopped wearing it to work after one of his buddies had wiped out on his bike. The man's wedding ring had caught on his knuckle and ripped the skin off like a sock. After that, Lena had made Jared promise not to wear his ring while he was riding. The black pouch was a compromise. She'd told him to leave the ring at home, but her husband was romantic—much more so than any woman Lena had ever met—and he didn't like the idea of being without it.

She assumed now that he carried it around out of habit.

Lena returned the ring to the pouch and opened Jared's wallet. She'd given it to him their first year together, and he still carried it despite the fact that he'd never used a wallet before. It was really nothing more than a portable photo album. Lena thumbed past the many candid shots Jared had taken over the last five years: Lena in front of their house on the day they moved in, Lena on his bike, Jared and Lena at Disney World, a Braves game, the SEC play-offs, the national championship in Arizona.

She stopped on the photo from their wedding, which had taken place in a judge's chambers inside the Atlanta courthouse. Lena's uncle Hank stood on one side of her, Jared on the other. Beside Jared were his mother, stepfather, sister, grandmother, grandfather, two cousins, and an elementary school teacher who'd always kept in touch.

Everyone was dressed up but Lena, who was in a navy pantsuit she normally wore to work. Her hair was down, the brown curls hanging past her shoulders. She'd had her makeup done at the Lenox Macy's counter by a transexual who'd gone on and on about her skin tone. At least one woman had appreciated Lena that day. The sour look on Jared's mother's face explained why the groom hadn't insisted on a more formal affair. Somewhere right now in Alabama, Darnell Long was praying that her son would come to his senses and divorce the bitch he'd married.

Sometimes Lena wondered if she held on to Jared solely to spite the woman.

She flipped to the next picture, and her knees felt shaky.

Lena sat down on the bed.

She had seen the photo many times, just not in Jared's wallet. It was from the shoebox Lena kept in the closet. The picture was of her twin sister, Sibyl. Lena was struck by a painful ache of jealousy, and then she felt herself start to laugh. Jared obviously thought the picture was of Lena. He'd never met Sibyl. She'd been dead ten years when Jared came into Lena's life.

She put her hand to her mouth as the laugh turned into a sob. When Lena had found out she was pregnant, the first person she'd thought of was Sibyl. There was a brief spark of happiness as Lena had picked up the phone to call her sister.

And then the loss had sucker punched her in the chest.

Lena carefully wiped underneath her eyes as she stared at the photo. She could see why Jared had chosen it. Sibyl was sitting on a blanket in the park. Her mouth was open, head tilted back. She was laughing with full abandon—the kind of happiness Lena seldom showed. Their Mexican American grandmother's genes were on full display. Sibyl's skin was bronze from the sun. Her curly brown hair was down, the way Lena wore her hair today. Though Sibyl didn't have the highlights Lena had, and she certainly didn't have the few strands of gray.

What would Sibyl look like now? It was a question Lena had

asked a lot over the years. She assumed it was something all twins wondered when one passed away. Sibyl had never had Lena's hard lines and sharp edges. There was always a softness to Sibyl's face, an openness that invited people in instead of pushing them away. Only a fool would mistake one twin for the other.

"Lee?"

She looked up at Jared as if it was perfectly normal for her to be sitting in her underwear crying over his wallet. He was standing in the doorway again, feet just shy of entering.

She asked, "Who was that call from? On your cell phone?"

"The number was blocked." He looped his thumbs through his tool belt as he leaned against the doorjamb. "You all right?"

"I'm ... uh ... " Her voice caught. "Tired."

Lena looked at Sibyl one last time before she closed the wallet. She felt tears streaming down her face. Her jaw tightened as she tried to force her emotions back down. No matter what she did, they kept bubbling up again, tightening her throat, squeezing like a band around her chest.

"Lee?" He still didn't come into the room.

Lena shook her head, willing him to go. She couldn't look at him, couldn't let Jared see her like this. She knew that breaking down was exactly what he'd been waiting for. Expecting.

Wanting.

But then something snapped inside of her. Another sob came out—deep, mournful. Lena couldn't fight it anymore, couldn't keep pushing him away. She didn't make Jared come to her. She crossed the room quickly, wrapping her arms around his shoulders, pressing her face to his chest.

"Lena—"

She kissed him. Her hands went to his face, touched his neck. Jared resisted at first, but he was a twenty-six-year-old man who'd spent the last week sleeping on the couch. It didn't take much for Lena to get a response. His calloused hands rubbed along her bare back. He pulled her closer, kissed her harder.

And then his whole body jerked away.

Blood sprayed into her mouth.

Lena heard the gunshot seconds later.

After Jared had been hit. After he collapsed against her.

He was too heavy. Lena stumbled, falling back onto the floor, Jared sprawled on top of her, pinning her down. She couldn't

move. She tried to push him up, but another shot rang out. His body spasmed, lifting a few inches, then falling against her again.

Lena heard a high-pitched keening. It was coming from her own mouth. She scrambled out from under Jared, then grabbed him by his shirt to pull him out of the line of fire. She managed to move him a few feet before his tool belt got twisted up in the rug.

“No-no-no,” Lena stuttered before she clamped her hands over her mouth to stop the noise. She pressed her back to the wall, fighting a wave of hysteria. The vodka and pills caught up with her. Vomit roiled into the back of her throat. She wanted to scream. Needed to scream.

But she couldn’t.

Jared wasn’t moving. The noise from the gun still rang in her ears. Shotgun blast. The pellets had scattered, penetrating his back, his head. Bright red circles of blood spread into the dried yellow paint on his T-shirt. A screwdriver from his tool belt was jammed into his side. More blood was pooling underneath his body. She put her hand on his leg, felt the lean muscle of his calf.

“Jared?” she whispered. “Jared?”

His eyes stayed closed. Blood bubbled from his lips. His fingers quivered against the floor. She could see the tan line where he’d been wearing his wedding ring even though he promised her he wouldn’t.

Lena reached for his hand, then pulled back.

Footsteps.

The shooter was walking down the hallway. Slowly. Methodically. He was wearing boots. She could hear the echo of the wooden heel hitting the bare floorboards, then the softer scrape of the toe.

One step.

Another.

Silence.

The shooter raked back the shower curtain in the hall bathroom.

Lena’s eyes scanned the bedroom: The guns were locked in the safe. Her cell phone was on the other side of the room. They didn’t have a landline. The window was too out in the open. The bathroom was a deathtrap.

Jared’s cell phone.

She ran her hand up his leg, checked his pockets. Empty.

Empty. They were all empty.

The footsteps resumed, echoing down the hallway, the sound like twigs snapping.

And then—nothing.

He'd stopped outside the first bedroom. Two desks. Boxes of old case files. Jared always left the closet door open. The shooter could see it from the hallway.

He cleared his throat and spat on the floor.

He wanted Lena to know that he was coming.

She pressed her back against the wall, forced herself to stand up. She wasn't going to be sitting down when she died. She was going to be on her feet, fighting for her life, her husband's life.

The footsteps stopped again. The shooter was checking the next bedroom. Bright yellow walls. Closet door laid across a pair of sawhorses so Jared could paint balloons on it. From the hallway, you could see the thin pencil lines where he'd sketched them freehand. You could also see straight back inside the empty closet.

The shooter continued down the hall.

Lena's hand shook as she reached down to Jared. The hammer on his belt was already halfway out of its metal loop. She used her fingers to push it the rest of the way. Her hand wrapped around the grip. It felt warm, almost hot, against her skin.

Jared's eyelids fluttered open. He watched Lena as she stood up, pressed her back against the wall again. There was a glassy look to his gaze. Pain. Intense pain. It cut right through her. His mouth moved. Lena put her finger to her lips, willing him to be quiet, to play dead so that he wouldn't get shot again.

The footsteps stopped just shy of the bedroom door, maybe five feet away. The man's shadow preceded him into the room, casting half of Jared's body into darkness.

Lena turned the hammer around so that the claw was facing out. She heard the pump of a shotgun. The sound had its intended effect. She had to lock her knees so she didn't fall to the floor.

The shooter paused. His shadow wavered slightly, but didn't encroach farther into the room.

Lena tensed, counting off the seconds. One, two, three. The man did not enter. He was just standing there.

She tried to put herself in the shooter's head, figure out what he was thinking. Two cops. Both with guns they hadn't used. One

was on the floor. The other hadn't moved, hadn't shot back, hadn't screamed or jumped out the window or charged him.

Lena's ears strained in the silence as they both waited.

Finally, the shooter took another step forward—short, tentative. Then another. The tip of the shotgun's barrel was the first thing Lena saw. Sawed off. The metal was rough-cut, freshly hewn. There was a pause, a slight adjustment as the shooter pivoted to the side. Lena saw that the hand supporting the barrel was tattooed. A black skull and crossbones filled the webbing between the thumb and forefinger.

One last, careful step.

Lena two-handed the hammer and swung it into the man's face.

The claw sank into his eye socket. She heard the crunch of bone as the sharpened steel splintered a path into his skull. The shotgun went off, blasting a hole in the wall. Lena tried to pull out the hammer for another blow, but the claw was caught in his head. The man staggered, tried to brace himself against the door. His fingers wrapped around her wrist. Blood poured from his eye, ran into his mouth, down his neck.

That was when Lena saw the second man. He was running down the hallway, a Smith & Wesson five-shot in his hand. Lena yanked on the hammer, using it like a handle to jerk the shooter in front of her, to use him as a shield. Three shots popped off in rapid succession; the shooter's body absorbed each hit. Lena gave him a hard shove backward into the second assailant. Both men stumbled. The S&W skittered across the floor.

Lena scooped up the shotgun. She pulled the trigger, but the shell was jammed. She tried the pump, worked to clear the chamber as the second guy climbed his way up to standing. He lunged for her, fingers grazing the muzzle of the gun before he fell to one knee.

Jared had grabbed his ankle. He held on tight, his arm shaking from the effort. The man reared back, started to bring down his fist on Jared's temple.

Lena flipped the shotgun around, grabbed it by the barrel and swung it like a bat at the man's head. Blood and teeth sprayed as his jaw snapped loose. He crashed to the floor.

"Jared!" Lena screamed, dropping down beside him. "Jared!"

He moaned. Blood dribbled from his mouth. His stare was blank, unseeing.

"It's okay," she told him. "It's okay."

He coughed. His body shuddered, then a violent seizure took hold.

"Jared!" she screamed. "Jared!" Lena's vision blurred as tears filled her eyes. She put her hands on each side of his face. "Look at me," she begged. "Just look at me."

Movement. She saw it out of the corner of her eye. The second man was inching toward the bed, trying to reach the gun. Half his body was paralyzed. He dragged himself with one arm, a wounded cockroach leaving a trail of blood.

Lena felt her heart stop. Something had changed. The air had shifted. The world had stopped spinning.

She looked down at her husband.

Jared's body had gone completely slack. His eyelids were closed to a slit. She touched his face, his mouth. Her hand shook so hard that her fingertips tapped against his skin.

Sibyl. Jeffrey. The baby.

Their baby.

Lena stood up.

She moved like a machine. The hammer was still embedded in the first man's face. Lena braced her foot on his forehead, wrapped her hands around the handle, and wrenched the claw loose.

The cockroach was still crawling toward the bed. His progress was incremental. Lena took her time, waiting until he was inches away from the gun to drop her knee into his back. She felt his ribs snap under her full weight. Broken teeth spewed from his mouth like chunks of wet sand.

Lena raised the hammer above her head. It came down on the man's spine with a splintering crack. He screamed, his arms shooting out, his body bucking underneath her. Lena held on, her mind focused, her body rigid with rage. She raised the hammer high above her head and aimed for the back of his skull, but then—suddenly—everything stopped.

The hammer wouldn't move. It was stuck in the air.

Lena looked behind her. There was a third man. He was tall, with a lanky build and strong hands that kept Lena from delivering the deathblow.

She was too shocked to respond. She knew this man. Knew exactly who he was.

He was dressed like a biker—bandanna around his head, chain hanging from his leather belt. He put a finger to his lips, the same as she had done to Jared moments before. There was a warning in his eyes, and underneath the warning, she saw genuine fear.

Slowly, Lena came back to herself. Her hearing first—the raspy sound of her own labored breathing. Then she felt the shooting pain from her tensed muscles, the singed skin of her palms where she'd grabbed the shotgun. The acrid smell of death flooded into her nose. And just underneath that, she caught the tinge of the open road, the familiar odor of exhaust and oil and sweat that Jared brought home with him every night.

Jared.

The back of his shirt was drenched, glued to his skin. The yellow spots of dried paint had disappeared. They were black now, just like his hair—darkened by blood.

Lena's body went limp. The fight had drained out of her. She lowered the hammer, let it fall to the floor.

Sirens pierced the air. Two, three, more than she could count.

A hoarse voice called from somewhere outside. "Dude, where you at?"

The sirens got louder. Closer.

Will Trent looked at Lena one last time, then left the room.

2.

THURSDAY

ATLANTA, GEORGIA

Hospital elevators were notoriously unreliable, but Dr. Sara Linton felt that the ones at Atlanta's Grady Memorial were particularly creaky. Still, like a gambling addict hitting a slot machine, she punched the button every time on the off chance that the doors would open.

"Come on," Sara mumbled, staring at the numbers above the doors, willing them to hit seven. She waited, hands tucked into the pockets of her white lab coat as the digital display showed ten, then nine, then stayed at a solid eight.

Sara tapped her foot. She looked at her watch. And then she felt her body fill with dread as she saw Oliver Gittings trotting toward her.

As a pediatric attending in Grady Hospital's emergency room, Sara was in charge of several students who—despite some evidence to the contrary—assumed that one day they would become doctors. Night shifts were particularly tedious. There was something about the moon that turned their little brains into mush. Sara often wondered how some of them managed to dress themselves, let alone get into medical school.

Oliver Gittings was one of the better examples. Or worse, as the case tended to be. In the last eight hours, he'd already spilled a urine sample on himself and accidentally sewn a sterile cloth onto the sleeve of his lab coat. At least she hoped it was accidental.

He called, "Dr. Linton—"

"This way," Sara told him, giving up on the elevator and

heading toward the stairs.

"I'm glad I found you." Oliver ran after her like an eager puppy. "An interesting case came up."

Oliver thought all of his cases were interesting. She said, "Give me the highlights."

"Six-year-old girl," he began, pulling on the exit door twice before realizing that it opened outward. "Mom says the girl woke her up in the middle of the night for some water. They're going down the stairs. The girl starts to fall. Mom grabs her arm. Something pops. The girl starts screaming. Mom rushes her here."

Sara took the lead down the stairs. She guessed, "X-ray showed a spiral fracture?"

"Yes. The girl had a bruise on her arm here—"

Sara glanced back to see where he indicated. "So, you suspect abuse. Did you order a skeletal survey?"

"Yes, but radiology is backed up. My shift is almost over. I thought I'd go ahead and call D-FACS to get things moving."

Sara abruptly stopped her descent. The Division of Family and Children's Services. She asked, "You want to go ahead and put the kid in the system?"

Oliver shrugged, as if this was nothing. "The girl's too quiet. Mom's antsy, irritated. All she wants to know is when they can leave."

"How long have they been here?"

"I dunno. I think she was triaged around one."

Sara looked at her watch. "It's 5:58 in the morning. They've been here all night. I'd want to leave, too. What else?"

For the first time, Oliver seemed to doubt himself. "Well, the fracture—"

Sara continued down the stairs. "No specific fracture is pathognomonic to child abuse. You call D-FACS and it's a legal matter. If this mother is an abuser, you want to make sure she doesn't get away with it. You need corroborating evidence. Does the girl seem scared of her mother? Does she look you in the eye and answer questions? Are there other bruises? Developmental delays? Continence issues? Is there a history of ER visits? How did she present otherwise?" Oliver didn't immediately answer. Sara prompted, "Is she healthy? Well nourished?"

"Yes, but—"

"Stop." Sara wasn't looking for a discussion. She checked her

watch again. "Dr. Connor is taking over for me, but you've got all of my numbers. Order the skeletal survey to see if there are any past breaks or fractures. Notify security to keep an eye on the mom. Call the other ERs to see if the girl's ever been admitted." Sara moderated her tone, trying to make it clear she was teaching him something, not punishing him. "Oliver, sixty-five percent of child abuse cases are flagged in emergency rooms. If you stay in pediatrics, this is the sort of thing you're going to be dealing with on a weekly basis. I'm not saying you're wrong. I'm just saying you need to know all the facts before you turn this girl's life upside down. And her mother's."

"Yes, ma'am." He headed down the stairs, hands tucked deep into his coat pockets.

Sara didn't immediately follow, cognizant that Oliver's ego was fragile enough without her snapping at his heels. Instead, she sat on the bottom stair and checked her hospital BlackBerry. Sara's eyes threatened to roll back in her head as she scrolled through the administrative detritus littering her mailbox. Meetings, conferences, denied requisitions, and new procedures for requisitioning, attending conferences, and scheduling meetings.

She felt around in her other pocket and traded the BlackBerry for her personal phone. This was much better. Her father had emailed a silly joke about snails that he'd heard at the Waffle House. Her mother had forwarded a recipe that was never going to happen. There was a long email from her sister with a picture of Sara's niece attached. She marked this unread and saved it for later. The next message was a text from Sara's boyfriend. An hour ago, he'd sent her a photo of his breakfast: six mini chocolate doughnuts, an egg and cheese biscuit, and a large Coke.

Sara didn't know which one of them was going to have a heart attack first.

The door popped open. Dr. Felix Connor stuck his head into the stairwell. He eyed Sara suspiciously. "Why do you look so happy?"

"Because I can go home now that you're finally here?"

"Gimme a minute to hit the can."

Sara dropped the phone back into her pocket as she stood. Oliver wasn't the only one who wanted to get out of here. Sara had pulled several night shifts in a row courtesy of a stomach flu that was running rampant through the hospital. She was

beginning to feel punished for her own good health.

Home. Sleep. Silence. She was already making plans as she walked through the ER. Thanks to her crazy work schedule, Sara had four full days of freedom ahead of her. She could read a book. Take a run with her dogs. Remind her boyfriend why they were together.

This last bit widened her smile considerably. She got some curious looks in return. Not many people were happy to find themselves at Grady, which was the only publicly funded hospital left in Atlanta. The staff tended to take on the hardened demeanor of combat veterans. If practicing medicine was an uphill battle, working at Grady was on par with Guadalcanal. Stabbings, beatings, poisonings, rapes, shootings, murders, drug overdoses.

And that was just pediatrics.

Sara stopped at the computer by the nurses' station. She pulled up Oliver's patient on the monitor. The X-ray clearly showed where the child's right humerus had been twisted. Either the mom was being truthful about what had happened on the stairs or she was savvy enough to fabricate a believable lie.

Sara looked up, scanning the open-curtain area, which was predictably filled with repeat customers. Several drunks were sleeping off benders. There was a junkie who threatened to kill himself every time he got arrested and an older homeless woman who belonged in a mental hospital but knew how to game the system so she could stay on the streets. Oliver's little girl was curled up asleep on the last gurney. Her mother was in a chair beside her. She was sleeping, too, but her hand was laced through her daughter's. She hadn't yet noticed the security guard standing a few feet away.

Not for the first time, Sara wished that nature had devised a system to alert the rest of the world to people who were abusing children. A scarlet letter. A mark of the beast. Some sign that let decent people know these monsters couldn't be trusted.

Up until a few years ago, Sara had lived in a small town four hours south of Atlanta. She'd done double duty as the county's pediatrician and medical examiner. Her father liked to joke that between Sara's two jobs, she got them coming and going. While this was certainly true, too many times, Sara had been put in the position of witnessing firsthand the awful things people could do

to children. The X-rays that showed repeatedly broken bones. The dental records revealing teeth that had rotted from neglect. The skin that was forever marked from burns and beatings.

Now that she was living in Atlanta, Sara had the additional knowledge that came from dating a man who'd grown up in state care. Sara's boyfriend didn't like to talk about his childhood. When she touched her fingers to the healed cigarette burns on his chest, or kissed the jagged scar on his upper lip where the skin had been punched in two, she could only imagine the hell he'd survived.

Still, there were far worse things that could happen to a child. The system was flawed in many ways, but it was also there for a reason.

"I wish you'd stop smiling." Felix Connor dried his hands with a paper towel as he walked toward Sara. "I gotta say, I'm still having a hard time shaking this flu."

Sara made her voice chipper. "Better sick at work than sick at home."

"Is that what you tell your patients?"

"Just the babies." Before Felix could come up with an excuse to leave, Sara started running down her cases. She was wrapping up the details on Oliver's patient when she felt a rush of heat come to the back of her neck. Sara glanced over her shoulder, feeling like she was being watched. She did a double take when she saw her boyfriend.

Will Trent was leaning against the wall. He was dressed in a charcoal three-piece suit that was nicely tailored to his lean body. His hands were in his pockets. His sandy-blond hair was damp, curving against the nape of his neck and stopping just shy of his collar.

He smiled at her.

Sara smiled back, feeling a familiar tingling in her chest. She had known Will for almost two years—met him in this very hospital—but lately their relationship had turned into something more. The depth of her feeling was an unexpected treasure. Sara had lost her husband five years ago. She had assumed she would spend the rest of her life alone.

And then she'd met Will.

Sara said, "Felix, I—" She glanced around, but he was gone.

Will pushed away from the wall and walked toward her. "You

look nice.”

Sara laughed at the blatant lie. “What are you doing here? I thought you were working.”

“My briefing’s not for another hour.”

“Do you have time for second breakfast?”

Will slowly shook his head.

“Oh.” Sara realized he hadn’t just dropped by. She asked, “What’s wrong?”

“Maybe we could go somewhere?”

She led him toward the doctors’ lounge. The door was about thirty feet away, giving Sara just enough time to work up a full-on worry.

Will was a special agent with the Georgia Bureau of Investigation. He’d been working undercover for the last ten days. He couldn’t—or wouldn’t—tell Sara the details of his assignment, but he kept calling from strange numbers and showing up at odd hours. She had no idea where he came from or where he was going, and anytime she asked, he either changed the subject or found a reason to leave. When Sara wasn’t busy feeling mildly annoyed by all this, she was consumed with fear that something bad was going to happen. Or had already happened. Sara’s late husband had been a cop. He was murdered in the line of duty, and losing him had almost killed her. The thought of the same thing happening to Will was too much to bear.

“Let me get that.” Will reached in front of Sara to open the door. Fortunately, the lounge was empty. He waited for her to sit down at the table before taking the chair across from her.

She repeated, “What’s wrong?”

Silently, he took her hand. Sara watched as Will ran his fingers along her palm, traced the inside of her wrist. Will watched, too, his deep blue eyes tracking the movement of his fingers. There was something about the way he watched himself touching her that made Sara’s skin start to tingle.

She stilled his hand. All she needed was for one of her students to walk in and find her purring like a cat. Besides, she recognized Will’s stalling tactics by now.

She leaned forward. “What is it?”

He gave a half-smile. “Diversion not working?”

“Almost,” she admitted.

Will took a deep breath and said, “My assignment got a little

more complicated.”

Sara had been expecting as much, but she still needed a moment to absorb the information.

He said, “I can’t tell you why, but I’m going to be working longer hours. I won’t be able to make it back to Atlanta as much. See you as much.”

She wasn’t so sure Will couldn’t tell her about his job, but Sara didn’t want to spend what little time they had together rehashing what had proven to be a fruitless discussion.

She said, “Okay.”

“Good.” He looked down at their hands again. Sara followed his gaze. His wrists were tan, but only to the cuffs of his shirt. His hair was streaked with blond highlights. Whatever Will was doing, it required him to spend time in the sun.

“What I wanted to say,” he continued, “was that I didn’t want you to think I was disappearing on you. Or that I...” His voice trailed off. “I mean, what we’re doing.” Will stopped. “What we’ve been doing ...”

Sara waited.

“I didn’t want you to take my not being here for—” He seemed to be looking for the right words. “Lack of interest?” He kept staring down at their hands. “Because I am. Interested, I mean.”

Sara studied the top of his head, the way his hair grew in a spiral from the crown. There was going to come a point in the near future when she would no longer be able to accept his evasions. He would either have to open up to her or she would have to consider her options. The more Sara thought about it, the closer she felt to the looming crossroads.

She stopped thinking about it.

Instead, she said, “Just promise me that whatever you’re doing, you’re being careful.”

He nodded, but she would’ve felt better if he’d actually said the words. Will wasn’t the only detective in the relationship. The GBI was to the state of Georgia what the FBI was to the United States. Except in cases of drug trafficking or child abduction, the agency had to be specifically asked to work a case, and the local police departments didn’t tend to ask unless they were desperate.

Any way Sara looked at it, whatever crime had caused Will to go undercover was too dicey for the locals to handle. Worse, being undercover meant that Will’s partner wasn’t there to back

him up. He was completely alone, probably surrounded by men with violent histories and addictions.

Will asked, "So, we're all right?"

Sara pressed her lips together, forcing back the words she really wanted to say. "Of course we're all right."

"Good." Will slumped back in his chair, his relief almost palpable. Not for the first time, Sara wondered how a man who'd spent his entire adult life solving puzzles could be so willfully obtuse in his private life.

She asked, "How long will this take?"

"Two, maybe three weeks."

She waited for more, but in the end, Will simply looked away. The gesture was artlessly executed, as if he was going through a checklist of casual movements. Blink. Scratch jaw. Feign interest in the notices on the wall.

Sara turned to look at the posters that suddenly held his rapt attention. They were typical to a hospital: warnings about HIV and hepatitis C alongside a rudely defaced hygiene series featuring SpongeBob SquarePants.

Sara turned back around. She'd never been good at passive-aggressive game play. "Can we at least acknowledge that there's something else going on? Because I can feel it, Will. There's something else to this and I think you're keeping it from me because you don't want me to worry."

To his credit, he didn't offer false protests. "Would it make you feel better?"

She nodded.

"All right."

Sara chewed her bottom lip. She waited for more, then remembered she wanted to leave the hospital before she was old enough to retire. "That's it?"

He shrugged.

She was too tired to keep pushing the boulder up the hill. "You are driving me absolutely crazy."

"In a good way?"

She squeezed his hand. "Not exactly."

He laughed, though they both knew she wasn't kidding. He asked, "Did you hear Homeland Security arrested SpongeBob at the airport?"

"Will."

"I'm serious. They showed it on the news this morning."

Sara groaned. "Public indecency?"

"That goes without saying, but the big charge was they caught him trying to take too many fluids onto the plane."

She shook her head. "That's awful."

"He said he was framed." Will paused for effect. "But it's obvious nobody hung him out to dry."

Sara kept shaking her head. "How long did it take for you to come up with that?"

Will leaned forward and kissed her—not an apologetic brush across the lips or a quick goodbye, but something longer, more meaningful.

Briefly, Sara considered the fact that the entire emergency room was on the other side of the door, that anyone could walk in on them, but then Will deepened the kiss and none of that mattered. He was out of his chair, on his knees in front of her. He pressed closer, pushing her back against the chair. Sara started to feel lightheaded.

"Jell-O cup!" a man screamed from the ER.

Sara jumped. Will sat back on his heels. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Sorry," she apologized, as if she could control the patients. Sara straightened Will's collar, smoothed down his tie. She could feel his pulse pounding in the side of his neck. It matched her own beating heart. "The drunks are waking up."

"I like Jell-O, too."

"Will—"

"I should probably get to work." He stood up and brushed the grime off his pants. "Remember what I said, okay? I'm not going anywhere." He grinned. "I mean, I'm leaving now, but I'm coming back. As soon as I can. Okay?"

Her mind filled with things to tell him—that she wanted him to promise that he would stay out of harm's way, that she needed him to assure her that everything was going to be all right. Sara knew these promises would be meaningless at best and a burden at most. The last thing a cop needed to think about when he was in the line of fire was whether or not his girlfriend would approve.

In the end, she told him, "Okay."

He smiled at her, but again, Sara could tell that something was

off. She could see it in his eyes—a hesitation, a concern. As usual, Will didn't give her time to question him.

She caught a glimpse of the crowded hallway as he opened the door and left. The morning rush had arrived. The cacophony of beeping monitors and machinery had started to rev. Patients were already parked on gurneys in the hallway. The drunk screamed for Jell-O again, then another screamed for the first one to shut up and also that he wanted some Jell-O.

Sara clasped her hands together in her lap, silently reviewing her conversation with Will. What was he really trying to tell her? Why had he come to the hospital when everything he'd said could've been relayed over the phone? At least he'd admitted something else was going on. He could be so damn inscrutable, and Sara was not too proud to admit that she often found herself outmaneuvered.

She touched her fingers to her lips, felt where Will's mouth had been. Was that the point of his visit? Was kissing her Will's way of making sure she didn't forget him while he was gone? Or was he marking his territory before he left town?

Only one of those options was flattering.

Sara's phone rang. She dug around in her pocket, feeling for the telltale vibration. She expected—hoped—that it was Will, but the caller ID read TALLADEGA CO, AL. Over the last week, he'd called from a lot of strange places, but never from Alabama.

Sara answered, "Hello?"

There was no response, just a low humming sound.

Sara tried again. "Hello?" There was still no response, but the humming got louder, more animal than electronic.

"Hello?" Sara was about to end the call, but, unreasonably, her mind flashed up the image of Will lying on the pavement, his body rent in two. She stood from the chair. "Will?"

There was a huff of air down the line.

"Hello?" Sara pulled open the door. She ran into the hall, nearly colliding with a patient. This was ridiculous. Will was fine. He'd just left less than two minutes ago. She could still feel his mouth on hers.

"Hello?" Sara pressed the phone to her ear. "Who is this?"

"S-s-s-ara?" The woman on the other end could barely speak.

Sara put her hand to her eyes, relief washing over her body. "Yes?"

“It’s ... it’s ... I’m sorry, I ...”

“Nell?” Sara quickly put together the pieces, recognizing the voice of her husband’s high school sweetheart. He’d had a child with Darnell Long, but not much else.

“Nell?” Sara repeated. “Are you okay?”

“It’s Jared!” the woman wailed. “Oh, God!”

Sara leaned back against the wall. Jared, her stepson. Sara had only met him a few times. He was a police officer, just as his father had been.

“I didn’t—” Nell’s voice caught. “I should’ve—”

“Nell, please. Tell me what—”

“I should’ve listened to you!” she cried. “She’s got him ... oh, God ...”

“Listened about—” Sara stopped. She knew exactly who Nell was talking about.

Lena Adams.

Sara’s husband had trained Lena fresh out of the academy, had taken her under his wing and promoted her to detective.

And in return for Jeffrey Tolliver’s trust, Lena Adams had gotten him killed.

Nell sobbed, “Oh, God, Sara! Please!”

“Nell,” Sara managed, her breath catching around the word. “Tell me. Tell me what happened.”

The woman was too hysterical to comply. “Why didn’t I listen to you? Why didn’t I forbid it? Why didn’t I ...” Her words dissolved into a heart-wrenching moan.

Sara forced air into her lungs. She could feel her chest shaking, her hands shaking. Her whole body vibrated with dread. “Nell, please. Just tell me what happened.”

3.

Will Trent stood in his boss's office on the top floor of City Hall East, looking out at the city. Atlanta was just waking up, the sun sparkling between the skyscrapers, commuters in BMWs and Audis honking their horns. Across the street, dozens of men were lined up outside the Home Depot shopping center. Will watched as, one after another, trucks pulled up and taillights glowed red. Hands shot out, fingers pointed, and two, three, sometimes four men at a time would jump into the back of the truck to begin the day's work.

Will could've had that life. There hadn't been much career advice at the Atlanta Children's Home. When Will turned eighteen, they'd given him a hundred dollars and a map to the homeless shelter. He'd spent the next several months jumping in and out of trucks, working construction or whatever jobs he could find. Will had been very lucky that the right kind of people had intervened. Otherwise, he never would've become an agent with the GBI. He wouldn't have his house or his car or his life.

He wouldn't have Sara.

Will turned away from the windows. He took in Amanda Wagner's office, which hadn't been altered much in the almost fifteen years that he'd worked for her. The location had moved a few times and the electronics had gotten sleeker as she worked her way up to deputy director of the GBI, but Amanda always decorated the same. Same photos on the wall. Same Oriental rug under her behemoth desk. Even her chair was the same squeaky old wood and leather contraption that looked like it belonged to George Bailey's nemesis in *It's a Wonderful Life*.

The flat-panel TV was one of her few concessions to modernity. Will found the remote and checked all the Atlanta news channels to see if they had picked up on what had happened in Macon last night. Less than a two-hour drive from the state capital, Macon was a fairly significant city, with more than 150,000 residents and a thriving university system. Because it was geographically at

the heart of the state, the city served as a compromise for people who found Atlanta too busy and smaller towns too slow. In many ways, Macon was a better representation of Georgia than Atlanta. Art museums sat alongside junk stores. A handful of respected tech colleges were blocks away from expensive private schools that taught creationism. The visitors' bureau touted both the Tubman African American Museum as well as Hay House, an eighteen-thousand-square-foot antebellum home built by the keeper of the Confederate treasury.

Apparently, the Atlanta news stations didn't find Macon as interesting. Will turned off the television and put the remote back on Amanda's desk. He should be careful what he wished for. It was probably just a matter of time before all the channels were filled with the gory details about the attack on Jared Long. The Atlanta news producers probably hadn't yet gotten wind of the story. Sometimes it took a painfully long time for phone calls to be made, people to be told that their lives had been irrevocably changed.

Will had been sitting in his car outside of Grady Hospital when Sara's call came through. He'd never been anyone's first phone call before, but when something bad happened, Sara evidently thought of him. She was crying. She had to stop a few times before she could tell him the story, though she had no way of knowing that Will already knew. Could fill her in on some of the missing details.

Jared had been shot.

His life was hanging by a thread.

Lena was somehow involved.

Will had stared blankly out the windshield as he listened to Sara try to get the words out. His mind conjured up the image of Lena in that tiny bedroom. Half-naked. Covered in blood. Will had been panicked as he rushed down the hallway, careening off the walls. He felt as if he was watching a video moving in slow motion. Lena jammed her knee into the guy's back, arced the hammer high above her head. The slow motion got even slower as the hammer dropped down the first time. The hallway got longer. Will could've been running up a mountain of sand. He was moving closer, yet somehow every step seemed to take him farther away.

But Sara didn't know any of that. She just knew that Jared had

been shot. That yet again, Lena Adams had been standing by while another good man had been targeted. It had happened to Sara's husband five years ago and now it had happened to her husband's son.

It wasn't a stretch for Sara to think it might happen to Will, too.

The frustrating part was that Will had specifically gone to the hospital this morning to come clean. He was going to tell Sara that he'd lied to her about his undercover assignment because he didn't want to worry her, and then he'd had to lie about where he was working so she wouldn't figure it out, and then he'd had to lie again and again until he'd realized that it would've been easier just to tell her the truth in the first place.

But then Will had seen her standing at the nurses' station and lost his nerve. Actually, he'd lost his breath. This was nothing new. Lately, every time he saw Sara Linton, Will literally felt like she had taken his breath away. That couldn't be good for his brain. He'd been oxygen-deprived. Obviously, that was why instead of confessing, he'd ended up on his knees kissing her like they were never going to see each other again.

Which might end up being the case. Will was painfully aware of the tenuous hold he had on the situation.

On Sara.

"You're late," Amanda Wagner said, scrolling through her BlackBerry as she entered her office.

Will didn't address the comment, which was automatic, something she generally said in lieu of hello. He told her, "I sent my report an hour ago."

"I've read it." Amanda's thumbs started working as she stood in the middle of the room responding to an email. She was dressed in a red suit, the skirt hitting just below her knee, white blouse neatly tucked into the waist. Her salt-and-pepper hair was in its usual helmet. Her nails were trimmed, the clear polish gleaming.

She looked well rested, though Will knew Amanda hadn't gotten much sleep last night. The Macon chief of police. The director of the GBI. The GBI crime scene unit. The GBI medical examiner. The GBI crime lab. They each had to be read in or sent out or relayed orders. And yet Amanda had managed to call Will back three more times before the sun came up. He could tell she was worried by the calmness of her tone, the way she spoke to

him as if he'd gotten a flat tire on the side of the highway instead of walked into a bloodbath. Usually, Amanda took a certain joy in making Will miserable, but last night was different.

It was also fleeting.

"So." She finished the email and moved on to another. "Quite a mess you've gotten yourself into, Wilbur."

He wasn't sure which mess she was talking about.

"I don't have to tell you that we're not out on the limb anymore; we're on the thin part of the branch. The twig."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Whoever these men are, they don't mind going after cops." Amanda glanced up at him. "Try not to get yourself killed, won't you? I don't have the patience to break in someone new."

"Yes, ma'am."

She turned her attention back to her email. "Where's Faith?"

Faith Mitchell, Will's partner. "You said meet at seven-thirty." He checked his watch. "She's got six minutes."

"How wonderful. You've learned to tell time." Amanda continued reading as she went to her desk, sat in her chair. The old cushion made a sound like a pig snort. "I looped the director in on your midnight escapades. He's keeping a close eye on this."

Will didn't know how he was expected to respond to this information, so he took his seat, waiting for the next shoe to drop. Just recently, Will had come to accept that Amanda Wagner was the closest thing he would ever have to a mother—that is, if your mother was the type to lock you in a refrigerator or strap you into the back seat of her car and roll you into a lake.

She put down her BlackBerry and took off her reading glasses. "Anything you need to tell me?"

"No, ma'am."

Uncharacteristically, Amanda didn't press. She turned on her computer, waited for it to boot. Will guessed Amanda was in her mid to late sixties, but there really was no way of knowing her exact age. She was still in good shape, still capable of running circles around men half her age—or Will's age, to be exact. And yet watching her try to work a computer mouse was like watching a cat try to pick up a pebble.

She slapped the mouse against the desk, mumbling, "What is wrong with this thing?"

Will knew better than to offer his help. He brushed a speck of

dirt off the knee of his trousers. It made him think about Sara. She was probably in her car by now, heading down to Macon. The drive was about an hour and a half. Will should've offered to take her. He could've confessed the whole sordid truth along the way.

And then Sara would've given him a choice: walk back to Atlanta or walk the rest of the way to Macon.

Amanda said, "You're brooding."

Will considered the description. "Don't you need the moors for that?"

"Clever." Amanda sat back in her chair, giving Will her full attention. "You investigated Lena Adams last year?"

"A year and a half ago," Will corrected. "Faith helped me. Lena's partner was stabbed. He practically bled out in the street. And then she arrested the suspect and he died in her custody."

"Reckless endangerment, negligence?"

"Yes," Will answered. "She was formally reprimanded, but she left Grant County a week later and joined the Macon force. They didn't seem to mind the taint."

Amanda picked at the stem of her glasses. Her voice got softer. "She was Jeffrey Tolliver's partner when he was murdered—what?—five, six years ago?"

Will stared out the window. He could feel her eyes lasering the side of his face.

She said, "There's an Eric Clapton song about telling the truth. Something about how the whole show is passing you by. Look into your heart. Et cetera."

Will cleared his throat. "It makes me very uncomfortable to think about you listening to Eric Clapton."

Amanda's sigh held a tinge of sadness that he didn't want to dwell on. "How exactly do you think this is going to end?"

He indicated the gray clouds that were suddenly crowding the sun. "I think it's going to rain."

"There's definitely a storm coming." Her tone quickly changed. "Ah, Major Branson. Thank you for making the drive."

Will stood as a woman wearing a dark blue police uniform came into the office. Ribbons and commendations filled her chest. A heavy-looking leather briefcase was in her hand. She was short and stocky, with her curly black hair shaved close to her head. She seemed about as happy to be here as Will.

Amanda made the introductions. "Special Agent Trent, this is Major Branson with the Macon Police Department. Denise is our liaison on the Jared Long shooting."

Will felt his bowels loosen. "I'm doing the investigation?"

A smile teased at Amanda's lips before she said, "No, Faith will take the lead."

"Already got it figured out?" Branson's temper sounded poised to uncoil. "I'm gonna be honest with you, Deputy Director. I'm not real happy with the idea of your people stomping around my patch like you own the place."

Amanda's tone stayed light. "Yet your chief sent you two hours north expressly to turn over all of your files."

"An hour and a half," Branson corrected. "And I may work for the man, but I don't always agree with him."

"Fair enough." Amanda indicated the chair in front of her desk. "Why don't we get our little pissing contest out of the way while Agent Trent fetches us some coffee?"

Branson sat, her briefcase clutched in her lap. Without looking at Will, she said, "Black, two sugars."

Amanda smiled her cat's smile. "Just black for me."

Will wasn't happy to be the designated fetcher, but he knew better than to linger. Outside the office, Caroline, Amanda's secretary, was sitting at her desk. She smiled at Will. "Cream. Two Sweet'N Lows."

Will saluted at her request as he walked into the hallway. His shoes sank into the padded carpet on the floor. He felt the chill of air-conditioning. City Hall East was housed in an old Sears building that had been built in the 1920s. When the city took over back in the nineties, only the important parts had been renovated, namely the executive suites. Three stories down in Will's shoebox of an office, the air was stale and likely toxic. The windows were rusted closed. The cracked asbestos tiles on the floor were scuffed red from the Georgia clay that had traveled in on nearly a hundred years of wingtips.

It wasn't just the air that was better on the top floor. The kitchen was a showplace, with dark cherry cabinets and stainless steel appliances. The coffeemaker looked like something a Transformer would shake off its leg. Will guessed the machine was the fancy kind that required pods. He checked the cabinets and found two boxes. He assumed Amanda drank the pink and

orange Dunkin' Donuts high-test. The other box contained purple and yellow pods with flowers and vanilla beans emblazoned on the foil. Will took out three hazelnuts and shut the cabinet door.

After a few false starts, he figured out how to load a pod. Another minute passed before he managed to pry open the lid of the water tank and fill it to the line. He took three mugs off the hooks and waited for the water to boil.

Out of habit, Will opened the refrigerator door. There were a couple of paper bags in the fridge, but no old takeout containers or rotting food that smelled like it belonged in the morgue. Before Will started dating Sara, everything he ate was an on-the-go type of meal, whether it was a bowl of cereal he downed while standing over the sink or the hot dogs he bought at the gas station on his way home.

Now when Will went home, that usually meant Sara's apartment and something for dinner that didn't roll under a heat lamp all day.

Or it meant that for the time being.

Finally, the red light flashed on the coffee machine. Will pressed down the handle on the pod and watched the hot liquid squirt out. The smell reminded him of the cloying perfume some women wear in an attempt to hide the odor of cigarettes.

He refilled the water tank for another round. The hazelnut scent wafted into his nostrils as he stirred powdered creamer into the first mug. Will had never liked the taste of coffee, but he made Sara's for her every morning. She liked it strong with no fancy flavoring. He'd started to associate the smell with her.

Will put down the spoon and stared at the machine.

There was no use fighting it anymore. He gave in completely to thinking about Sara, letting his mind consider all the things he was going to lose. Feeling her long auburn hair tickle his face. Tracing his lips along the freckles at the small of her back. Watching her chest blush bright red when he touched her. Then there was the way she would sometimes kiss him, showing him with her mouth what she wanted him to do.

"Will?"

He looked up, surprised to find Faith Mitchell standing in the doorway.

She asked, "What's wrong? You look sick."

The red light was flashing. Will loaded another pod. "You want

one?”

“If I have any more caffeine today, my head will explode.”

“Emma keep you up?”

Emma was Faith’s ten-month-old daughter. Will knew the baby was with her father this week, but he listened to Faith like it was the first time he was hearing the news.

“Anyway.” Faith rounded out the litany of complaints about her baby’s daddy by asking, “What do you think about coincidences?”

Will recognized a trick question when he heard one.

She said, “Like, you’re working an undercover case one minute and the next minute you’re sucked into another Lena Adams shit-storm.” She held out her hands in an open shrug. “Coincidence?”

“We always knew it was possible I’d run into her.”

“We *did*?” She raised her voice high on the last word, like she was questioning a toddler.

Will turned his attention back to the coffee machine. He slowed down his movements, feigning uncertainty so that Faith would take over.

Instead of taking the bait, she told him, “Sara called me about fifteen minutes ago.”

Will concentrated on filling the water tank precisely to the mark.

“She knows the state investigates officer-involved fatalities.”

He loaded up the next pod.

“She wanted to know what was going on with Jared.” Faith paused a moment, then added, “She didn’t want to bother you with it, but we both know she’s terrified of you getting mixed up with Lena, so ...” Faith shrugged. “I told her I’d look into it.”

Will cleared his throat. “That should be easy. Amanda’s putting you in charge of the investigation.”

“Well, great, but I didn’t know that when I told Sara. I was lying to her. Just like I was lying when I agreed that it’s a good thing you’re working undercover God-knows-where and you’re not going to get sucked into this, because I’m not sure if you know this, but Sara is terrified of you being around Lena.”

Will checked the kitchen drawers for sweeteners. He found two pink packets and tore off the tops.

Faith said, “You know Sara thinks Lena’s responsible for her husband’s murder. I pretty much agree with her, by the way.”

Will tapped the sweetener into the mug.

"She's also going to think it's Lena's fault that Jared was shot, which, considering her history, is a real possibility." Faith paused again. "Actually, it's a pattern now. I saw it back when you were investigating Lena Adams a year and a half ago. People who get close to her end up dead. Sara's right to be scared. Jared's just the latest casualty."

Will tossed the trash into the garbage can. Stainless steel, just like the appliances. He wondered if Amanda had used her own money.

Faith needled, "Jared, Sara's stepson by her dead husband who she thinks Lena got murdered."

The red light started flashing on the coffee machine. Will pressed down the handle on the pod. He tried the weather thing. "I think it's going to rain today."

Faith groaned. "You're a dumbass, you know that?"

He grimaced, mostly because he couldn't contradict her.

"It's not the case that's going to piss Sara off, it's the cover-up." Faith paused, but only for breath. "Actually, it won't piss her off. It'll hurt her. Devastate her. Which is a hell of a lot worse than her being mad. People get over being mad."

Will scooped up the three mugs in his hands. "Amanda's waiting."

Faith trailed him out of the kitchen. Will hunched his shoulders against the disappointment radiating off her, but she was blissfully silent as she followed him to Amanda's office. He knew better than to think this was over. Faith was probably itemizing in her head all the different ways she was right about this.

Sadly, there was nothing Will could say, because Faith *was* right. Sara wouldn't be angry. She would be hurt. She would be devastated. And then she would probably inventory the steaming load of crap Will had brought into her otherwise normal life and decide it wasn't worth it. His Dickensian childhood. What had happened to his family. His ardent desire not to discuss either topic no matter how gently Sara pressed. There just wasn't much to recommend him. Will had almost been kicked out of high school. He'd been homeless. He'd barely graduated from college. And this didn't even touch on Will's hateful wife, who had evaporated off the face of the earth the minute he'd filed divorce papers, yet still somehow managed to leave the occasional nasty

message tucked under the windshield wiper of Sara's car.

Caroline was still at her desk. She helped Will move the mugs around, taking the one with cream. He realized he'd screwed up the orders at the same moment he realized he didn't care.

Unbelievably, the tension in Amanda's office was thicker than when Will had left. Amanda's jaw was set. Denise Branson's body was rigid, her hands clenched into fists. The pissing contest was far from over.

Amanda's tone could've cut through steel. "Major Branson, this is Special Agent Mitchell."

Oddly, Denise Branson smiled warmly at Faith. "I worked with your mother when I was a rookie. I hope she's enjoying her retirement?"

"Yes." Faith shook the woman's hand. "I'll tell Mama you asked after her."

Branson continued, "Evelyn was always the consummate professional." She still didn't look at Amanda, but they all took her meaning. "I'm sorry I don't have time to look her up while I'm in town."

Faith's perfunctory smile and lack of response made it clear she wasn't going to be so easily charmed away from Amanda's side.

To break the awkward moment, Will passed out the coffees. Amanda held the mug to her lips, then recoiled when the smell hit her. Branson noted the gesture and placed her mug on the desk.

Amanda said, "Let's try to keep this brief. We all have work to do."

Will waited for the women to sit, then leaned against the windowsill, feeling—literally—like the odd man out. He was used to being surrounded by women, but there was something about this particular group that made him feel the need to cross his legs.

Amanda began, "All right, let's start with this officer-involved ..." She searched for the appropriate word. "... hammering." She smiled on this last bit, though Will had seen firsthand why the observation wasn't funny. "Denise, any leads on why Adams and Long were targeted?"

"We have some theories."

They all waited, but Branson didn't share them.

"All right," Amanda said. "We'll need to review all recent case

files, talk to their partners and team members and see if they can come up with any—”

“We’ve already done that,” Branson interrupted. “No one stood out. They’re police officers. They don’t get thank-you notes for arresting people.”

Amanda did not demure. “And yet they were targeted for a reason.”

“We’ve reviewed all of Adams’s cases going back twelve months. Same for Long. They’ve been doing mostly routine stuff. No dangerous work. Nothing that would draw this kind of attention.”

Amanda smirked. “Fascinating you were able to reach that conclusion in less than six hours.”

“We’re a crack team down in Macon.”

Amanda analyzed the woman. So did Will. Branson obviously relished the game, but her lips quivered at the corner when she was hiding something. It was almost as if she was fighting a smile.

Amanda asked, “You’ve met Charlie Reed?”

“That’s your forensics guy?” Branson shook her head. “Didn’t have a chance. Per your request to my chief, the house was sealed immediately after Jared Long was taken to the hospital. It didn’t seem like a good use of my time to drive over there and wait for your boys to mosey on down.”

“Thank you for your cooperation, Major. I’m sure it will help our investigation run more smoothly. Too many cooks and all that.” Amanda stopped to offer a canned smile. “The lab knows to rush any trace Charlie finds. He’ll report directly to me, and I’ll share anything relevant with your department. Faith is taking point on the investigation.” She told Faith, “Let’s be sure to keep Macon in the loop.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Faith took out her notebook and turned to a fresh page. “Major, what can you tell me?”

Branson had obviously come prepared. She told Amanda, “Go ahead and pull up those photos on the zip drive.”

Amanda raised an eyebrow at the order, but she still complied, moving the mouse around, looking at the TV set as if she expected something to happen. The screen stayed static. “Why isn’t this working?”

Will kept silent, but Faith asked, “Is it on?”

"Of course it's on." Amanda picked up the remote and pressed the red button. The screen flickered on, then a photograph came up. Will guessed he was looking at Jared Long's employment photo. He'd met the young man once before. Long was a handsome kid with the kind of charming self-confidence that made him a natural leader. From all reports, he was a lot like his father.

Branson provided, "Jared Long, Lena Adams's husband. He's a motorman, been on the Macon force seven years. Good at his job. Likes being on the bike. No red flags. Stellar officer."

Faith mumbled, "Unlike his wife."

If Branson heard the comment, she chose to ignore it. "Long is out of surgery as of half an hour ago. It's touch-and-go, but that doesn't change anything on our end. An officer was shot. Another was almost murdered. Someone put the hit out. Next picture, please."

Amanda clicked the mouse. She stared at the screen, waiting for the image to change. "Oh, for the love of—"

Faith said, "Hit the space bar."

"That won't work." Amanda tapped the space bar. The picture changed. The new photo showed an older man with a pockmarked face and squinty eyes. He was dressed in an orange prison jumper. There was a placard under his chin with his name and inmate number.

Branson supplied, "Samuel Marcus Lawrence, the first assailant who entered the house, DOA shortly thereafter. He's our first shooter. Mid-level thug with a couple of assaults that put him inside for two and three years, respectively. Early parole for good behavior, times two. He told anyone who'd listen that he was an ex-Hells Angel but there's no evidence he ever patched in."

Faith kept writing in her notebook as she asked, "Drugs?"

"Meth. He had more sores on his face than a backseat whore."

Amanda said, "Either way, he's dead now." She tapped the space bar again. Another mugshot came on screen. The man was about the same age as the first, with gray hair and the faded tattoo of a cobra's head folding into the turkey gizzard of his neck.

"Fred Leroy Zachary," Branson provided. "He did eight years for assault with a deadly, then pulled a full dime off a kidnap and rape. Known around town as a muscle for hire. He's alive, but just

barely. His jaw was broken. Spine fractured. Ribs broken. Whole body's in a cast. Mouth's wired shut. He can't talk, and even if he could, his lawyer won't let him."

Amanda said, "Well, you can't accuse Adams of not being thorough. What did she have to say for herself?"

Branson turned cagey again. "Not much. Doctors said she was in shock. They had to treat her at the scene. She sketched out the highlights—one armed male breached the house. Long was shot in the back. Sawed-off shotgun, so the pellets spread. Adams took the hammer out of Long's tool belt and defended herself. A second armed male came at her. There was a struggle, but she managed to neutralize both intruders."

Branson seemed to be finished. Amanda asked, "That's it?"

"Like I said, Adams was under medical care for severe shock. She saw her husband get shot. Fought for her life. His life, too, come to that. We'll go back at her later, but from where I'm sitting, she's earned some breathing room."

Amanda silently steeped her fingers together underneath her chin. Faith kept writing in her notebook, but Will could practically see her ears perk up. There was a big piece missing from the end of the story. Either Lena had lied about Will being at the house or Branson was lying about what Lena had told her.

Amanda said, "Faith will go back at Adams. She's had enough breathing room, I think. We need to know exactly what happened last night. You may not like it, but it's our case and that's how it's going to be."

Branson's jaw tightened, but she gave a single nod of agreement.

Faith broke the tension this time. "Major, maybe you can fill in some basic details for me?" She turned to a fresh page in her notebook. "We're talking a residential area?" Branson nodded. "A shotgun goes off in the middle of the night. Anybody see anything? Hear anything?"

Branson apparently shared Amanda's habit of answering questions she didn't like in her own sweet time. She paused a moment longer than necessary, then said, "The neighbors weren't sure at first. It's a fairly rural area. Just past midnight, you hear a shot, maybe it's poachers, a car backfiring. The area's heavily wooded. Houses are on five-acre lots. We're not like y'all here in the city, stacked up on top of each other like rats."

Faith nodded, ignoring the dig, or maybe agreeing with it. "Who called the police?"

"A neighbor who lives four doors down. You've got her name and statement on the zip drive if your boss can figure out how to open it." She glanced Amanda's way, then turned back to Faith. "There's two other cops on that street. One's married to a paramedic, the other lives with a firefighter. That's the only reason Long didn't die at the scene. His heart had stopped by the time they got there. They took turns working on him until the ambulance arrived. Took almost twenty minutes."

Amanda said, "If Long comes around, Faith will interview him to see if his statement matches his wife's."

Branson waited another long moment. The corner of her lips quivered, then curved into a smile. "Aren't you curious how I know for a fact that your boy over there was in that house last night right when the murders went down?"

Will supposed he was the boy in question. He thought about the hammer, the way the blood was still warm when he grabbed the metal with his bare hand. The swirls of his fingerprints in the dried blood would've been like a neon light to a cop as seasoned as Denise Branson.

Amanda breathed out a heavy sigh. "I think we can call Will a man, since he's the only thing that stopped your detective from hammering a suspect to death. A second suspect, that is."

Branson snapped, "You think so?"

Amanda made a calculated guess. "I gather that despite my orders to keep your people out of my crime scene, you ran fingerprints?"

Branson straightened her shoulders, as if bracing herself for a fight. She'd probably sent a team to Lena's house the minute Amanda gave the order to lock it down. Will could only imagine the major's rage when his GBI file popped up on her computer. He couldn't blame the woman. Nobody liked realizing they'd been fooled.

"All right." Amanda turned to Will. "Our turn to share. Run down your evening for the major, please."

Will hadn't been expecting to contribute, but he said, "Last night, I was approached by a contact I've been working as part of an undercover operation. He told me he needed a lookout on a house robbery. No violence involved, the occupants weren't

home. Obviously a lie on both counts. It looked like a good way to get inside the group, so I said yes.”

“You just happened to be in Macon?” Branson smirked when no one answered. “This contact got a name?”

Amanda supplied, “Anthony Dell.”

Branson didn’t acknowledge the answer. She prompted Will, “So, Dell said he had a job. What next?”

“We went to the job. Dell dropped me at the end of the street and told me to call on his cell if anyone approached. He drove down and parked in front of a house with a steep driveway. A light gray van was already parked on the street. Two males got out—I assume Zachary and Lawrence. They entered the house. Dell stayed outside by the van. I didn’t see that they were armed, but I was about fifty yards away.”

“That’s half a football field,” Branson noted. “Did you get the plates on the van?”

“It was midnight.”

“Full moon.”

“No streetlights. All I could see from where I was standing were shadows.”

Branson kept studying him, like she was trying to suss out a lie. Finally, she said, “The Kia that Dell was driving was still on scene when our units rolled up.”

Will felt his stomach drop. He had forgotten all about Tony’s car.

Branson continued, “We woke Dell up at his house this morning. He seemed real shocked that his car was missing from his driveway. Wanted to file a stolen vehicle report ASAP. We checked him for gunshot residue, ran his sheet, which was packed with low-level bullshit—but I’m sure you know that.”

“You let him go?” Amanda asked.

“What am I gonna hold him on? You gotta witness puts him at the scene?”

Will saw Amanda’s nostrils flare.

Branson continued, “I noticed Dell’s car’s got a sticker on the windshield—Macon General employee parking. Now, that rang a bell for me, because we did an investigation last month on some pills missing from the hospital pharmacy. Never did get any solid leads, but I know the GBI gets a copy of all reports pertaining to the theft of controlled substances. I made a trip to the hospital

this morning to check out Dell's co-workers." She asked Will, "How do you like your job at the hospital?"

Amanda managed to sound both irritated and bored. "Yes, Major, excellent work. Bully for you. Where is Dell's Kia now?"

"It's in our garage. You told us to seal the house, not the street." She seemed to take great pleasure in telling Amanda, "I'll make certain to share any relevant information with your department."

"How kind. Thank you."

"You're welcome." Branson turned her attention back to Will. "Two males went inside the house, you and Dell stayed in the street. What next?"

Will had to think a second before he could pick back up where he left off. "I heard the shotgun go off. I ran toward the house."

"Half a football field away," she noted. "And then?"

"Dell tried to stop me from going in. We struggled for a while. I don't know how long, but he's stronger than he looks, and he was obviously freaked out. Several more shots went off while we were fighting."

Branson gave him the once-over. "You don't look like you've been in a fight."

"He was trying to stop me from going inside, not knock me out."

"Nice guy."

Will shrugged, but in the criminal world, Dell had been doing him a solid. He'd been trying to get Will to leave instead of running into a firestorm.

Will continued, "By the time I made it into the house, both men were neutralized. Lena Adams recognized me, or at least it seemed like she did. I got her to drop the hammer, then I went back outside. Dell was gone. The police were close by. I could hear the sirens. I went behind the house, jumped the fence into the woods, and walked away."

Will tucked his hands into his pockets as he leaned against the window. Technically, he hadn't walked, but they didn't need to know that Will had bolted through those woods like the hounds of hell were at his back.

Branson asked, "Have you had any contact with Lena Adams since you and your partner investigated her a year and a half ago?"

Will told the truth. "Neither one of us has laid eyes on Lena since the investigation ended."

"Have you talked to her since last night?"

Will shook his head, his mind flashing on the image of Lena's face when he'd put his finger to his lips, told her to be quiet. She'd apparently taken it to heart.

Branson said, "I find it interesting that without any coordination, Detective Adams chose to maintain your cover."

Faith pointed out, "It makes her look good, doesn't it? Instead of Will stopping her from braining guy number two, she stops herself."

Branson wasn't about to publicly pile onto one of her officers. "I'll put a BOLO on the gray van and get it out to the news stations."

"Late model," Will supplied. "Probably a Ford. No windows on the back or sides. Light gray, not dark."

Branson took her BlackBerry out of her briefcase. "And nothing on the license plate, even though you were right up on it before you went into the house." She started thumbing the information into an email.

Amanda asked, "You didn't search for vehicles registered to Lawrence and Zachary?"

Branson kept typing. "Of course I did. They've both been living in the same trailer park off I-16. Zachary rides a Harley. Lawrence drives a truck. Both were parked outside their respective shitholes. Neither one of them have a gray van registered to their names."

"They're from Macon?"

"Born and raised."

"Family been notified?"

"Lawrence has an ex who seemed real happy he was gone. Zachary has a brother waiting for the needle over in Holman. Killed a gas station attendant during a robbery. Murder runs in the family."

"It usually does." Amanda was obviously ready to end the meeting. "Looks like we've got work to do." She turned to Faith, saying, "Priority number one when you get to Macon is talking to Lena Adams, making sure she knows to keep her mouth shut about Will. You'll need to review her recent cases. I'm sure the major won't mind another set of eyes on the good work her

people have already done. Talk to Adams's team, get some idea of what she's been up to. I wouldn't be surprised to learn she's been working off-book. See if anyone will talk."

Branson dropped her BlackBerry into her briefcase. "You'll have to interview her at the hospital. She won't leave Long's side. Said we'd have to take her away in handcuffs."

"That can be arranged," Faith offered. She'd worked behind the scenes on the previous Lena investigation and couldn't quite get past their inability to make the case stick. "Adams did attempt to murder a man."

Branson glared at her. "Are you not familiar with the Castle Doctrine, Agent Mitchell? The state guarantees a citizen's right to protect his or her home from an intruder. To my thinking, this episode is the very reason the law was passed in the first place."

Faith couldn't argue with the legalities, but she'd never been one to let go of a grudge. "Be that as it may, Major Branson, the way Lena Adams lives her life, she's gonna end up looking out from the wrong side of a cell eventually."

"I think the only thing Lena's looking at right now is how to get her husband to wake up. We all feel that way. Jared Long is a good cop. So is Lena for that matter, and it worries me, Agent Mitchell, that you're going into this thing thinking otherwise."

Faith bristled. "I'll go where the evidence leads me."

"Regardless," Amanda said. "We need to pin Lena down on protecting Will's cover. There's still a play to be made at that hospital, and given last night's events, this just got a hell of a lot more dangerous. Major, I expect you'll honor our request for confidentiality. We've spent too much time on this thing to have it blow up in our faces."

"This *thing*," Branson echoed, giving careful weight to the words.

Amanda was silent. She wasn't buying time; she was making Branson wait. For her part, Denise Branson looked ready to roll out a sleeping bag if that's what it took.

Finally, after what felt like a full minute, Amanda said, "Will?"

He looked her in the eye, wondering how much she expected him to reveal. She made an open gesture with her hand, as if to say he should hold nothing back. Of course, what she indicated for Branson and what she actually meant were two different things.

Will carefully bent the truth. "Several days ago, we got a tip that a high roller was making a move into Macon. Street name is Big Whitey. We ran him through the system and got a ping out of Florida, but not much else."

Branson asked, "Which part of Florida?"

"Sarasota."

"You got a picture?"

Will hesitated a moment too long. Amanda made a great show of opening one of her desk drawers, pulling out a surveillance photo. She slid it across her desk, saying, "This was taken four years ago."

Branson leaned over, making a point of studying the grainy image.

Will could describe the picture in his sleep. Big Whitey wore a Marlins baseball cap with the brim pulled low. His jacket was bulky, hardly what you'd expect in the Florida heat. Mirrored sunglasses wrapped around the top part of his face. His beard was dark and dense, showing very little skin. His hands were in his pockets. Big Whitey knew how to pose for a closed-circuit security camera. There was no way to tell how tall or short, white or not white, the man was.

Will explained, "Florida never laid eyes on him personally. This photo was taken off CCTV at a chicken joint on Tamiami Trail."

Branson asked, "Florida's sure this is Big Whitey?"

"One of the fry cooks gave him up. Said he recognized him from his local pill shop."

"Gave him up for what?"

Will pointed to the photo. "About half a minute after that image was captured, Whitey stepped back from the camera, shot a cop in the head, and escaped through the back exit, where a car was waiting."

Branson sounded dubious. "And Sarasota didn't go balls to the wall looking for a cop killer?"

"The fry cook didn't know much more than his street name. They were gonna go back at him the next day, but he was shot dead outside his house later that night."

"Sarasota let their only material witness go home?"

"They didn't know Whitey had made him, and they couldn't legally hold the guy without cause."

Amanda chimed in, "And Sarasota didn't put the pieces

together on Big Whitey until the FDLE came in and did it for them.” Her tone dripped with sarcasm as she needlessly explained, “The Florida Department of Law Enforcement works much like the GBI. They coordinate cases across county lines. They’re very good at providing the whole picture, the kind of details the local force is too myopic to register.”

Again, Branson took a moment before asking, “Do you have any more details on this Big Whitey?”

Will said, “Nothing recent. FDLE thinks he was originally ganged up with the Palmetto Street Rollers. They were a Miami-based group, mostly Cuban, some Caucasian. The FBI put membership around twenty thousand running up and down the East Coast.” Branson nodded, so Will continued, “The gang broke up into sets after some turf wars. Florida believes but isn’t certain that Big Whitey took over from Sarasota down to the Keys. We’re guessing two years ago, he moved up the coast into Savannah and Hilton Head.”

“Guessing based on what?”

“Both Savannah and Hilton Head kept hearing his name come up. Snitches, mostly, but nothing concrete. At first, the locals thought he was an urban legend, a kind of go-to bogeyman. ‘Play it straight or Big Whitey will get you.’ ‘Wasn’t me, Officer, Big Whitey did it.’ ” Will added, “Savannah’s convinced he’s real, but Carolina disbanded the Hilton Head task force six months ago. Put the money on coastal trafficking instead, figured it was a wider net.”

“What persuaded Savannah that this Big Whitey’s not some kind of urban legend?” Branson obviously couldn’t resist adding, “Other than the excellent counter-myopic services of the great GBI?”

Will ignored the sarcasm. “They started to see a pattern. The junkies and cons were suddenly more sophisticated. Crime went up but prosecutions went down. The bad guys had more money for lawyers—usually the same lawyers from the same firms. Better cars, better clothes, bigger guns. Somebody took a bunch of low-level thugs and turned them into businessmen.”

“Ergo, Big Whitey is real,” Branson summed up. “All the bad guys in town played along?”

“Unless they wanted to end up face-down in the sand.” Will didn’t tell her that in their own way, many of the cops had played

along, too. The detectives who didn't request transfers asked for early retirement. "Most of the criminals complied. They didn't become drug dealers to lose money."

"And now you think Big Whitey's trying to set up the same type of organization in Macon because you got a tip," Branson concluded. "I'm assuming Whitey specializes in pills, which Tony Dell was swiping from the hospital pharmacy?"

Will said, "That's a chunk of his business, but heroin is his end game. Whitey moves into the suburbs, branches out into the rich white neighborhoods. They start with pills, he moves them into heroin."

Branson asked, "How'd you target Dell in the first place?"

Amanda quipped, "Confidential source."

Branson didn't look at Amanda. "Same source who turned you on to Big Whitey?"

Amanda said, "That's how it usually works."

Branson kept ignoring her, asking Will, "And that's why you agreed to play lookout on the so-called robbery last night, to build your bad-boy cred with Dell?"

Will nodded.

"Well, that all makes sense. Thank you for your time." Branson picked up her briefcase from the floor and held it in her lap again. "You know how to get in touch with me, Deputy Director."

Amanda was seldom thrown, but Denise Branson had managed to surprise her. "That's it?"

"You're obviously not going to tell me anything else and I'm sure as shit not going to share anything with you." Branson stood. "If I'd wanted to get fucked around with this morning, I would've stayed in bed with my vibrator."

The woman knew how to make an exit. She kept her head held high as she left the office, her briefcase gripped close to her side.

Will looked at Amanda, who silently stared at the empty doorway.

"Wow." Faith broke the silence. "That was quite a show."

Amanda played with the stem of her reading glasses again. "She knew Lawrence fired the shotgun that took down Long. I expect we'll find she ordered some tests."

Will had picked up on that, too. "She was in the house at some point before it got locked down. She knew Lawrence had meth sores on his face, but he doesn't have them in the booking photo."

She called Dell Tony, not Anthony.”

Amanda said, “She had about two hours before Charlie and his team got to Macon. She’s obviously running a parallel investigation.” Amanda shot Will a pointed look. “And hell will freeze over before she tells us what—if anything—she finds in Dell’s car.”

Will nodded at the rebuke, which was deserved.

“I doubt the car will be useful.” Faith flipped back through her notes. “Branson obviously fingerprinted the bodies to get their IDs. Zachary and Lawrence weren’t stupid enough to go in with their wallets. They probably left them in the van.”

Will said, “Dell’s probably sold their credit cards by now. He’ll keep the licenses for his own use. The van’s probably been stripped for parts.” Leaving the Kia at the scene had been a risky move, but Tony Dell wasn’t the type to pass on an easy score.

Amanda asked Will, “Dell’s criminal record is petty—am I correct?”

“Yes,” Will answered. Tony Dell had been very lucky up until now. “He’s done jail time off some misdemeanors, but he’s never made it to the big house.”

“What’s your story when you see him?”

“I’m angry. Why did he lie about the job? What did he tell the cops? Should I leave town? Do I still get paid?”

“Good. Don’t oversell it.”

Will nodded again.

Faith sat back in her chair. “Why didn’t Lena tell Branson you were there?”

“I have no idea,” Will admitted. “I buy that she was in shock. Her pupils were blown. She was dripping sweat. She’d just killed one guy with her bare hands and was about to take out another.”

“Yes, how about that?” Amanda asked. “Let’s keep in mind she was fully prepared to commit cold-blooded murder.”

Will said, “Branson’s right about the Castle Doctrine. Two people came into Lena’s home and tried to kill her. She thought her husband was dead. She feared for her life. You could take it to trial, but there’s not a jury on earth who would convict her.” This was the problem with Lena Adams—or at least Will’s problem. He didn’t condone her actions, but at a gut level, he understood them.

Amanda’s tone was brisk. “I said let’s keep it in mind. I didn’t

tell you to lock her up for it.” She told Faith, “See if you can get Will and Lena in the same room together. She might talk more openly with him.”

“That should be easy with Sara right down the hallway.” Faith stared her displeasure into Will. “And don’t forget who we’re dealing with. In case it’s not obvious, it still rankles me that Lena got away the last time. It wouldn’t surprise me a bit to find out this time around that she knows exactly why this happened and who ordered it. Maybe she skimmed cash from the wrong bust. Took kickbacks from the wrong bad guys. That could be why Major Branson’s doing her own investigation. Lena’s one of her team. Branson doesn’t want to look like the idiot who didn’t realize she had a dirty cop on her hands.”

“Lena’s not working the other side,” Will countered. He’d spent a lifetime dealing with damaged women like Lena Adams. Their motivations were easy to read once you knew what to look for. “She’d never take a bribe. She does bad things, but she always thinks she’s doing them for the right reason.”

“Whatever.” Faith had never been a fan of nuance. “Major Branson thinks the hospital pharmacy theft is the reason you ended up in Macon. She’s not going to stop until she finds out who your informant is.”

Amanda stated the obvious. “She’ll only know if someone tells her.”

Will said, “Don’t you think it’s strange she asked if we had a photo of Big Whitey?”

“Yes,” Amanda answered. “A picture isn’t the first thing I would ask about.”

Faith said, “She didn’t do that weird thing with her mouth when she saw it, but who the hell knows?” She closed her notebook. “What else do you think she’s not telling us?”

Amanda said, “More than we’re not telling her, which I find highly annoying.” She raised her voice. “Caroline, get me Gil Gonzalo at the FDLE.”

“He’s on central time,” Caroline shouted back. “Give it another half hour unless you want to talk to a junior officer.”

“I guess they work when they please down there,” Amanda grumbled. “Will, your report said Dell approached you around eleven-thirty last night. He took you straight to the job?”

“I was just coming off my hospital shift. He stopped me in the

parking lot.” Will hadn’t considered the timing until now. “Maybe he needed me to fill in for someone else.”

Faith asked, “How did Dell pitch the job?”

“He asked if I wanted to make five hundred bucks cash for keeping my mouth shut and my eyes open.”

Faith said, “Five hundred bucks is a lot of money for being a lookout. You could get a guy killed for less than that.”

“You’re right.” Will was beginning to think he’d missed a lot of things last night. Adrenaline and sheer panic had never enhanced anyone’s short-term memory.

He said, “I noticed when they were outside Lena’s house that they all shook hands. Not the shoulder-bump bro thing, just a formal handshake, like they didn’t know each other well.”

Faith twisted her lips to the side as she considered the situation. “So, the plan was thrown together at the last minute. They didn’t have a crew in place.”

Will said, “Dell hangs out at a place called Tipsie’s just about every night. It’s a strip joint off the highway, caters mostly to bikers and ex-cons. I went with him a few times to build a rapport.”

“A rapport?” Faith echoed.

Will ignored her sarcasm. “If you’re looking for a guy to help you kill a couple of cops in Macon, Tipsie’s is the place to go.”

“I’ll check it out,” Faith said. “Hopefully, Macon PD will be more helpful than Major Branson. There’s something a little too go-getter about her for me. Who wears all their ribbons for a downtown meeting? And what was that snickery smile on her lips?”

Amanda told them, “This sounds like a character-building exercise. Attempted murder on two cops, one man dead, another critically wounded, and the chief sends her to brief us? That’s not a plum assignment.”

“Especially if she’s been up since one-shitty in the morning,” Faith pointed out. “For what it’s worth, Branson sounds to me like she’s on-side with Lena. Could be an ‘us against the world’ thing, like they’re both the same kind of bad.”

“Maybe,” Amanda allowed. “Misery loves company.”

Will tuned out their voices. He thought about last night, the drive to Lena’s house. Dell had been fidgety, but that was pretty much his default. He’d played with the radio, tapped his fingers

on the dash, the steering wheel, his leg, as he drove one-handed toward what they both thought was an easy score. Dell had talked the entire time: about the weather, his ailing mother who lived in Texas, a woman at the hospital he was dying to sleep with. All Will had to do was nod occasionally to keep him going. Dell didn't need any more encouragement. He actually talked too much for his own good. Major Branson had been fed the story backward. Tony Dell was the original target of Will's investigation. His first day undercover, Dell would not shut up about a big-time dealer named Big Whitey.

Will realized that Amanda and Faith had gone silent.

Faith asked, "What is it?"

Will shook his head, but he still told them, "Big Whitey."

"It can't be coincidence," Amanda said. "You're down there for Dell. Dell turns you on to Big Whitey. Big Whitey kills cops. A little over a week later, two police officers are attacked."

Will said, "It's the timing that's bothering me. If I'm going to kill some cops, I don't do it on the fly. I plan it out. I follow them around. I figure out what their habits are. It would take several days, maybe a week, to get a team together. There must've been a clock ticking on the hit, otherwise they would've never used Dell and they sure as hell wouldn't've hired me sight unseen."

Faith asked, "You think some of their original crew chickened out?" She answered her own question. "It would make sense that they wouldn't tell you and Dell what they were really up to after their first choice walked away."

Will said, "That would explain the five hundred dollars. You overpay to keep the questions down and buy an easy yes." He went back to the timing. "Bad guys don't play the long game. This was something recent. The hit was put out in the last two weeks, maximum. So, we figure out what happened in the last two weeks."

"Macon is in Bibb County now." Amanda tapped some keys on her computer. "That's region ...?"

"Twelve," Will supplied.

Amanda raised her voice again. "Caroline, get me Nick Shelton on the phone."

Will said, "I've been reading the Macon paper every day." He ignored the surprised looks they gave him. "About a week ago, two cops were hurt raiding a shooting gallery that was selling

mostly meth and pills. The details were sketchy. One's still in the hospital. The other's taking disability."

"Anything else?" Amanda asked.

"They netted some cash under the drug seizure rule. Paper didn't give an exact number, but Macon PD was talking about using it to buy new cruisers, some AKs for SWAT." Will shrugged again. "The rest was just the usual blotter stuff—missing teenage girls, pot bust at the school, a guy died on the toilet."

Amanda clasped her hands together on the desk. She was obviously done with talking. "All right. We have a plan?"

"My hospital shift starts at eleven." Will told Faith, "You'll have to figure out a way to get me and Lena in the same room without blowing my cover."

"I'm sure she'll cooperate." Faith sounded skeptical. She asked Amanda, "Do you think it's worth me going to the trailer park where Zachary and Lawrence lived?"

Amanda shook her head. "Branson's probably flipped the place upside down by now. Give it a day or two. Go in soft so there's a nice contrast."

"All right," Faith agreed. "Speaking of Branson, I'll double-check the information she gave us, run down the records on Zachary and Lawrence, make sure there's nothing she's leaving out. Might as well run Adams and Long while I'm at it. I'll send everything to data analysis so they can track down bank accounts, mortgages, known associates, family members, whatever else pops up."

Amanda said, "That's going to be a lot of information to sort through. Pull some help from the field office. Make them do the bulk of the work on Jared Long so we have a long paper trail if this goes to trial. We don't want to be accused of prejudicial thinking."

"You mean again?" Faith pushed herself up from her chair. "I'll call the cell phone company and get a list off the towers near Adams's house. Midnight in a rural area, there can't be that many active calls."

"Let me know if they give you any push-back," Amanda said. Cellular providers were getting stingy about data mining lately. "If we need a warrant, it'll take a few days."

"Amanda?" Caroline yelled. "Nick Shelton's on line two."

Amanda picked up the receiver, but she put it to her shoulder

instead of her ear. “Will, be careful. Keep your phone on you at all times so we know exactly where you are.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He followed Faith toward the door.

“Also—” Amanda waited for them to turn back around. “Will’s right about the timing. Whatever set this off had to be recent. Faith, put together a timeline. Start with last night, then go backward day by day, minute by minute if you have to. Find out whatever the hell it is Lena Adams did to put all of this into motion.”

4.

MACON, GEORGIA

SEVEN DAYS AGO—THE DAY OF THE RAID

Dawn turned the morning light a cobalt blue as the raid van roared down a gravel road. There were ten cops in back, five on one side, five on the other, all jammed shoulder-to-shoulder so that every bump of the tires made them jerk in unison. The radio speakers were blaring Ice-T's "Cop Killer." The air inside the van vibrated with the raging beat.

Cop killer. Better you than me.

Lena Adams steadied her shotgun as they hit another rut in the road. She checked the Glock strapped to her thigh, made sure the Velcro held the gun tightly in place. The voice in her head screamed along with Ice-T's as they got closer to the target. She took a few quick breaths, not to clear her mind but to make it spin, to amp up the adrenaline and the absolute high that came from knowing she was a few moments away from the biggest bust of her career.

And then everything stopped.

The music snapped off. The red light came on over their heads. Silence.

Two minutes until arrival.

The van slowed. Gravel crunched under the tires. Guns were drawn, magazines checked. Helmets and protective glasses were adjusted. The smell of testosterone got thicker. Nine men and one woman. All of them suited in Kevlar vests and black fatigues,

loaded up with enough ammo to take down a small army.

Lena breathed through her mouth, tasting the fear and excitement circling inside the van. She took in her team. Eyes wide. Pupils the size of dimes. The anticipation was almost sexual. She could feel the exhilaration building around her, the way everyone shifted in their seats, gripped their guns tighter in their hands. They'd been staking out the house for the last two weeks, had planned their attack even as the junkies and whores streamed in and out like ants on a mound. There would be piles of money. Percocet. Vicodin. Hillbilly heroin. Coke. Guns.

Lots of guns.

Overnight surveillance told them that four men were inside the house. One was a low-level thug on parole off assault charges. The second was a junkie scumbag who would suck off a dog to feed his Oxy habit. The third was Diego Nuñez, an old-school enforcer who enjoyed getting his hands dirty. The fourth was their leader, a bastard named Sid Waller who'd been questioned on a rape and two different murders but somehow managed to skate on all of them.

Waller was their main target. Lena had been tracking him for eight months, doing a masochistic hokeypokey—locking him up, letting him go, locking him up, letting him go.

Not this time.

The drugs and guns would put Sid away for twenty years, minimum, but Lena wanted more than that. She wanted him to know for the rest of his miserable life that a woman had cuffed him, jailed him, convicted him. Not that he would have a long life once Lena was finished. She wanted Sid Waller on death row. She wanted to watch them jam the needle in his arm. See that last flicker of life drain out of him. And she was betting her career on making that happen.

For two weeks, she'd been fighting the brass, pushing them to keep the operation going, pleading with them to extend the overtime, authorize the manpower, spend the money, and pull in the favors for the snitch who'd brought them all to this house in the middle of the woods.

Sid's crew wouldn't last long behind bars. Diego Nuñez would hold out, but the other two were junkies, and with Sid Waller out of the way, getting high would trump being loyal. In less than twenty-four hours, they'd both be scrambling to make deals, and

Lena had a DA who was ready to hand them out. Sid Waller had killed a nineteen-year-old kid. He'd raped his own niece and slit his sister's throat when she'd called 911. Every cop in this van wanted to be the one to take him down.

Lena didn't bother with wanting it. She was actually going to do it.

She looked up at the ceiling, staring at the red light until it flickered off and then on again.

One minute.

Lena closed her eyes, going over the plan. They had pulled the records on the house. It was a foreclosure, one of many on the outskirts of town. Brick, which was good because it would stop bullets. The single-story structure was in the middle of two point-five acres bordered by a national forest on one side and a rural route on the other that bisected Macon and fed into Interstate 75, heading north into Atlanta. Searching the tax commissioner's office had netted them a builder's diagram: den, bathroom, and two bedrooms in the back. Dining room and kitchen in the front, with a set of stairs opposite the sink that led down into the basement.

They'd rehearsed the raid so many times that Lena saw it like a tightly choreographed dance. DeShawn Franklin and Mitch Cabello would breach the side door with a Monoshock Ram. Lena would take the front of the house with Paul Vickery, her partner for the last year. Eric Haigh and Keith McVale would clear the bathroom and two bedrooms in the back. DeShawn and Mitch would secure any prisoners. The remaining men would guard the perimeter of the house and make sure no one slipped out through a window or door. Lena had wanted at least eight more bodies on the team, but the operation was already pushing the million-dollar mark and Lena knew better than to ask the brass for more.

They always worked in twos; no one entered a room alone. The layout of the house was choppy, each room walled off with nothing but a door in and out. Back at the station, they'd taped off the garage, mapping the rooms to scale. Lena and Paul had two doorways to contend with before they reached the basement: den to dining room, dining room to kitchen. Each opening represented a new opportunity to get shot.

The basement was going to be the trickiest part. The builder's diagram showed a wide-open space, but that had been drawn in

the fifties, when the house was built. Sometime in the last sixty years, the basement had been finished. There would be walls they didn't know about. Closed doors and closets. There was no door to the outside, only two narrow, boarded-up windows that a grown man couldn't fit through. The basement was a deathtrap.

Back at the station, they had drawn straws to see who would go down first. Lena's team had won, but that was only because she had been holding the straws.

The van downshifted to a crawl. There were no windows in the back, but Lena could see past the driver's head. The sun winked underneath the visor. A thick stand of pine trees arced around the side of the house. Aerial photos showed a straight shot to the rural route less than two hundred yards through the forest. If the bad guys decided to run, that was the direction they'd take, which was why two cruisers were assigned to patrolling that stretch of road.

The van stopped. Overhead, the red light flickered again, this time staying off.

Lena pumped her shotgun, loading a cartridge into the chamber. She checked the Glock again. Her team followed suit, checking their weapons. The driver, an old-timer named Kirk Davis, whispered into the radio, letting the brass know they'd arrived. The mobile command center was parked a mile away in the Piggly Wiggly parking lot. If history was any indication, Denise Branson would wait until Lena's team had secured the house, then roll in and take credit for everything.

So be it.

Lena's credit would come when she had Sid Waller on the ground, her foot on his neck, thick plastic zip ties cutting into his fat wrists. It was the only thing left in her life that she wanted to do—could do. It got her up in the morning and it went to her empty bed with her every night.

Lena grabbed the door handle, then looked back at the group, stared each man in the eye to make sure they were ready. There were nods all around. She pulled open the door.

And the dance began.

Lena jumped out first, heading toward the house at a fast trot. She heard footsteps pounding behind her—nine guys armed to the teeth and ready to break some heads. She kept her shotgun tight to her chest as she ran toward the carport. Her Glock tapped

against her thigh. She scanned the woods around the house, took in the trash littering the ground, the broken bottles and cigarette butts.

The perimeter team swarmed into position. Lena led the rest of her men into the carport. They lined up two on each side. Paul Vickery jammed his shoulder against Lena's. He winked at her, like this was nothing, though she could see his chest heaving up and down underneath his vest. Inside the house, they heard the laugh track from a TV show, then music. *The Jeffersons*. "Movin' On Up."

Lena started the timer on her watch. She gave the nod to DeShawn and Mitch, who were holding the Monoshock, waiting for her signal.

They swung back the ram twice to build up momentum, then slammed the sixty-pound metal cylinder straight into the door. The wood splintered like glass.

Lena yelled, "Police!" as they rushed in—guns drawn, ready to light up the place.

But they were late to the party.

Two men sat on a yellow corduroy couch opposite the television. Their shirts were off. Jeans slung low. One had his hand tucked into his front pocket. The other guy held a can of beer. Both had their eyes open. Parted lips showed missing teeth. An array of handguns covered the battered coffee table in front of them.

Neither moved, or ever would again until the coroner came to pronounce them.

Their throats had been cut. The skin gaped open, showing white tips of vertebrae among the dark red sinew inside their necks.

Paul checked for pulses, though even from ten feet away, Lena could tell both men had been dead for hours. Waxy skin. The odor of decay. The junkie was one of the deceased—Elian Ramirez. His bare chest was concave, the ribs standing out like toothpicks. His murderer had saved him the cost of killing himself with Oxy.

Paul checked the second man, turning the head to get a better look at him. "Shit," he cursed. His disappointment spread around the room.

Diego Nuñez, Sid Waller's right-hand man. Lena watched a fly

crawl across his eyeball. Nuñez's purple-black tongue lolled out of his mouth like a chow's. According to statements, Diego had taken his turn with Sid Waller's niece once his boss had finished with her. He'd been behind the wheel during the drive-by that killed a nineteen-year-old kid who'd been stupid enough to mouth off to Waller. Lena's guess was that, as a reward for good service, Diego had joined in on the fun with Waller's sister. The woman had been brutally raped and beaten before her throat was sliced open.

Murderer. Rapist. Thug. He'd died with a beer in his hand and his eyes glued to the TV.

"Shit," Paul repeated. He had found another body behind the couch. This one had been spared the slit throat, but part of his head was missing. It was a clean cut straight across. Lena guessed the ax leaning against the wall was the reason why. Long strands of hair and chunks of scalp and white bone were caked onto the edge of the blade.

Eric Haigh's hand clamped to his mouth. Vomit spewed between his fingers as he ran out the door. As far as Lena was concerned, he could keep running. She had little tolerance for weakness. And she sure as shit wasn't going to let her team get ambushed while they stood around with their thumbs up their asses.

She snapped her fingers for attention, the crisp sound cutting through the chorus booming from the TV. Lena pointed to the three corpses, then held up her hand, showing four fingers. Surveillance had four guys in the house. Sid Waller was yet to be found.

They didn't need further prompting. DeShawn guarded the door so there wouldn't be any surprises from the rear. Mitch took Eric's place and followed Keith into the back hallway. Lena headed for the dining room, Paul behind her.

They kept at a low crouch as they walked. Trash was scattered across the floor—mostly beer cans and empty fast food bags. The carpet underneath was thick with grime. It stuck to the soles of Lena's boots as she moved toward the open doorway to the dining room. She kept her tread light, mindful of the basement. She imagined Sid Waller down there, gun pointed up, listening for a sound he could shoot at.

The *Jeffersons* theme wound down with a gospel flourish. Lena

could barely hear it over the sound of blood pumping in her ears as she stood to the side of the open dining room doorway. Her shoulder was against the wall. Plaster, lath, a few studs. Easily punctured by a nine-millimeter Parabellum, which Lena knew for a fact was Sid Waller's ammo of choice.

Paul tapped her leg twice, giving her the go signal. She spun around the doorframe in a low stance and pointed her shotgun into the room. There was no dining room table, just a bloodstained mattress on the floor with the usual detritus found in a shooting gallery. Crack pipes. Scorched aluminum foil. Spent hypodermics. The sharp vinegar smell of heroin burned Lena's nostrils. Water damage from a recent rain had caused the ceiling to collapse. There were chunks of plaster on the floor. The hardwood was warped, cupping like the hull of a canoe. Lena scanned upward, making sure no one was hiding in the rafters.

The room was empty. Through the broken window, Lena saw one of the other detectives in the front yard. He held his Colt AR-15 at chest level as he scanned back and forth like a pendulum. He stopped to shake his head at Lena, indicating no one had come out of the house.

She glanced back at Paul, then pointed toward the next doorway. This one was closed. The kitchen was beyond, then the basement door.

As rehearsed, Paul took the lead. Lena kept her shotgun braced against her shoulder as she walked backward, guarding the rear.

From the bedrooms, Mitch yelled, "Clear!"

Lena tapped Paul's leg, indicating he should go. His movements mirrored her earlier ones as he kicked open the door and pointed his Glock into the kitchen. Lena swiveled with her shotgun.

Empty.

None of the cabinets had doors. Half the ceiling had fallen down. The other half was stained dark brown. The sink had been pulled out. Plaster was missing where copper pipes and electrical wire had been ripped out of the walls and sold for scrap. The stench from the open drain was nauseating. Paul pointed his Glock into the ceiling as he checked for hiding places, then shook his head, indicating it was clear.

They both looked at the basement door.

This was unexpected.

There was a wooden brace like you'd find across a barn door. A

two-by-four rested on two metal U-channels that were bolted to each side of the doorframe.

Paul gave Lena an inquisitive look. She could practically hear his thoughts. They'd talked a great deal about the basement door. In all the scenarios, they had assumed two things: the door would be locked and a bad guy would be standing on the other side with a loaded gun. The plan called for them to work with their backs to the wall—use the butt of the shotgun to break off the knob, the lock, or whatever was in their way, then yank open the door and rush into the hell that was waiting for them.

The bracing changed things, but maybe not too much.

Lena stood to the side, back flat to the wall as she used the muzzle of her shotgun to try to push up the wood. The fit was too tight. There was no way to slide it out. One of them would have to use both hands to heave it away, leaving his or her body as an open target to whoever might be standing on the other side of the door.

Lena didn't think about it for long. She tossed her shotgun to Paul. He caught it with his free hand, then backed up to give her cover.

She had to put her shoulder into moving the brace, kneeling down and pushing up. The damn thing was wedged in there. It wouldn't budge. She tried again, bending deep at the knees and exploding up. That worked—sort of. The board finally slipped free, but Lena stumbled back in the process, losing her balance and falling flat on her ass.

So much for the element of surprise.

The board clattered to the floor. Her tailbone felt like it had been cracked. There was a sharp, biting pain in her scalp where her head had met the sharp edge of the laminate counter. Her helmet had tipped forward, smashing her safety glasses into the bridge of her nose. Lena put her hand to the back of her head. The hair was wet. She looked at her fingers: blood.

Paul stared at her, his brow furrowed, like he couldn't understand how she'd screwed up something so easy. Lena couldn't either, but there was no time to figure it out. She pulled herself up, keeping an eye on the closed door. She tried to shake it off. Her vision was blurry. Her nose felt like a metronome was pounding inside. She took off the safety glasses. They were cracked at the bridge. She tossed them into one of the open

cabinets.

There was a low whistle from the other room: *Don't shoot*. Keith came into the kitchen. Mitch followed. They were both big guys, their shoulders so wide that they made the kitchen feel more like a closet.

Lena felt a bead of sweat roll down the back of her neck. She used her hand to wipe it away. Her fingers were sticky. It wasn't sweat, it was blood.

Paul chewed his tongue between his front teeth, a tic she'd spotted their first week working together. It meant he was about to disagree with her. He didn't do it much, but when he did, he meant it.

Lena opened her mouth to take back command, but by some silent agreement, Mitch and Keith stepped forward, pulling out their flashlights as they stood on either side of the door. They all looked at Lena, but this time it was with irritation rather than expectancy.

Reluctantly, she moved over to the sink and jammed the shotgun to her shoulder so she could at least back them up. The laugh track on the television seemed to mock her. Lena couldn't make out the words, just the low rumble of Weezy's voice followed by a high-pitched response from George.

Mitch swung open the basement door. No one shot him, so he went down the stairs. Keith followed. Paul stood at the top, Glock pointing down in case someone managed to get past the combined four hundred-plus pounds of cop.

And then the waiting started.

Time changed. Even the particles in the air floated at a different frequency.

Paul didn't move. Sweat dripped from his hands, spotted the floor. Lena held her breath as she waited for some kind of resolution—guns firing, men yelling. Her head ticked down the seconds. Five. Ten. Another roar of laughter came from the television. Weezy again. Then Lionel.

Twenty seconds. Paul still hadn't moved. He was like a statue.

Lena quietly let out the breath she'd been holding. She inhaled again.

Thirty-five seconds.

Forty.

Finally, Keith called, "Clear."

Paul's hands lowered. Lena felt her lungs shake as she exhaled.

"Do the second sweep," she ordered, propping the shotgun against the counter so she could take off her helmet. There was a string of curses from below, but Lena didn't care. Three dead men were in the house—a house that had been under twenty-four-hour surveillance. She'd spent a million bucks of the department's money on this clusterfuck. She'd managed to rip open her scalp and bruise her nose. Her ass ached like a motherfucker. Her head was pounding. Meanwhile, Sid Waller was probably on a beach somewhere sipping a margarita and wondering which woman he was going to follow home and rape tonight.

Lena looked down at her watch. The timer was still running. They'd been in the house four minutes and thirty-two seconds.

"Shhh-it," Lena drew out the word. She looked up at the ceiling. The bare rafters showed white specks of mold. A clump of plastic bags was shoved into a hole in the asphalt shingles. She heard heavy footsteps in the next room as the rest of the team came in to see what had happened.

Lena raised her voice so it would carry through the house, ordering, "We clear out of here A-SAP. This is an active crime scene."

DeShawn called back, "Branson's on the way. Coroner's thirty minutes out."

"Great," she said. "The more the merrier."

Paul took off his helmet. He ran his hand through his sweaty hair. "You okay?"

Lena shook her head, too angry to speak. This was supposed to change things. This was supposed to make everything better. The only goddamn thing she had in her life right now that was working was her job, and she'd managed to screw that up, too.

She unstrapped the Velcro around her vest so she could breathe. Her shirt was stuck to her back. She knew her neck was covered with blood. This wouldn't stop with Denise Branson. The chief would want answers. The brass would show up. Internal Affairs. Lena would need to call her husband to bring her a change of clothes so she didn't look like she'd gotten her ass handed to her while they chewed her out. Not that Jared was answering her calls. Not that he probably even thought of himself as her husband anymore.

Lena covered her face with her hands. Shook her head. She had

to get her shit together. She couldn't fall apart now.

"I'll back you up with Branson," Paul said. "Whatever you need."

Lena dropped her hands. "I need to know why that door was braced."

Paul's brow furrowed again. She could see he hadn't thought that far into it.

Lena said, "You butcher three guys and you get the hell out. You don't stick around inside the house. You don't barricade the basement." She indicated the door. "Look at the edge of the wood—somebody pounded it in." Lena wiped away the sweat pooling on her brow. The house was like a kiln. "Goddamn it. Branson's probably gonna bust me down to patrol for this."

"You and Jared can ride together."

"Go to hell."

"Hey." Paul put his Glock on the counter. His hand was on her arm, then her face. He smiled at her, trying to make everything okay.

Lena pulled away from him. She stamped her boot on the floor so they'd hear her in the basement. "Cabello? McVale? What's taking so long down there?"

"Found some money!" Keith called back. "We're rich!"

"Thank God." Lena headed toward the basement. "Please let it be a million dollars." A drug seizure like that would at least pay for all the overtime.

She told Paul, "Get everybody out of the house. Tell CSU they're gonna need to bring lights. I want to talk to the coroner when he gets here."

He gave her a curt salute. "Yes, boss."

Lena took her Maglite out of her pants pocket as she headed downstairs. She searched the wall for a light switch as she reached the bottom landing. The electrical panel was open. She could see old fuses plugged into slots. She tapped a few, but nothing happened.

As predicted, the basement had been chopped into tiny rooms. The beam of Lena's flashlight picked up buckling, cheap paneling, and busted-open bags of trash that had been tossed down the stairs. The back of the stairs was open, empty but for more trash. There was no hallway, just a series of open doors, one room leading directly into the other. There were four doorways in all,

so five rooms, counting the one she was standing in.

She saw a soft glow of light in the distance, probably Keith and Mitch counting the stash of money in the last room. Lena's eyes blurred on the light. She put her hand to the back of her head, suppressing a string of curses. The blood was coming out in a steady stream. She would probably need stitches. Her head throbbed with pain. Her nose felt cracked. The day's humiliations were piling up. Her only chance of salvaging the operation was finding a mound of hundred-dollar bills that was high enough to touch the ceiling.

Lena opened her mouth to call to the guys, but something stopped her. Sixth sense. Cop's intuition. There were no voices. Keith and Mitch couldn't take a dump without narrating it for all to hear. They'd found a pile of cash and weren't joking about how they were going to spend it?

Something wasn't right.

Lena's hand wrapped around her Glock. She turned off the flashlight, then waited for her eyes to adjust to the darkness.

She strained to pick up sounds, trying to block out the noise from the television set upstairs.

Nothing.

She made her way into the next room. As carefully as Lena moved, it was impossible to not make a sound. There was too much trash on the floor—empty beer cans, glass crack pipes, aluminum foil. The carpet was thick and wet, like a suction cup against the soles of her boots. Every sound was amplified in the crowded space. She might as well start singing.

No.

What she really should do is go upstairs and get backup. You never went into a room alone. You always worked in pairs. Lena was breaking her own cardinal rule.

But she'd already fallen on her ass, cut open her head, and spent a fortune capturing three dead men and securing a crime scene that probably contained more DNA than a men's toilet at the local truck stop. She wasn't going to risk what was left of her reputation based on feeling some bad juju.

Still, Lena felt for the loose strap around her Kevlar vest and pulled it tight against her waist. She moved forward, her knees bent, her center of gravity low in case she had to dive to the ground or fight off an attacker. The closer she got to the last

room, the more certain she was that something had gone horribly wrong.

Twenty feet. Fifteen. Lena was approximately ten feet away when she saw the tip of a boot. Black leather. Steel toe. It was just like the one she was wearing, only three sizes larger.

And pointing up toward the ceiling.

Lena froze. She blinked her eyes. Her vision doubled. Blood was pooling up around the collar of her vest. Her mouth was bone-dry.

She took another step. Lena could just make out the floor in front of her. The flashlights from the other room were walleyed, one pointing toward the door, the other toward the wall. There was a suitcase opposite the door. Money spilled out onto the floor. Hundreds, just like she'd prayed for.

Lena two-handed the Glock. She wasn't sweating anymore. She didn't feel any fear. All extraneous thought left her mind. She counted out her steps—one, then two, then she was in the last room and pointing her gun at Sid Waller.

He had Keith in a choke hold, the muzzle of a Sig Sauer nine-millimeter jammed into the man's neck. Mitch was flat on his back. His scalp was ripped open. Blood covered his face.

From the moment they put a gun in your hand at the academy, they taught you to always rest your finger on the trigger guard, never on the trigger. This gave your brain a few extra milliseconds to process what you were looking at, to tell whether or not you were drawing down on friend or foe. You never put your finger on the trigger unless you were ready to shoot someone.

Lena put her finger on the trigger.

"Get back," Sid Waller ordered.

Lena shook her head. "No."

He made a show of tightening his grip on the Sig. "I want a car. I want the road cleared."

"You're not getting anything." Keith's eyes went wide as Lena took another step closer. "Let him go."

"Get a negotiator."

"I'm your negotiator," she told him. "Let him go or die."

"Back up." Waller jammed the Sig harder into Keith's neck.

"I'll do it."

"Do it." She took another step forward. There was no way in

hell she was letting him take Keith out of this basement. "You're gonna kill him either way. Do it now so I can go ahead and kill you."

"I mean it."

"So do I."

Waller's eyes turned jittery. This wasn't the first time he'd stared down Lena, but it was the first time he'd done it with a gun pointed at his head. "You're fucking crazy."

"You're fucking right." Lena took another step forward. She felt numb, like she was watching someone else do this. A different woman held her Glock. A different woman stared down this murderer, this child rapist. "Put the gun down."

Keith let out a sob. He whispered, "Please ..."

Waller turned the Sig on Lena. "I'll kill you, then. How about that?"

She glanced into the dark nothingness of the muzzle. "See if you make it up those stairs."

"Back the fuck up!" Waller screamed, spit flying from his mouth. "I'll do it!"

"Do it." Lena was less than two feet away.

"I will!"

"Do it!" she screamed. "Pull the trigger, you fucking pussy!"

Waller's hand moved quickly. There wasn't even a blur. One second, the Sig was pointed at Lena, the next it was pressed to his head. His finger jerked. There was a flash, and the side of his head exploded.

"Jesus Christ!" Keith slapped at the pieces of skull and brain that had sprayed his neck. "Christ!" He scrambled to get away, his feet sliding on the wet carpet.

Lena braced her hand against the wall. All the buzz left her body. "Check on Mitch."

"Fuck!" Keith pushed himself up, stumbled from the room.

"Jesus!"

"Lee?" Paul trampled down the stairs, his voice filled with panic.

"Get the paramedics!" she shouted back. Lena knelt down beside Mitch, made sure he knew she was there. "Take it easy," she managed. "We're getting help."

Mitch coughed. His chest heaved from the effort. His eyes were as wild as Keith's.

“What the—” Paul took in the scene with visible shock. “What —” He didn’t say anything else, just kicked the gun out of Waller’s hand like a guy with half his head missing was still a threat.

DeShawn’s voice came from the other side of the basement. “Y’all okay?”

“We’re okay. Stay where you are.” Lena sat back on her heels, slid her Glock back into the holster. She told Paul, “Waller shot himself in the head.”

“No shit,” Paul said. “Mitch? Are you—”

“Get me outta here.” Mitch reached up, touched his fingers to the bare bone of his skull. He stared at Lena. She couldn’t read his expression. Either he was terrified or impressed. She still wasn’t sure when he told her, “You gotta fuckin’ death wish.”

“Come on.” Paul folded Mitch’s scalp back into place like it was a piece of cloth. “Can you stand up?”

Mitch tried, but Paul did most of the lifting, telling Lena, “Branson’s five minutes out.”

Lena felt something tickle her neck. She put her fingers to the spot and rubbed away the grit of Sid Waller’s brain. Flashlight beams came from the other end of the basement. Lena guessed most of the team had come down the stairs when they heard the gunshot.

She shouted, “Jesus Christ, get out of here! Why do I have to keep reminding everybody that this is an active crime scene?”

There were grumbles of protest, but no one challenged the order.

Paul told her, “IA is gonna be all over this.”

Lena didn’t answer. She was no stranger to Internal Affairs.

“I’ll talk to Keith, make sure he’s on board.” Paul looped Mitch’s arm around his shoulders. He asked Lena, “You got your story straight?”

“Just get Mitch upstairs.”

Paul practically lifted Mitch’s feet off the ground as they staggered toward the basement stairs. The climb was cumbersome, but a couple of men had obviously disobeyed Lena’s orders and stuck around to help Paul carry Mitch out. She heard them walk clumsily through the kitchen, then they were finally gone.

The house was silent. The wood creaked and flexed as the

temperature started to change. The sun was coming up fast. There was a hint of white light seeping around the edges of the boarded-up windows.

All of Lena's energy had drained. Her vision was still hazy. The room felt off-kilter. A sense of separateness took hold. The aloneness turned lonely. She wanted Jared. She wanted him to rush into the room and put his arms around her. If she thought about it hard enough, she could almost feel his hands rubbing her back, hear his calming voice in her ear.

Lena wiped away tears. Why did she ache for Jared so much when he wasn't there, yet every time he was standing in front of her, all she could think about was how much she wanted him to leave?

She looked down. Her hand had gone to her stomach again. Her palm flat to her belly.

Lena shook her head, tried to make herself focus because Paul was right about one thing: the minute Branson got down here, she'd want a clear story. Three men had been murdered in the night while the cops were sitting in a surveillance truck less than five hundred yards away. Keith was probably still shitting himself from having a gun jammed into his neck. Mitch had almost been scalped. Sid Waller was dead by his own hand.

What could Lena say? That part of her had been hoping Sid Waller would kill her? That just about everybody in Lena's life would be better off if he had?

No. She would tell Branson that she had followed her training. You didn't leave a hostage with a madman. You didn't let them go to a second location. You took your shot when you could.

Or, you let the bad guy take his shot.

She turned her flashlight on Sid Waller. His mouth was open. She could see the titanium cap on his front tooth. There was a skull and crossbones etched into it. Lena had seen it enough times during interrogations to draw it from memory. Waller would sit at the table with his legs spread wide like his balls needed the extra room. He barely looked at Lena, but when he did, he conveyed such a sense of disgust that she felt dirty just being near him. Even with his lawyer there, he would sneer at her, spit at her, call her a stupid cunt. It drove Paul insane, but Lena just let it slide. Waller wanted a reaction. He wanted her to lunge at him so he could laugh in her face. You didn't have to be a genius to

recognize a man who hated women. The bastard would rather kill himself than be taken in by one.

She trained the flashlight on the gleaming wet hole where the side of Waller's head used to be.

Wish granted.

Lena turned away from the body, shining the light into the suitcase. She'd been wrong about that—there were more fifties than hundreds. Maybe half a million dollars. Denise Branson would have to fill her chest with all her ribbons and commendations again for when they put her picture in the paper. The fact that two seasoned cops had let the bad guy get the drop on them wouldn't be part of the story.

Lena wanted the question answered, though. Mitch and Keith were better than this. At least she thought they were. She scanned the room with her Maglite, trying to figure out what had happened. There was a piece of paneling hanging crookedly off the wall. She craned her neck to see behind it. Waller's hiding place. The earth was dug out around the foundation. Like rats in a trap, Keith and Mitch had gone straight to the money, and Sid Waller had sprung out from behind the wall and taken them both down before they could make a squeak.

Mitch first, probably brained with the muzzle of the Sig. Then the next thing Keith knows, the Sig is jammed in his throat. Much more frightening than the thought of getting shot in the head. You get shot in the neck, you might live. You might never walk again, you might breathe through a tube or piss in a bag for the rest of your life, but you'd live.

Someone was on the stairs. Lena waited for Denise Branson to pick her way through the filthy basement.

"Adams? What the hell happened here?" Denise yelled. "You're gonna be damn lucky if Chief Gray doesn't bust your ass over this."

Lena had heard the threat before, and from people a lot scarier than Denise Branson. She answered, "Waller took Keith hostage. He pointed the gun at me. I pointed my gun at him. He made a choice."

Denise scowled at Waller's dead body. She looked mad enough to spit. "Who do you think is gonna give us Big Whitey now?"

Lena was so sick and tired of hearing that fucking name. "Denise, I really don't give a shit."

“You best check that attitude before I—”

She stopped.

There was a sound. They both heard it. Waller’s hiding place. There was something else behind the wall.

Lena’s Glock was in her hand. She couldn’t even remember pulling it.

Denise moved more slowly. She stepped back, drew her side-arm.

The sound came again. Lena moved to the right, tried to use her flashlight to see behind the panel. Just like before, she had her shoulder to the wall. She knelt down, angling the light. The whole left side of the hole was obscured. All Lena saw was wet, black earth and a filthy, wadded-up athletic sock.

Lena stood back up. The two women stared at each other. Predictably, Denise nodded for Lena to take lead.

Lena waited for the numbness to come back, the autopilot to take over. It didn’t—or wouldn’t. All the bravado from before had evaporated away. Her body didn’t want to move. Five minutes ago, she’d had a death wish, but now that the opportunity had presented itself again, she found herself unwilling.

Denise made a hissing sound between her teeth. Lena turned to look at her. The major was waiting, gun pointed low, finger resting on the trigger guard. Her eyes went wide. Her lips parted, showing her teeth.

Lena turned back around. She looked at the dirty, wet sock, the dark hole Sid Waller had crawled out of.

The sound came again.

No more thinking.

Lena pulled back the panel.

5.

Sara had only visited Macon a handful of times, but she'd always gotten the impression that the city was one forever stuck in limbo, caught between the liberal state capital less than one hundred miles north and the smaller, more conservative towns that made up the majority of the state. Most Atlantans never gave Macon a second thought, but everything about Macon seemed to strain with the need to impress its wealthier neighbor.

Macon General Hospital was a perfect example of this endless striving. Even as Sara pulled into the freshly paved parking lot, she couldn't help but notice the difference in scale between the towering monolith of Grady and the three architecturally ornate brick buildings that made up the much smaller county medical complex. Up until the 1960s, Grady had been segregated into two different wards—one for black and one for white. As with many areas in the modern South, a different sort of segregation had taken hold in Macon. It wasn't about race anymore, but class. All were welcome so long as they could afford the entrance fee.

Sara didn't realize she had driven to the back of the parking lot until she noticed the exit signs. She pulled into a space under some trees. For a few minutes, she just sat in the car, trying to decide what to do next. Then her brain took over and made her hand open the door, her feet hit the asphalt, her legs move as she walked toward the hospital. The large fountain in the middle of the circular drive sent up a wet mist as she passed by. The rhythmic lapping of water was probably meant to calm visitors, but to Sara, the sound only managed to further set her teeth on edge.

She felt time roll back as she walked toward the front doors of the main hospital building—not by decades, but by years. Just like that, she was in Grant County again, transported back to the day her husband had been murdered. Sara's body made the connection before her brain did. It was probably all the police officers, a sea of blue that filled the parking lot, the front

entrance, the lobby.

The sight of them sent a jolt of adrenaline straight into Sara's heart. Her ears filled with a high-pitched ringing. Her head ached. Her muscles twitched. It was as if all the wires that held together her body had suddenly gone taut.

Or maybe it wasn't adrenaline. Maybe it was anger, because by the time Sara walked into the hospital, she was so angry that she could barely function.

No—she wasn't just angry. She was furious.

Furious to be here. Furious that she wasn't home taking a shower or eating breakfast or walking the dogs or sleeping in her bed or going about her normal life. Furious that yet again, she'd become ensnared in another one of Lena Adams's deadly webs.

If the wires had gone taut, it was only because Lena had pulled them.

The rage had started its slow build in the Grady ER, the moment Sara hung up with Nell. Sara had heard it humming in the background, like a song she couldn't remember the words to. She'd called Will. She'd packed the spare clothes and toiletries she kept at the hospital. She'd made arrangements with the dog sitter, her department head, her students. She'd filled up her car with gas. She'd driven just above the speed limit as she made her way out of the city. Jared needed her. Darnell needed her. That was what kept Sara moving forward. They were the only two things that mattered. Sara had a duty to be there for them. She owed it to Jeffrey. She owed it to Jared and Nell.

But by the halfway mark to Macon, the song got louder, and Sara's brain started adding words to the melody.

Jeffrey. Lena's partner. Sara's husband.

Sara's life.

She had held him in her arms as he lay dying. She had stroked her fingers through his thick hair one last time. She had touched the rough skin of his cheek one last time. She had pressed her lips to his, felt his ragged last breaths in her mouth. She had begged him not to leave even as she watched the life slowly leave his beautiful eyes.

Sara had wanted to follow him. Grief set her adrift, unmoored her from everything that mattered. Weeks went by, months, but the pain was a relentless tide that would not ebb. Finally, Sara had taken too many pills. She'd told her mother it was a mistake,

but Sara hadn't made a mistake. She'd wanted to die, and when she found that she could not die, the only thing she could do was start over.

She'd left her family, her home, her life, and moved to Atlanta. She had bought an apartment that was nothing like the house she'd shared with Jeffrey. She'd purchased furniture that Jeffrey would not have liked, dressed in clothes he would never expect her to wear. Sara had even taken a job Jeffrey had never seen her do. She'd made her life into something that worked without him.

And she'd met Will.

Will.

The thought of his name smoothed down some of the sharp edges. Sara wanted so badly to be with him right now that she almost turned around. She saw herself getting into her car, heading toward the highway, retracing her steps back to Atlanta.

There was a clingy red dress hanging in Sara's closet. She would wear it with the painfully high heels that made Will lick his lips every time he saw them. Sara would brush out her hair, wear it down around her shoulders the way he liked. She would darken her eyeliner, load up on the mascara. She would wear a touch of perfume everywhere she wanted him to kiss her. And as soon as he walked through the door, Sara would tell Will that she was deeply, irrevocably in love with him. She'd never said the words to him before. Never found the right time.

Time.

A sharp, startling memory jolted Sara out of her plans. She was at her old house standing in front of the fireplace. What was she wearing? Sara didn't have to think for long. She was in the same black dress she'd worn to her husband's funeral. Days had passed before her mother managed to get Sara to take off the dress, to shower, to change into something that didn't carry the stench of Jeffrey's death.

And still, Sara had kept returning to the fireplace. She could not stop staring at the cherrywood clock on the mantel. It was a beautiful old thing, a wedding gift to Sara's grandmother that had been passed to Sara, just like the watch she wore on her wrist. That Sara had inherited two timepieces was not something she'd ever considered remarkable. What she remembered most from the days after the funeral was watching the second hand move on her grandmother's clock, hearing the loud tick of the gears marking

time.

Sara had stopped the clock. She had put her watch in a drawer. She had unplugged the clock beside her bed—their bed that she could no longer sleep in. She had found some electrician's tape in Jeffrey's workbench and covered the clock on the microwave, the stove, the cable box. It became an obsession. No one could enter the house with a watch. No one could remark on the passage of time. Anything that reminded Sara that life was moving on without Jeffrey had to be hidden from sight.

"Mrs. Tolliver?"

Sara felt another jolt. She'd stopped walking. She was standing stock-still in the middle of the hospital lobby as if lightning had struck.

"Mrs. Tolliver?" the man repeated. He was older, with a shock of white-gray hair and a well-trimmed mustache.

As with Nell's phone call, Sara's memory took a few seconds to cull information from her past. She finally said, "Chief Gray."

He smiled warmly at Sara, though there was a familiar reserve in his eyes. Sara thought of it as the Widow Look—not the look a widow gave, but the one she received. The one that said the viewer didn't quite know what to say because, secretly, all he or she could feel was so damn lucky it hadn't happened to them.

He held out his hand. "Lonnie."

"Sara." She shook his hand, which felt solid and reassuring, just like the man. Lonnie Gray was an old-school cop, the type who could never really leave the job. Even during retirement, he'd taken up consulting, moving around the state to help whip various law enforcement agencies into shape. Sara hadn't seen Gray since the funeral. Or at least she assumed that was the last time. Sara had been so heavily medicated during the service that the only memories she had were the ones her mother and sister had planted there.

She said, "I didn't know you were running Macon now."

"Consulting proved to be even more boring than it sounded. I missed being a benevolent dictator." Gray smiled at the joke, which they both recognized as the truth. Despite his grandfatherly appearance, Sara couldn't see Lonnie Gray offering advice that no one had to take.

She said, "Macon is lucky to have you."

"Well, let's just say I'm glad it hasn't been put to a vote." He

glanced down at Sara's hand, probably to see whether or not she had remarried. "I hear you're living in Atlanta now?"

"Yes." Sara decided to acknowledge the obvious. "You and I keep meeting under bad circumstances."

"We do indeed." Gray seemed to appreciate her candidness. "Jared's stabilized for now. The doctors are taking good care of him."

Sara was relieved to be on more comfortable footing. "Do you mind if I ask why he wasn't taken to MCGG?" The Medical Center of Central Georgia was a Level 1 trauma center, much better equipped for a gunshot wound than Macon General.

Chief Gray deflected. "I'm sorry. I called you Mrs. Tolliver. You're a doctor, aren't you?"

"Yes." Sara could only guess why he'd sidestepped the question. The ambulance crew had obviously been thinking in seconds, not minutes. Jared's injuries had necessitated rushing him to the closest emergency room.

"Rest assured, we'll find out who did this to your stepson." Gray gave her a sage nod, as if to remind Sara that they always got their man. It was so maddeningly black and white to some people. They thought vengeance made it easier, when, in fact, all it did was fester the sorrow.

Gray continued, "Jeffrey's surely been missed these past few years. I could use his skills on this one."

Sara already knew the answer, but she asked, "You called in the state?"

"Never hurts to have extra hands."

He wasn't being diplomatic. Lonnie Gray was the same kind of chief that Jeffrey had been. They weren't concerned with glory. They just wanted the bad guys caught and the good guys to go home at night.

Sara said, "I'm sure you'll figure out why this happened."

"As am I, Dr. Tolliver. That's a promise." His voice took on a practiced tone that he probably employed whenever duty called. "Jared's a good kid. Wish I had fifty more of 'em. And Detective Adams has been a great addition to the team. We'll have them back up on their feet in no time. You know we take care of our people."

Sara tried to think of an appropriate response, but Lonnie Gray was obviously not expecting one. He looked as drained as Sara

felt. She'd seen Jeffrey in the same circumstance many times. His shoulders were slumped from the burdens placed on him. His face was drawn. Policing was an occupation, but no one stayed in it long enough to become chief without feeling a true calling.

Sara followed Gray's gaze as he took in his officers. She tried not to catalogue the similarities from five years ago. The Band-Aids on their arms where they'd all given blood. The way boredom compelled them to chip off the edges of their Styrofoam coffee cups. The expectant looks in their eyes when anyone new appeared.

Lonnie Gray said, "My son passed away just recently."

Sara didn't know he'd had a son. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"Thank you." He sounded resigned. "I'm sure you know it never gets easy."

Sara nodded again. There was a lump in her throat that she could not swallow. "I should go."

"I'll walk you up."

"No," she said, almost interrupting him. "Thank you, I'm fine. Stay here with your men."

He seemed relieved. "The mother's up there. I take it there's no love lost between her and my detective. Perhaps you could ...?"

Despite the circumstances, Sara felt a smile come to her lips. He was talking to her the way he'd talk to any senior officer's wife. She imagined it was the same in the military, or any other male-dominated profession where the women were expected to keep hearth and home running smoothly while the men went out and conquered the world.

She said, "I'm not sure it's my place."

"Adams was your husband's partner."

"She was," Sara confirmed, though she gathered Gray didn't know about their complicated history. She paused before adding, "I really should go. Nell's waiting for me."

"Thank you." He grasped her hand between his. "And remember, if there's anything I can do for you, just ask."

Sara could only nod again, which was the response Chief Gray seemed to need. He touched her elbow before walking away. Sara watched him approach one of his detectives. The man's relaxed posture immediately took on a military stance. He nodded at Sara with a familiar, exaggerated deference she'd come to expect whenever any officer learned that she was a cop's widow.

Sara nodded back, thinking the sentiment was comforting until it became suffocating. She did not want to be tragic. She had fought the stigma for years at Grady, where a cop was generally posted outside every third room. Oddly, it wasn't until Sara had started dating Will that people had let her step down from the pedestal.

She didn't have it in her to climb back up again.

Sara followed the green stripe on the floor, knowing it would lead to the elevators, just as she knew the blue signage would direct her to the ICU. There was a reassuring sameness to private hospitals, with their bright lights and cheerful paintings that announced to the world that the majority of their patients were paying customers.

Sara pressed the button beside the elevator door. It was hard to believe that just a few hours ago, she'd done the same in Atlanta. As with the exterior, Grady's interior was different compared to Macon General. Everything here was clean and modern, befitting the clientele. Most of the hospital's money probably came from luxurious birthing suites, routine colonoscopies, and MRIs on baby boomers' knees. The paint was not chipped from the walls. Buckets were not strategically placed under leaking pipes. There was no permanent police precinct on site or a holding area for prison inmates and the criminally insane.

Frankly, Sara preferred Grady.

The elevator doors slid open with a tiny squeak. Sara got into the car. She was alone. The doors closed. She pressed the button by the blue sign. She watched the numbers flash on, then off, as the car traveled up to the fifth floor. With each burst of light, she suppressed the urge to speak the phrase that was playing over and over in her head: *I don't want to be here. I don't want to be here. I don't want to be here.*

Even before Jeffrey died, Sara had never liked Lena Adams. She was dangerous. Arrogant. Sloppy. Jeffrey constantly complained about Lena's headstrong ways, but Sara knew how her husband's mind worked. There was no sexual attraction between them—sometimes Sara wished it had been that simple. Lena was simply a challenge that Jeffrey could not walk away from. She was a destructive little sister to his all-forgiving big brother. Jeffrey loved her toughness. He loved her fight. He loved that no matter how hard Lena was hit, she always got back up after being

knocked down.

And if Lena couldn't quite pick herself up, Jeffrey was always there to lend a hand. It was easy to take risks when you knew someone else would bear the consequences, which was exactly what had happened five years ago. Once again, Lena had gone off on her own, recklessly pursuing some very bad people. When they'd proven to be too dangerous for Lena to handle, she'd called Jeffrey to save her, just like she'd done countless times before. Only this time, this last time, the bad people hadn't backed down. This time, instead of making Lena pay, they had murdered Jeffrey.

Sara had no doubt that this same scenario had played out with Jared. Motorcycle cops didn't have hit squads break into their houses. Sara would've bet her life savings on Lena yet again pissing off some very bad men who'd decided just like the last bad men that the best way to punish Lena was to take away the thing she loved most.

As if Lena Adams was capable of loving anything.

The elevator doors slid open. Same crisp white. Same bright lights. Sara was on autopilot as she followed the arrows to the ICU waiting room. She walked by a tall man wearing a blue and orange baseball hat. He didn't recognize her, but Sara instantly knew Jerry Long, Darnell's husband and Jeffrey's boyhood friend. Everyone called him Possum because of a childhood accident involving illegal fireworks. He'd worshipped Jeffrey in that strange way that only straight men can. Possum had played wide receiver to Jeffrey's quarterback. He'd married Jeffrey's old girlfriend. He'd raised Jeffrey's child.

Sara kept walking. She kept her head down, passing unnoticed.

As a doctor, her life had been spent anticipating what would happen next, thinking three or four steps ahead, but for some reason, Sara's day was revealing itself in small slices. She hadn't let herself think past the mundane tasks in front of her: Leave Grady. Now drive down the interstate. Now take the exit. Now park the car. Now go into the hospital.

Seeing Possum offered a small glimpse of what was to come. They would want to reminisce about Jeffrey. They would want to tell old stories about pranks and practical jokes and loose women and angry husbands and Sara would have to sit there and listen to all of it as if her life had stopped the moment his had.

And it *had* stopped. Everything had come to a standstill. But, eventually, it had to start moving again, and Sara had built a new life for herself—a life that they would not understand.

The guilt felt like a vulture sitting on her shoulder, waiting for the right moment to devour her.

Sara could only put one foot in front of the other as she continued down the hall. She turned into the small waiting room just outside the closed double doors of the ICU. The space was empty but for an older woman whose hair was more gray than brown.

“Sara,” Nell said. She was sitting on a love seat underneath a window. A pile of knitting was in her lap. Several magazines were splayed beside her.

There was only a five-year difference between them, but Nell had aged in that way good country women do—no hair color, no makeup, no laser treatments to remove sunspots or smooth out wrinkles. She looked, in fact, entirely her age, which was not something Sara was used to seeing in Atlanta.

“Don’t get up,” Sara told her, leaning down to pull Nell into a tight hug. Nell had always been stout and strong, but there was something fragile about her now. Helplessness had reduced her.

Still, Sara said, “You haven’t changed a bit.”

Nell barked a laugh. “Hell, honey, don’t lie. We got mirrors in Alabama, too.” She moved the magazines so Sara could sit beside her. She took Sara’s hand, which was unusual. Nell wasn’t affectionate. She was talkative, and sometimes abrupt to the point of rudeness, but she was also incredibly kind—the sort of woman you could call in the middle of the night no matter how many years had passed and she would move heaven and earth to come to your side.

The sort of woman Sara should be.

She tightened her hold on Nell’s hand. “I’m so sorry this happened.”

“I shouldn’t’ve bothered you. I was just ...”

“I’m glad you did,” Sara told her, and in that moment, she really meant it. There was no way she could have stayed in Atlanta. This was where she belonged. “Is there anything I can do?”

Nell let out a heavy sigh. “I don’t know what you can do other than wait. They’re not telling me anything. Twenty-four hours,

they say they might know more. What does that even mean?"

Sara knew that it meant they had no idea; it was all up to Jared now. Still, she told Nell, "It means he's young and he's strong and his body needs time to fight this."

"I hope you're right." Nell let go of Sara's hand. She tucked her knitting into a denim bag. "You were right about her, Sara. First Jeffrey and now this. That woman is nothin' but poison."

Sara felt a familiar tightening in her throat. "We should just concentrate on Jared right now."

Nell shook her head. "She won't leave the room. Just sits there in the corner like a damn gargoyle." Her lips turned into a thin white line. "I can't even stand to look at her. Takes everything I got not to spit in her face."

Sara forced back the impulse to agree. It would do no good for them to feed off each other. "Who's his doctor?"

"Shammers. Shaman. I can't remember. Something foreign."

"Is he with this hospital or did they call him over from Central Georgia?"

"No idea. He gave me his card." Nell picked up her purse to search for it. "I don't even know if this is a good hospital."

"It's good," Sara told her, though she hoped they'd called in the bigger guns from the trauma center. "How long has he been out of surgery?"

She looked at her watch. "About an hour."

"Did they give you any details?"

"Hell, Sara, I don't know that medical stuff. He was shot with a shotgun. The pellets went everywhere. His head, his neck, and back."

"Did any penetrate the skull?"

"They're monitoring his brain swelling. I guess that means it went into his brain." She turned to Sara. "They said they might have to release the pressure. Is that bad?"

Sara explained, "The skull has a fixed volume. If the brain swells, it needs somewhere to go."

"So they just saw off the top of his head?"

"Not like you're thinking. It's a very precise surgical procedure." She put her hand on Nell's shoulder. "Don't think about that until you have to, all right?" Nell reluctantly nodded. "What about his spinal cord?"

"You mean, will he be crippled?" She shrugged, a tight, jerky

movement. "They're keeping him knocked out. Said it's best he sleeps, but I know my boy. He'd hate being pumped full of pain pills."

Sara knew that Nell couldn't fathom the amount of pain her son was in. "Did Jared say anything before they put him under?"

"Chief Gray told me he was unconscious when they brought him in. Do you know him?"

"Gray?" Sara nodded. "Jeffrey worked a case with him before we met. He trusted him. So does everyone else. Gray's worked all over the state, received all kinds of awards."

Nell wasn't impressed. "For whatever that's worth. Didn't stop Jared from getting shot." She started pulling things out of her purse. A hairbrush. Her pocket Bible. A tin of Burt's Bees lip balm. "Where did I put that damn card?"

Sara asked, "How has Jared been lately?"

"Healthy as a horse."

"No, not his health." Sara didn't know how to broach the subject, so she dove right in. "Has he been working a case he was worried about? Or has Lena been doing something?"

"Oh, he won't say a word against her—not Little Miss Perfect." Nell took out a blister pack of gum. She offered a piece to Sara.

Sara shook her head. "When's the last time you talked to him?"

"He calls me every Sunday and Wednesday after church. Mind you, he's not going himself. Stopped doing that once he met up with her."

Today was Thursday. Sara asked, "So, you talked to him last night?"

"Nine o'clock and he was at a bar with his friends. What does that tell you?" Nell wasn't looking for an answer. "Says something's not right, that's what it tells you. Wednesday night, he should be at home with his wife, not off somewhere drinking with his buddies."

Sara kept her opinion to herself. Jared was a grown man. Married or not, he was entitled to a night out. "Did he say anything on the phone that sounded off?"

"No. Just the usual. 'Work's good. Lena's great. Tell Daddy I said hey.' Nothing but puppies and sunshine." She snorted at the thought. "They didn't even get married in a church. Did it downtown like they were signing a contract. You've met her uncle?" Sara nodded again. "He was the only one there on her

side. That tells you everything you need to know right there. No friends. Nobody from work. Just some old piece of beef jerky looks like he belongs on the side of the road harassing people for money.” She pointed to her bare arms. “Had needle tracks up and down his arms. Didn’t even bother hiding ’em. God knows if they’re old or new.”

Sara pressed her lips together, catching a glimpse of that bottomless pit she’d barely managed to pull herself out of. “Nell, it won’t do any good getting worked up like this.”

Nell was obviously reluctant to let go, but finally she said, “You’re right. If I keep talking about her, I’m gonna end up going in there and killing her.” Nell looked down at her purse again and concentrated on digging around for the doctor’s card. “He needs his pajamas. He’d hate waking up in one of those gowns.”

“We’ll get some pajamas for him,” Sara offered, knowing there was no point.

“I want to see the house. I’ve only seen pictures. What do you make of that? I’m less than four hours away, but she’s never invited me for Christmas or holidays or nothing.”

Sara wasn’t about to take up for Lena, but she doubted Nell had made things easy. “The forensic team is probably still there.”

“The forensic team.” Nell let the words settle. “I want to go by the house. I want to see where it happened.”

“That’s probably not a good idea,” Sara countered. “The police don’t clean up before they leave. It’ll look just how it did last night.”

Nell seemed shocked by the information. She recovered quickly, taking a small notebook and a pen out of her purse. “I’ll tell Possum to go by the dollar store. There’s one right off the exit.” She clicked the pen and started writing. “We’ll need a bunch of rags. Lysol spray. Trash bags. Some gloves. What else—bleach?”

Sara tried to reason with her. “There are services that take care of this kind of thing.”

“I’m not gonna let some stranger clean my baby’s house.” She sounded appalled. “That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard.”

Sara knew better than to argue.

“Why would anyone do this?” Nell asked. “He’s always been the sweetest boy. Never said a hard word against anybody.

Always helping people. Never asking for anything in return. Why, Sara? Why would someone hurt him?"

Sara shook her head, though Lena's name was on the tip of her tongue.

"His eyes are taped shut. He's got all kinds of tubes coming out of him. They got this plastic thing looks like a Connect Four sticking out of his side."

"That's probably a Pleur-evac," Sara guessed. "It helps keep his lung open to give it time to heal."

"Well, you've just told me more than anybody else has, thank you very much."

Sara doubted this was true. She'd seen the glazed look in Nell's eyes before. In traumatic situations, it was hard to understand the information being conveyed by doctors, let alone ask salient questions.

Sara told Nell the same thing she told the families of her patients. "Write down all your questions as they come. If I can't answer them, then we'll find someone who will. All right?"

"That's good. I should've thought to do that. I've just been so ..." She couldn't finish the thought. "I mean, seeing him all—" Her words were cut off by a guttural sound. She lowered the notebook and pen to her lap, the shopping list forgotten. Tears rolled down her cheeks. Sara wondered if she was wishing her husband would return. More likely, she was praying her son would walk through the door.

Sara took Nell's hand again, but she couldn't look at her. The pain was too raw. While Sara witnessed the possibility of death almost every single day, knowing Nell, knowing Jared, made it different. She had lost her outsider's perspective.

"Well, this is useless." Nell's voice was filled with self-recrimination. "Crying never helped anybody." She pulled a pack of Kleenex from her purse and dried her eyes. "I haven't told Delia." Jared's sister, Nell's youngest child. "She's working in the Gulf. She's a vet now. Did you know that?" Sara nodded. "They got her scraping oil off sea turtles. She says the whole damn coast is still a tar pit."

"You need to tell her."

"What do I say? 'That bitch your brother married mighta got him killed?'" Nell shook her head, visibly angry. "I knew when I found out he was seeing her that nothing good would come of it."

Sara said nothing.

“He kept it from me for a full year. He knew I wouldn’t approve. He knew why, too.” Nell blew her nose in the Kleenex. “You warned me, Sara. You warned him, too. There’s no harm in a big fat ‘I told you so’ right about now.”

Sara didn’t respond. She got no joy from being right.

“Jared just wouldn’t listen. Kept saying Jeffrey knew the risk when he put on the badge. Like she had nothing to do with it. Like she didn’t abandon him when the going got tough.” Nell’s mouth twisted with disgust. “Part of me wonders if I’d just shut up about her, maybe he woulda gone on to somebody new.”

The arguments were so familiar that Sara could practically recite them along with Nell. She’d tortured herself with the same recriminations after Jeffrey had died. Sara should’ve stopped him from working with Lena. She should’ve put her foot down. She should’ve told him that it was too dangerous, too risky, to get involved in Lena’s life.

But his focus had always been on saving other people, never on saving himself.

Sara told Nell, “You can’t second-guess yourself.”

“Can’t I?” She indicated the waiting room. “I got all the time in the world to think about everything I’ve done wrong.”

Sara forced a change in subject. “I saw Possum in the hall.”

Nell slumped back against the couch. She didn’t speak for a few seconds. “He’s just a wreck. Keeps breaking down. I ain’t seen him cry like that in five years. Won’t listen to the doctors. Won’t go into Jared’s room. It’s not because of Lena. He always got along with her. You know how friendly he is. The man would talk to a stump about its knots. But all this stuff—” She waved her hand in the air, indicating the hospital. “It just brings it back for him. You, too, I guess.”

Sara looked past Nell at the floral painting on the wall. Unbidden, she thought about Will. Lying on the couch with him. Watching TV. His arms around her. Their dogs piled around them.

Nell said, “We all went to the hospital that night.” She didn’t have to say which night. “Drove straight through without stopping. Like there was any use him being at a hospital. Nothing could be done for him by then. Hell, if there was something to do, you woulda done it.”

Sara felt the image of Will slip away. The vulture was back with its guilt, digging its talons into her flesh.

Nell continued, "I know we lost touch with you for a reason. It's just too painful, isn't it? And here I dragged you back down into all of it. I'm sorry for that, Sara. I didn't know who else to call."

Sara nodded. All she could manage was, "Jeffrey would've wanted me here."

Nell said, "I wish to God I'd told him about Jared sooner. Given him a chance to know his son."

"He understood why you didn't," Sara said, thinking that was only half a lie. Jeffrey had been trying to find a way to connect with Jared before he died. It was a tricky proposition. Nell could be a hard woman, and Possum deserved better than to have some other man come in and try to be Jared's father.

Nell asked, "Do you remember the first time I met you?"

It felt like a hundred years ago, but Sara said, "Yes."

"You musta thought Jeffrey was crazy drivin' you down past where Jesus lost his sandals."

Sara smiled. Sylacauga, Alabama, was the very definition of rural, but she had been so pleased that Jeffrey wanted her to meet his family, his people. "We crashed your garden party."

"You told me you were a stripper."

Sara laughed. She'd forgotten that part. Nell had prompted the response, asking Sara whether she was a stewardess or a stripper. They'd all had this idea of Jeffrey in their heads—the sort of man he was, the type of woman he dated.

And they had been so wrong.

"Anyway," Nell said. "We're miserable enough without digging up the past. I know you still deal with it every single day." Again, she took Sara's hand in her own, but this time, she smoothed out the finger where Sara's wedding ring used to be. "I'm glad you took it off, darlin'. Someday when enough time's passed, you'll find a way to move on."

Sara nodded again, forcing herself not to look away.

Five years.

She had mourned her husband for five years. She had been alone for five years. She had waited and waited for the ache to go away for five long, lonely years.

"Sara?"

Sara realized she'd missed a question. "Yes?"

"I asked could you go check on him? I know it'll be hard with Lena in there, but maybe you can do some of your doctor talk and see if you can find out anything they're not saying?"

Sara couldn't think of a reason not to. It was why she was here, after all. To help Nell. To help Jared. To be her husband's proxy as his son lay in a hospital bed. Even Chief Lonnie Gray had assumed Sara would play her part.

So she did.

Sara stood from the couch and left the tiny waiting room. She was still dressed in her hospital scrubs. The nurses' eyes passed over Sara as she pushed open the doors to the ICU and walked down the hall. The board behind the desk gave Jared's room number, but Sara would've known where he was by the cop stationed outside. The officer was standing a few yards down from the nurses' station, arm resting on his holster. There was a glass wall separating Jared's room from the hall. The curtain was half-closed. The door was open.

The cop gave Sara a nod. "Ma'am."

She didn't respond, just stood in the doorway to the room, acting as if she belonged.

The overhead lights were off. The machines provided a soft glow to see by. Jared's face was swollen. His body was still. Sara did not need to see his chart. The equipment in the room told the story. Pleur-evac connected to wall suction for the pneumothorax. Ventilator to assist breathing. Three IV pumps pushing fluids and antibiotics. NG tube to wall suction to keep the stomach empty. Pulse ox monitor. Blood-pressure monitor. Heart monitor. Urinary catheter. Surgical drains. A crash cart was pushed against the wall, the defibrillator on standby.

They weren't expecting Jared to rally anytime soon.

With great resignation, Sara forced herself to look at the corner opposite the bed.

Lena was sleeping. Or at least her eyes were closed. She was balled up in a large chair. Her arms were wrapped around her legs, knees hugged to her chest. She was wearing hospital scrubs, probably because her clothes had been booked into evidence.

She seemed much the same. A yellowing bruise arched underneath her left eye. The bridge of her nose had a linear cut that had started to scab. Neither was unexpected. Sara could not

think of a time when Lena didn't have some visible bruise or mark that came from living her life so hard. The only thing different was her hair. It was longer than the last time Sara had seen her. At the funeral? Sara couldn't remember. No one in the Linton family could bear to utter the woman's name.

Sara took a deep breath, then walked into the room.

In many ways, seeing Jared was much harder than seeing Lena. He looked so much like Jeffrey—the dark hair, the tone of his skin, the delicate eyelashes. He was built like his father. He walked with the same athletic grace. Jared even had the same deep voice.

Sara put her hand to his face. She couldn't stop herself. She stroked her thumb along his forehead, traced the arc of his eyebrow. His hair was thick and surprisingly soft, like Jeffrey's had been. Even the scruff of his beard felt familiar, was growing back in the same pattern as Jeffrey's.

Lena still hadn't moved, but Sara could tell she was awake now—watching.

Slowly, Sara took her hand away from Jared's face. She would not let herself feel ashamed for touching him, for thinking the obvious thoughts, making the obvious connections.

Lena shifted in the chair. She unfolded herself, rested her feet on the floor.

Sara held Jared's hand. The palm was calloused. Jeffrey's hands had always felt smooth. His nails had been trimmed, not bitten to the quick. His cuticles weren't torn at the edges. Sometimes, Sara had caught him using the oatmeal-scented lotion she'd kept on the table by their bed.

Lena stood up from the chair.

Sara's heart hammered in her chest. She didn't know why. Just being in the same room with Lena made her feel nervous. Even with the cop outside. Even knowing that there was no way Lena could harm her, Sara felt unsafe.

And Lena, as usual, was oblivious. She stood by the bed. She didn't touch Jared. Didn't reach down to ease him or to reassure herself that he was still there. Instead of holding him, she held herself. Her arms were wrapped around her waist. She had always been so goddamn self-contained.

"Sara—" Lena breathed. It was more like a sob. Lena had never been ashamed to cry. She used it to great effect. She hissed in a

mouthful of air, her body shaking from the effort. Her hand gripped the railing on the bed. Her wedding ring was yellow gold with a small diamond. Blood was caked into the setting. She was waiting for Sara to say something, to make it all better.

Automatically, the words came to Sara's mind, the advice she had given over countless hospital beds: *It's okay to touch him. Hold his hand. Talk to him. Kiss him. Ignore all the tubes coming out of his body and lie beside him. Let him know on some basic level that he is not alone. That you are here to help him fight his way back.*

Sara said none of this. Instead, she chewed at the tip of her tongue until she tasted blood. Her heart was still pounding. The fear was gone. A coldness had taken over. Sara could feel it moving through her body, its icy fingers wrapping around her torso, scratching at her throat.

"I can't—" Lena's voice caught. For Sara, it was like listening to herself five years ago. Just with those two words, she felt it all over again. The devastation. The loss. The loneliness.

"I can't—" Lena repeated. "I can't do it. I can't live without him."

Sara gently pulled her hand away from Jared's. She smoothed down the sheet, tucked it in close around his side. She looked at Lena—really looked at her straight in the eye.

"Good," Sara told her. "Now you know how it feels."

6.

Will rode his motorcycle around the Macon General parking lot until he spotted Sara's BMW. It was a stupid thing to do, but he was feeling pretty stupid lately anyway. She'd bypassed the doctors' lot and found a spot in the back under a stand of shade trees. He suppressed the desire to get off his bike and touch the hood of her car. Will told himself it was only to see how long she'd been there, but deep down he knew he wanted some kind of connection.

Which was embarrassing and pathetic enough to make him gun the engine and proceed to the employee lot at an inadvisable speed.

Fortunately, burning some rubber in the parking lot was exactly the kind of thing his alter ego would do. Will had gone undercover before. He liked to think that he was pretty good at getting into character. There were some happily retired chickens in North Georgia who could attest to his skills. While busting a cockfighting ring was not as dangerous as his current assignment, the GBI's information officers had managed to give Will an even more impressive cover this time around.

As with the day laborers outside the Home Depot, Will imagined that Bill Black, his cover ID, provided a glimpse into what could have been. The man was a con, the sort of guy who knew his way around the system. He had a sealed juvie record and a dishonorable discharge from the Air Force. More important, there were three serious charges on his adult sheet—two for knocking around various women and another for pushing a mall cop down an escalator.

The latter charge had landed Bill Black in the Fulton County jail for ninety days. He'd been paroled for good behavior, but was kept on a tight leash by a parole officer who reported directly back to Amanda. The PO had already dropped by the hospital a few times for surprise check-ins. Bill Black was a scary guy. There were other crimes that the cops were looking at him for. A gas

station stickup. Some messy business up in Kentucky. An assault that left a man blind in one eye. Black was what those in the know called a person of interest.

The GBI had managed to locate a couple of snitches who were willing to back up Black's cover story in exchange for leniency. Another con told Will all the gossip floating around the jail during the time in which Bill Black was incarcerated. The guards had confirmed the lurid details, which sounded like a mash-up of *Cool Hand Luke* and *The Sopranos*. Then they had taken some unflattering photos of Will holding up a placard with Black's name and inmate number. Aside from the lack of any pathetic jailhouse tattoos, Will would've been hard-pressed to find the holes in his backstory.

Of course, there were always holes to be found, but Will wasn't about to share the biggest one with Amanda: the name Bill Black, which Amanda had proudly presented to Will as if on a silver platter, made his brain feel like it belonged in a Salvador Dalí painting.

"Bill rhymes with Will," she'd told him, handing over the dossier he was required to memorize. "And of course Black is a color."

Will gathered from her demeanor that he was supposed to be grateful. The truth was, she might as well have thrown on a leotard and acted out the name in interpretive dance.

Will was dyslexic, a fact that Amanda only trotted out when she couldn't find a sharper knife in her drawer. He wasn't about to have an open conversation about his problem—that was what the Internet was for—but if Amanda had bothered to look it up, she would've realized dyslexia wasn't a reading disorder, but a language-processing disorder. Which was why Will had no ear for rhymes and couldn't understand how Black could be a color when the capital letter meant that it was a name.

But Will had sat in Amanda's office and thumbed through Bill Black's file like it made perfect sense.

"Looks good," he'd told her.

She hadn't been convinced. "You want me to help you with the big words?"

Will had closed the file and left her office.

He could read—he wasn't a complete imbecile—but it took some time and a lot of patience. Over the years, Will had learned

a few tricks to help him pass as more fluent. Holding a ruler under a line of text to keep the letters from jumping around. Using the computer to dictate his reports or read his emails. He'd been told in school that he read on a second-grade level. Not that his teachers had formally diagnosed him with anything other than stupidity. Will was in college when he finally learned that what he had was called dyslexia, but it was too late by then for him to do anything but pray to God that no one found out.

For the most part, not many people did. Amanda seemed happy to keep it as a weapon in her arsenal. Faith had discovered it during their first case, and whenever anything involving reading came up, she took on a maternal tone that made Will want to stick his head in a wood chipper.

And of course Sara knew. She'd figured it out immediately. Will guessed being a doctor helped her recognize the signs. The weird part was that she treated him no different from before. She saw his dyslexia as just another part of Will, like the color of his hair or the size of his feet.

She saw him as normal.

And if he kept revving his motorcycle, she'd look out the window and see him riding through the parking lot.

The irony was not lost on Will that he'd spent the last ten days hiding the truth from Sara only to find himself stuck not just in the same city, but in the same building dealing with basically the same people. He would do anything to have her back in Atlanta, where the lies flowed a lot easier. In Macon, there was the constant possibility that Will would turn a corner or open a door and find Sara standing there wanting answers.

He coasted the Triumph into his usual spot by the employee entrance. The rain had accompanied him most of the trip down from Atlanta, spitting fine needles into his face. Will's helmet wasn't the wraparound kind, but a shorty, which gave his head the minimum coverage allowed by law. It was closer to a beanie. Every time a large truck crowded him on the interstate, Will wondered if he'd actually be able to see his brains on the asphalt before he died or if death would be instantaneous.

The thought was not a new one. Will had ridden a Kawasaki in his twenties because the bike was cheap and gas was expensive. And it had to be said that the sensation of sitting atop a large, vibrating machine was not an unpleasant feeling for a young man

with limited dating experience. Add another decade, and the story took a considerably darker tone. His back ached. His hands hurt. His shoulders were screaming. Other areas were equally displeased. Will shook out his legs as he got off the bike. He unbuckled his helmet and peeled it off his head.

“Hey, Bud,” a nurse called.

Will looked up. The woman was leaning against the building and sucking on a cigarette. He’d told people to call him Buddy because he didn’t want to recall his conversation with Amanda every time he heard Bill Black’s name. That his hospital colleagues had all shortened it to Bud was an unforeseen development.

She asked, “Good ride?”

Will grunted, which was a typical Bill Black response.

“That’s nice.” She smiled at him. Her bleach-blond hair didn’t move in the breeze. Her tight pink scrubs were covered in leaping dolphins. “You hear about what happened last night with them two cops?”

“Yep.” Will pulled the bandanna off his head and used it to wipe the road from his face.

“One of ’em’s in the ICU. Might not wake up.” She picked something off the tip of her tongue. “Po-po’s crawling all over the place.”

Will grunted again. He stuck the bandanna in his back pocket.

She exhaled a long stream of smoke. “Tony says they were at his house this morning. Fools stole his car and used it for the hit. You believe that?”

Will stared at her, trying to decipher whether or not she was being rhetorical. He decided his best bet was to ignore the question altogether. “I need to clock in.”

He tucked his helmet under his arm as he walked toward the door. The nurse took a last hit off the cigarette. She didn’t seem to mind his gruffness. This was typical of the women in Bill Black’s social circle. They expected their men to be quiet, to grunt and glare and scratch and spit. For Will, who’d been trained to put the toilet seat back down before he was even out of diapers, it was like living on the moon.

Or utopia, depending on how you looked at it.

“Take care now,” the nurse said. She winked at Will as he opened the door. He didn’t bother to hold it open for her. He

knew the woman's type, had seen her standing in the periphery his entire life. They were at the children's home. They were out in the streets. Oftentimes, they were in the back of a squad car. They chose the wrong guys, made all the wrong decisions. The worse you treated them, the tighter they held on.

Will had always known this type of woman found him attractive. Maybe it was the scars on his face. Maybe it was some invisible mark left by his childhood that only fellow travelers could see. Either way, they were drawn to Will because they thought he was damaged or dangerous or both. He had spent his life avoiding them. The only way to hold the interest of a desperate woman was to be a certain type of man. Will had never wanted to be that man.

"Hey," the nurse called. She stood in the open doorway, hand on her hip. "It's Cayla, by the way."

Will stared at her. He was standing outside the employee locker room. She was thirty feet away. The gray dolphins on her shirt looked like spoiled sperm.

She gave a flirty smile. "Cayla with a C."

Will didn't think another grunt would travel. He tried to be clever. "You want me to write that down or something?"

"Sure do." She laughed in a way that made him feel small. "Whatchu doin' after work?"

He shrugged.

"Why don't you come by my house for supper? I bet you ain't had nothin' home-cooked since you got out."

Bill Black's history had gotten around fast. Will had worked at the hospital less than two weeks and she already knew he'd been in jail.

She pressed, "How about it? Around seven? I can get a good scald on a chicken."

Will hesitated. He knew Cayla Martin's name from her rap sheet, which showed an arrest for drunken driving four years ago. DUIs came with expensive fines. Cayla still had another thousand dollars to pay before she was allowed to do more than drive herself to and from work. She was also a pharmacy nurse, which meant she had access to all the pills that kept getting stolen.

Cayla stamped her foot. "Come on, Bud. Let me cook you somethin' good."

Will was contemplating his options when Tony Dell came out

of the locker room. The man panicked. His sneakers squeaked against the floor as he tripped over his feet trying to flee.

Con or cop—it didn't matter. When someone was trying to get away from you, you stopped them. Will dropped his helmet on the floor. He grabbed Tony by the back of the neck and slammed him face-first into the door.

"Hey!" Tony cried. He was a little guy. Will was almost a foot and a half taller and carried at least fifty pounds more muscle. Lifting Tony off his feet was as easy as lifting Sara.

Will made his voice a growl. "What the fuck did you get me into?"

"I didn't—" Tony tried. Obviously, it was difficult for him to talk with his face smashed against a door. "Come on, Bud! I was tryin' to hook you up!"

"I'll hook you to a fucking noose."

"Bud! I'm serious, dude. I didn't know!" His toes kicked at the door as he tried to find purchase. "Come on!"

Will let him go. Tony's feet slid back to the floor. He took a few seconds to collect himself. He was breathing hard. Sweat poured from his brow, but whether that was because he was high or terrified, Will wasn't sure. Regardless, now that Tony wasn't afraid of having his neck snapped, he took umbrage with the rough treatment. "Jesus, dude. What's wrong with you?"

Will demanded, "Who set up the job?"

Tony looked up and down the hallway to make sure they were alone. Cayla had vanished. Women like that knew when to get out of the way.

"Damn." Tony rubbed the back of his neck. "That hurt, man."

"Who set it up?" Will jammed his finger into Tony's shoulder. "Tell me, you little shit."

Tony slapped his hand to his shoulder. "I don't know. Two guys at the bar came up and asked did I wanna make some money."

"Last night?"

"Yeah, after work."

"You knew them?"

"I seen 'em around." He started rubbing his shoulder. "You seen 'em, too. Them guys who hang back in the special corner."

The VIP section of Tipsie's. Will had seen it all right. It was about as welcoming as the shower room at the state pen. "How much money did they offer?"

Tony turned shift.

Will put his hand on Tony's chest and pushed him back against the door. There was no force behind the hold, but the threat was enough to get the little man talking.

"Fifteen hundred bucks."

Will pulled back his fist. "You mother—"

"They told me we'd be safe!" Tony yelled, his hands going up. "They said we just needed to stand out in the street like we did. Nothin' to it."

Will kept his fist at the ready. "So you get a thou and I get five bills?"

"I was closest to the house." He gave a halfhearted shrug. "My spot was more dangerous."

Will let his fist drop. "You knew it was more than a robbery."

Tony opened his mouth, then closed it. He checked again to make sure they were alone. "I ain't gonna lie to you, Bud. I knew there was some people in the house might get hurt. I swear on a stack of Bibles I had no idea they was cops. No way I woulda taken that job, let alone bring you into it. We's friends, right?"

"My friends don't throw me in the shit when I'm already on parole." Will's shirt had pulled out from his jeans. He tucked it back in as he looked up and down the hall. "This better not blow back on me."

Tony wasn't as stupid as he looked. "Why'd you wanna go in the house so bad anyway? What was up with that?"

The million-dollar question. Will had figured out his answer on the ride down. "I need the money. Dead men don't pay."

"I hear ya," Tony said, but he was obviously not buying it. "You sure did run in there like a bat outta hell, though. Near about took my head off. I was only trying to help you."

Again, Will checked the hallway. "I got an ex, all right? Girl up in Tennessee. She's got a kid by me. I didn't believe her, but the test came back." Will tried to put some anger in his voice. "Bitch said she'd file on me if I don't throw down five K before the baby comes." He said the phrase he'd heard from many a con. "I can't go back to jail again, man. I can't do it."

Tony nodded his understanding. Will had gathered from various conversations at Tipsie's that the DNA tests they feared most were the ones that proved paternity. What was harder to believe was that the slang Will had picked up from watching an

outlaw biker show on cable was actually working.

"I hear ya, man." Tony scratched his arm, a nervous habit that had left permanent red streaks on his skin. "You want, I could run up there with you, give her a talkin'-to."

"You wanna keep your voice down?" Will asked. "Every pig in the county's upstairs. That cop might not make it. You wanna guess what happens then?"

Tony kept scratching his arm. "So, what'd you see?" Again, he checked the hall. "Inside the house. What'd you see?"

"One dead guy, one on his way out." Will tried to fight back the bloody image of Lena straddling Fred Zachary, preparing to break his spine in two. "Some crazy chick with a hammer."

"She see you?"

"You think she'd be alive if she did?"

Tony lowered his voice. "I heard she used the claw."

"You know her?" Will clarified, "The cop. She ever bang you up?"

"Shit no. Ain't no bitch takin' me down, bro."

Will guessed an eight-pound Chihuahua could take down Tony Dell. "Why'd they wanna kill two cops? They on the take?"

"Dudes didn't say and I didn't ask." Tony backed himself against the door rather than let Will put him there. "Honest, Bud. I got no idea."

Will considered what a guy like Bill Black would be worried about in this situation. He asked, "What'd you do with the van?"

Tony was obviously not expecting the question. "It's cool. I know some guys."

"Whatever they paid you, half of it's mine."

Tony tried, "I didn't get much."

"Bullshit." Will grabbed Tony's arm to make sure the man was paying attention. "I'm only gonna ask you this one more time: Who do they work for?"

"I got no idea, dude. Honest."

"Well, you better think hard about it, because you and me are looking a hell of a lot like a couple of loose ends right now."

"You think they'll come after us?"

"You think whoever set this in motion is just gonna trust you not to talk?"

"Holy Christ." The color drained from Tony's face. "It's gotta be Big Whitey. He's the only dude I can think of who has them kind

of balls.”

Will tightened his grip around Tony’s arm. It was a hell of a lot easier to interrogate someone when you could scare the crap out of them. “Why do you say that?”

“Because he’s killed cops before. Everybody knows that. Hell, man, I heard he took out a federal agent down in Florida.”

Yet another murder to look into. Will asked, “You sure you didn’t tell them my name?”

“Hell no, brother. Hell no.”

“If I find out you did ...”

“I promise!” Tony’s voice went up a few octaves. “Lookit, man. I ain’t no snitch. I’m tellin’ you straight up.” He used his free hand to dig into his back pocket. “Look, all right?” He pulled out a wad of cash. “This is all I got for the van. You take it, all right? We’ll call it even. Okay?”

Will took the cash. It was moist, which he tried not to think about as he counted out the bills. “Six hundred bucks. That’s all you got?”

“That’s more than you thought you’d get last night.”

Will grunted. Bill Black would be satisfied with the amount. “Lookit.” Tony scratched his arm again. “Big Whitey’s a businessman. We can go talk to him. Try to reason with him.”

“There’s no way I’m—”

“Just listen to me, hoss.” Tony kept scratching, even though he’d drawn blood on his arm. “I told you I got a pill thing going here. You and me could double it up and—”

“No,” Will said. “My PO got me this job. Who do you think they’re gonna look at when a ton of pills start going missing?” He loomed over Tony again. “What’d you say to the police when they rang your doorbell this morning?”

The furtive look was back. “How’d you hear about that?”

“That nurse. She’s probably told the whole damn hospital by now.”

“Cayla,” Tony provided. The soft way he said her name rang a bell. Cayla Martin was the girl Tony wouldn’t shut up about on the drive to Lena’s last night. It made sense that a pill freak would want to hook up with a pharmacy nurse.

Tony asked, “She say anything else about me?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

Will was getting tired of this. "She offered to cook me supper."

Tony took the news harder than Will anticipated. He tucked his chin down to his chest. "Are you gonna go?"

"Tell me what you said to the cops this morning."

Tony didn't answer. "I thought you were my friend, Bud. I can't believe you're going out with her."

Will couldn't believe he was having this conversation. "What'd you tell the cops, Tony? Don't make me beat it out of you."

He still sulked, but answered, "That the car musta been stolen. They asked me to come down to the station and file a report."

"You stay out of that station," Will warned. "They get you in there, you won't ever come out."

"I ain't tellin' 'em nothin'."

"You think that matters? Two cops were almost killed. They're gonna pin this on the first idiot they can find."

"They got the idiots," Tony said. "Them two guys from last night—one's dead. The other one can't even move, and they's no way in hell he'll open his mouth. I keep tellin' you—Big Whitey, he's got reach. He'll take 'em out in the hospital. In the jail. In the prison. Ain't nowhere Big Whitey can't get to you. Trust me, man. He's a bad dude."

Will gritted his teeth. Every conversation he'd ever had with Tony Dell tended to turn down Big Whitey Way at some point. Something about that didn't feel right, and Will's instinct was to shut it down. "Whatever, man. Just keep me out of it."

Tony sensed he was losing his audience. "We could talk to him. Let him know we ain't gonna rat. Maybe get on the payroll."

"No." Will picked up his helmet off the floor. He wiped the scuffs with the back of his sleeve. He tried more biker talk. "I gotta kid to pay for, my PO's up my ass. I don't need to be looking for more trouble."

"It don't gotta be like that."

"Whatever, bro. Just keep my name out of it."

Will yanked open the door to the locker room. The space was empty. Blue lockers ran down the walls and divided the room into three sections. He waited a few seconds, wondering if Tony Dell would follow. When the door stayed closed, Will headed toward the lockers on the back wall.

Bill Black's name was written on a piece of masking tape stuck to his locker. Will had used a Sharpie to cross it out and write

BUD. Three letters. It wasn't pretty—Will's handwriting had never been stellar—but it beat the locker next to his, where someone had drawn an ejaculating penis that had only one ball.

Will assumed it was an inside joke.

To secure his locker, Will had bought a luggage lock instead of a combination dial. Left and right had never been easy, but Will was good with numbers. He spun the four digits to the date he'd first kissed Sara. Or, technically, the date Sara had kissed him. The lock didn't need to know the details.

Will hung his helmet inside the locker and took out his folded work shirt and pants. Maintenance duty wasn't a bad job as these things went. Will was good at fixing things. The forms they made him fill out were designed for someone with little grasp of the English language. There were only five boxes to check or not check, and only one long line with an X beside it, which made it easy when it came time to sign his name. Not that Will signed his name. He wrote two capital letter *Bs* and left it at that.

Will took off his street clothes and dressed for work. He wore Bill Black's photo ID on a lanyard around his neck. A security card and set of keys were attached to a retractable wire on his belt. A flashlight hooked through a metal loop on the side. Will transferred the still-moist cash from Tony Dell into the front pocket of his work pants, hoping the bills would be dry when he logged them into evidence later. In a blue Velcro wallet were a few of Black's credit cards, a copy of a speeding ticket that served as his license, and some receipts that indicated Mr. Black preferred to do all his shopping at the RaceTrac near the mouth of the Ocmulgee Trail.

He checked the battery on his iPhone. Will didn't use a smartphone in his real life, but Bill Black was a little more sophisticated. Not that the device was the sort of thing you had to be a rocket scientist to operate. Will had figured out most of the programs on his own as he whiled away the hours at the fleabag efficiency motel where Bill Black rented a room by the week.

Black's primary email account was on the hospital server. The secondary account was through Gmail. The inbox contained some increasingly nasty messages that appeared to have been written by an angry pregnant woman in Tennessee. There were a few mildly racist forwards from some dummy accounts, but Bill Black didn't have many friends. The bulk of his mail consisted of junk

sent from mailing lists that advertised hunting gear and naked women, and coupons for things like beef jerky and Old Spice.

Black's musical tastes ran toward country, with some Otis Redding thrown in as a hat tip to the singer's hometown of Macon. There were some pictures of scenic views taken from the highway. Black was a hunter, so it made sense that he would appreciate woods and trees. Black also liked the ladies. There were several risqué photos downloaded from the Internet. Blondes and Asians mostly. Will had briefly considered putting a few redheads on there, but that felt weird because of Sara. And also because of Sara, he knew they weren't really redheads.

The tech specialist at the GBI had done the rest of the heavy lifting, adding some stealth features to the phone. The apps ran in the background and were invisible to anyone who didn't know exactly what to look for. One of them automatically erased all phone numbers and texts going in and out. Another turned the speakers into a recording device when you tapped the power button three times. Yet another provided a rolling phone number in case Will had to make a call and didn't want his location to come up. The most important app patched the device into the military's tracking system—not the GPS available to the entire world, but the real-time global positioning used for things like targeting drones and delivering bombs.

This last app was the reason Will kept checking the battery. Amanda was right about many things, but none more than the belief that there was a link between Will's investigation into Big Whitey and the attack on Lena Adams and Jared Long. Even Tony Dell had made the connection.

Will didn't want to go off the grid because he forgot to plug in his phone.

The door banged open. Will turned around. He was half expecting to find Tony Dell, but the new guy was beefy looking with a full head of hair and a jaw that was sharp enough to cut glass.

Will knew a cop when he saw one. He did exactly what Bill Black would do—slammed his locker closed and headed toward the exit.

The cop held up his badge. "Detective Paul Vickery, Macon PD."

Lena's partner. That made sense. Will still didn't acknowledge

him. He kept his beeline toward the door.

Vickery grabbed Will's shoulder and spun him around. He was a few inches shorter than Will, but he had a badge and a gun and obviously felt that gave him the right to be an asshole. "Where you going?" He glanced at the name stitched on Will's shirt. "Buddy."

Will tried to calm things down. "I don't want any trouble, all right?"

Vickery bounced on the balls of his feet, obviously spoiling for a fight. "Well, you're about to get it, motherfucker. Where's Tony Dell?"

Will shrugged, thinking Lena's partner didn't need to be face-to-face with the guy whose car was left outside the house where Jared Long was almost murdered. And Lena, too, for that matter. "I dunno, man. Ask at the front office."

"I'm asking you, fuckball. You're Bill Black, right?" Vickery wasn't looking for an answer. His eyes scanned the hospital ID hanging around Will's neck. "Your boss says you and Dell are real tight. Thick as thieves."

Will imagined Ray Salemi would've said anything to get Paul Vickery out of his office. "It's not exclusive," Will said. "We've both agreed to see other people."

"Funny, asshole." Vickery moved closer. "Where were you last night? You with Dell when him and his crew tried to take on my partner?"

Will had already arranged his alibi. "Ask my parole officer. He dropped in on me around midnight."

"I'm gonna do that." Vickery's beady eyes narrowed even more. "Something ain't right with you, asshole. I can feel it in my gut."

Will avoided the obvious joke.

"You're chest-high in this shit. I can smell it on you." Vickery sniffed, as if to illustrate the point. "Dell's a professional snitch. Just a matter of time before he rats you out. Why don't you beat him to it? Tell me what happened last night and I'll keep you outta jail."

"Sorry I can't help, Officer." Again, Will tried to leave, but Vickery's hand went to his chest, stopping him.

Vickery warned, "You got one more chance to tell me where your boyfriend is or I start taking it out on you."

"I said I don't—"

Vickery punched him in the face. Will saw it coming, but there wasn't enough time to get out of the way. Will's head swiveled. His jaw popped. He tasted blood in his mouth. Automatically, Will's fists went up.

He had to force them back down. Vickery was Lena's partner. Will didn't have to think long to consider the number of stupid things he'd do if someone threatened Faith and her family.

"Come on, Buddy." Vickery slapped Will's face with his open palm. "You wanna hit me, Buddy?" He whistled like he was calling a dog. "Come on, boy. Come on."

Will peeled his fingers from his palms to get them to unclench. Instead of beating the ever-loving shit out of Paul Vickery, he said, "You know there's a security camera in here, right?"

Vickery's eyes flicked upward to the corner. The camera was pointed straight down, its red light flashing. He seemed to be considering whether or not beating Will to death was worth losing his badge over.

Apparently not.

Vickery told Will, "This isn't over." He kicked the door open and stormed out with his hands fisted at his sides.

Will glanced up at the camera, which ran on a nine-volt battery and wasn't connected to anything because the Supreme Court had ruled that employees had an expectation of privacy when they were in a locker room.

You'd think a detective would know that.

Will checked his reflection in the mirror over the sink. Vickery hadn't done any visible damage. Will used his tongue to find the source of blood in his mouth. The inside of his cheek had cut against his teeth. He turned on the faucet and sipped some water. The wound started to sting. Will swished the water around until his spit was only slightly pink.

His phone buzzed in his pocket. He used the earbud to listen to the email from Ray Salemi, his helpful boss. Will read the words along with the tinny computer voice. He gathered Faith had found a way to get him and Lena in the same room together.

There was a leaking pipe in the ICU. Will had been assigned to fix it.

Will took the north stairwell up to the fifth floor. The going

wasn't easy. His toolbox got heavier with each step. His body kept reminding him that he'd only gotten a few hours of sleep the night before. Will normally tried to run a few miles every day, but Bill Black's life didn't allow for such luxuries. By the third-floor landing, Will's arm was shaking. Level four brought shooting pains into his lower back. He set the toolbox down and used his bandanna to wipe the sweat off his face.

"Hey."

He looked up. Faith was leaning over the railing.

She looked down the open stairwell, making sure they were alone before asking, "Did you come up from the basement?"

He grabbed his toolbox and started climbing again. "The elevator opens up across from the waiting room, which is by the other set of stairs."

"Why didn't you take the elevator to the fourth floor and go up from there?"

Will watched a drop of sweat roll down his nose and splash onto the concrete steps.

"Will?"

He rounded the landing. Faith had that smile on her face that said she realized he was stupid but was being kind enough not to verbalize the observation. "I've been checking all the doors for the last fifteen minutes."

He asked, "Did you break a pipe or just pretend it's broken?"

"Water pistol. You'll see." She nodded toward the next flight of stairs. "Think you can make it?"

Faith took the steps two at a time. She had changed into her regs—black sneakers, tan cargo pants, and a long-sleeved blue polo shirt with the letters *GBI* written in bright yellow across the back. Her blonde hair was tucked into a matching blue ballcap with the same logo. Her Glock was strapped to her thigh.

Will dropped his toolbox by the door to the ICU. He looked through the skinny window into the ward. One nurse was behind the desk. The cop who was guarding Jared Long's room was so young he looked as if he was wrapped in plastic. Will had investigated cop shootings before. If Macon was like any other force on the planet, all the seasoned cops were out banging down doors and threatening sources.

Will headed up the stairs after Faith. The climb was remarkably easy without the added weight.

He pushed open the metal door. His eyes watered from the sudden sunlight. The rain clouds had receded, opening up a bright blue sky. Will gathered from the discarded cigarette butts in the pea gravel that the staff was familiar with the roof exit. He scanned the medical complex. The five-story hospital building was at the center. Two lower buildings flanked each side. Doctors rented the spaces. From what Will gathered, there were lots of baby doctors on hand. He'd been to the birthing suites a few times. They were more like hotel rooms. Most of Macon's industrial parks and factories had shut down during the recession, but Maconites were still making babies.

"Over here," Faith called.

There was a shed covering the exit door. Faith had walked around the back so no one could surprise them.

Will asked, "Sara?"

"She went shopping with Nell. Jared's mother. She wants to clean the house."

"The crime scene house?"

"That's the one."

Will felt his brow furrow. He couldn't imagine Sara thought that was a good idea.

Faith said, "I'll head over to the house later to make sure she's all right." She squinted at the name on his shirt. "Buddy?"

"It belonged to the last guy," Will lied. "I talked to Tony Dell this morning."

"And?"

"It's like we thought. Zachary and Lawrence found him at Tipsie's, said they needed a couple of men for a job."

"Tony knew them?"

"He says no, that he's just seen them around the bar. I believe him maybe ninety percent. They hang out in the back with the other rednecks in charge. Way above Tony's pay grade."

Faith pulled a pair of sunglasses out of her pocket and slid them on. "I verified what Branson told us this morning. She wasn't lying about the shooters. They're mid-level thugs. Nothing this violent in their histories. Certainly not murder for hire."

"What's the prognosis on Fred Zachary, the second shooter?"

"Don't ask me. I can't get near him. His lawyer's set up shop in his hospital room. Won't leave his side."

"That sounds expensive."

“The guy’s part of a fancy firm out of Savannah. Vanhorn and Gresham. They just opened up offices in Macon.” She glanced over to make sure he was following. “It’s the same M.O. as Sarasota and Hilton Head. Big Whitey moves in, he organizes the local scumbags, he gives them fancy lawyers, and he takes out any cops who get in his way.”

Will asked, “Anything off the cell towers?”

“Lena got a text from Paul Vickery around eleven-fifty. Nothing big, just checking if she’s okay. Fifteen minutes later, Long got a blocked call we’re trying to trace. Might take until tomorrow.”

“Fifteen minutes later?”

“Yeah, about ten minutes before the attack.”

Will stared out at the view, which was a depressing mix of interstate and strip malls. “Could be one of Jared’s buddies just calling to check in.”

“Could be.”

“Have you talked to Lena’s team?”

“What’s left of it. DeShawn Franklin seems to think this is no big deal. Paul Vickery is a dick.”

Will ran his hand along his jaw. “He’s upset about his partner almost being murdered. He was here looking for Tony Dell this morning.”

“Did he find him?”

“If Tony gets the crap beaten out of him, then we’ll know he did.”

“Vickery struck me as that kind of guy,” Faith admitted. “Very self-righteous about me wasting his time when he could be out looking for whoever put out the hit on Lena and Jared.”

Will said, “Vickery thinks Bill Black is involved.”

“I’d probably make the same assumption. Black’s a con with a violent history. Dell’s car was at the crime scene. They both work at the same place.”

“My boss told Vickery that Tony Dell and Bill Black are good friends.”

“Nice. How’s that target feel on your back?”

“Stabby,” Will admitted. He’d have to be very careful around Vickery if he ever had the bad fortune to cross paths with him again. “What’s the police station like?”

“They’re all helpful on the surface, but the minute you start to pull at a string, they cut you off.”

“What strings?”

“Incident reports. Daily briefings. They’re not good at producing paperwork, which is odd for a police station.”

Will noted, “It’s been my impression that police officers have to write everything down.”

“Mine, too. Maybe we should go work for Macon.” She leaned back against the shed. “Chief Gray runs a tight ship, but he’s got the press on his back—both Macon and Atlanta—plus there’s talk someone saw a CNN truck heading down 75.”

“Great,” Will mumbled. He’d seldom worked a case where the media made things better.

Faith said, “Gray has every able-bodied cop pounding the streets, including himself. You gotta hand it to the old guy. He’s got his sleeves rolled up just like everybody else. The downside is that Branson’s got the whole station to herself. Her and Paul Vickery. I get the feeling DeShawn Franklin’s heart isn’t in it. He was handpicked by Chief Gray when he took over the force a few years ago. His loyalties have to be torn.”

“You think he’ll flip?”

“Not unless he’s caught in bed with a dead woman or a live boy.” Faith blew out a puff of air. He could tell she was frustrated. “I ran Jared and Lena’s credit, checked their accounts. They pass the smell test. Lena’s Celica is paid off, his truck’s a year out. Low balance on their credit cards. There’s a couple of thou left on Jared’s student loans. Another thou in savings. No big trips or lake houses. They’re a little upside down on their mortgage, but who isn’t?”

“What about their cases?”

“We’re covered up with cases. Jared was trying to win some kind of contest to write the most tickets. Lena’s got a stack of arrests this big.” Faith held her hands a foot apart. “I’ve got four loaners from the field office looking to kill me for drowning them in paperwork. They’re gonna be working eighteen-hour shifts.”

“It’s easier to treat them badly if you don’t know their names.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Faith said. “First thing I asked for was the case file on that shooting-gallery raid you read about in the newspaper.”

Will assumed she was drawing this out for a reason. “And?”

“IA has all the files. Every single scrap.”

Internal Affairs. “That makes sense. Two cops were hurt during

the raid.”

“Keith McVale and Mitch Cabello. Don’t be impressed. I only found out their names because I checked the duty roster.”

“Did you talk to them?”

“One’s in Florida spending his disability and the other checked himself out of the hospital this morning. He’s not answering my calls and he’s not at home.” She pulled her phone out of her back pocket and swiped the screen a few times before showing some photos to Will. “DeShawn Franklin. Mitch Cabello. Keith McVale.”

Except for skin color, there was a sameness to all the men—square-jawed, clean-cut. The same as Paul Vickery. They were more like a military unit than a detective squad.

Faith said, “There’s a third guy who took off around the same time. Another detective.” She held up the phone so Will could see his photo. “I don’t know how he’s connected, but Eric Haigh applied for administrative leave the day of the raid.”

Will scanned the image, which was more of the same. He guessed, “Unavailable?”

“He won’t even answer his phone.” Faith said, “It’s déjà vu all over again.”

Will knew what she meant. The police forces in Hilton Head and Savannah had both seen an uptick of early retirements and transfer requests the minute Big Whitey started throwing his weight around.

He said, “It’s the same strategy Whitey uses with the dealers. You kill or hurt one cop, it’s easier to get the rest of them to either fall in line or fall away.”

“And then Big Whitey corners the drug market.” Faith changed the subject. “I was so desperate this morning I even tracked down your newspaper stories.” She scrolled to the Web browser on her phone. The *Macon Chronicle-Herald* blotter was already pulled up. “We know about the shooting-gallery raid—at least that it happened. The two runaways were party girls; they straggled home the next afternoon. The school pot bust was a known offender who will be heading to rehab for his billionth time. The guy on the toilet had a heart attack. He was described as a forty-three-year-old entrepreneur.” Faith looked back up at Will. “I wish I was better at making puns.”

“It’ll come to you.”

She chuckled good-naturedly. "The raid has to be the flashpoint. I hate to admit this, but Denise Branson is good. She's got me completely rope-a-doped."

Will had worked these kinds of cases before. He saved Faith the explanation. "Internal Affairs won't release any paperwork on the shooting-gallery raid until they reach a decision. They can't legally discuss the details because the reputation of an officer or officers is at stake, or because there's possibly going to be a lawsuit. There's a gag order on everyone involved, and even without that, no one will talk to you because you're the bad lady from the state who's sticking her nose where it doesn't belong."

"In a nutshell," Faith confirmed. "I have a teenage son, so I know I should be used to being hated, but this is a whole new level."

Will wanted to tell her it got better, but he couldn't lie.

Faith tucked her phone back into her pocket. "I went in there expecting them to turn on Lena, but she's worshipped around that place. They talk about her like she's the best detective on the squad. I don't get it. And when I ask them why she's so great, they just look at me like it's so obvious, I must be some kind of idiot for not seeing it."

Will couldn't explain why Lena engendered such loyalty. He'd witnessed it in Grant County, too. For someone who continually screwed up, she seemed to have more than her fair share of supporters.

He asked, "What about Denise Branson? Did you get a temperature on her?"

"They're a bit cold on her, but that's to be expected. She's higher up the food chain. She's self-confident. She's a woman. Three strikes." Faith asked, "What else did you get out of Tony Dell?"

"Big Whitey this, Big Whitey that."

"That makes me nervous."

Will didn't address her concern. They'd had many conversations about how dangerous it felt for Tony Dell to keep throwing the name around. "I convinced him Big Whitey's probably going to kill us. Loose ends."

"Makes sense." Faith stared at the interstate. Will could guess her thoughts, which more than likely mirrored his own: It was time to make a move on Big Whitey. Will would have to get in

deeper with Tony Dell, possibly through Cayla the pharmacy nurse.

He said, "Tony thinks we should try to arrange a sit-down. Let Big Whitey know we're not a threat. See if we can do business with him."

Faith nodded, but she still didn't look at Will. "Give me the details as soon as you have them."

"Maybe you could tape a gun to the back of the toilet tank for me." She didn't respond. "Like in the—"

"I've seen *The Godfather*."

Will followed her gaze to the line of cars. I-475 was backing up with lunchtime traffic. Every big-box store and fast-food restaurant imaginable was crammed along the exit.

He asked, "You think of a pun yet? For the entrepreneur on the toilet?"

"It doesn't seem so funny anymore."

Will stared back at the cars. A truck swerved into the wrong lane to pass a van. Horns blared. Faith lifted her hat and brushed her hair back up underneath it.

He asked, "Is she okay?"

Faith shook her head. "I haven't heard a word come out of her mouth. It's like talking to a brick wall. She won't respond to anything. Won't look at me. I was thinking about holding a mirror under her nose to make sure she's still alive."

Will waited for Faith to realize that wasn't the question.

She said, "Sara's all right. Tired. She didn't say, but I can tell it's hard for her to be here."

Will nodded.

She finally looked up at him. "You need to tell her, Will. This is getting too close to the bone."

He rubbed his jaw. He felt a knot coming up where Vickery had punched him. "Lena didn't say anything?"

Faith stared at him for a second longer, then shook her head again. "I tried to go in there like she was just another witness. Then I tried to talk to her like a cop. But the whole time, I've got sweat dripping down my back because all I can think is am I going to be the next cop she gets killed." Faith shrugged her shoulders when she added, "Or you."

Will wasn't sure what to say. He shrugged his shoulders, too.

They both turned when they heard a cackling laugh. A group of

doctors had made their way up to the roof. Will walked gingerly around the shed. He kept his back to the metal wall. The pea gravel crunched as the group walked toward the edge of the building.

He checked that the coast was clear, then slipped through the door.

Will looked over the railing before heading down the stairs. His toolbox was still outside the ICU. He grabbed the handle and pushed open the door. And then his heart stopped because he hadn't checked the window first. Luckily, no one was there but the cop and the nurse.

The man's hand went to his gun.

Will held up his ID. "Maintenance. I got a report that a pipe's leaking?"

The cop gave Will a hard look. His hand stayed on his gun.

"Officer Raleigh, it's okay." The nurse stood up from her desk. "Lordy, Bud, it took you long enough." She apologized quickly. "I'm sorry, that's probably not your fault."

"I'm sorry anyway," Will told her. "Got hung up on the last job."

"It's Ruth." She smiled, motioning for him to follow her.

Will hefted the toolbox into his other hand as he walked down the hall. He had been in the ICU once before to check a hissing air conditioner. The basic layout was a horseshoe that squared off around the nurses' station. The rooms were small. The only windows looked into the hallway. Will guessed patients in the ICU didn't really care about sunlight, but the whole floor made him feel claustrophobic.

Officer Raleigh blocked the doorway to Jared's room. He grabbed the ID hanging around Will's neck. He scrutinized Bill Black's photo. Will was close enough to see the fine down on the young officer's cheek.

"What's the deal here?" Ruth seemed perplexed. "This is Buddy. He's been up here before."

Will studied the woman. She was older with dark hair that showed a little gray at the part. He wasn't sure why she kept covering for him. Will was pretty good at remembering faces and he was certain he'd never met this particular nurse before.

"All right." Raleigh finally moved out of Will's way.

Will tried to keep his expression neutral as he walked into the

room, but Lena, who was folded into a chair in the corner, wasn't as careful. Her mouth opened in surprise.

Ruth misunderstood her reaction. She told Lena, "I'm sorry, sweetheart. We need to get this leak checked out. Only take a minute."

Will couldn't help it. He looked everywhere in the room but at Jared.

"It's there." Ruth pointed at a brown spot in the ceiling.

Will was tall enough to reach up and touch it. The tile was wet and smelled like apples. He looked at the food tray beside Jared's bed. The apple juice container was empty.

Will lowered his hand. Ruth was watching him in a way that made him uncomfortable.

She winked at him, then said in a breathy whisper, "I'm a friend of Cayla's."

Will was trying to summon up one of Bill Black's grunts when Faith finally appeared.

"What the hell's going on?" She directed her anger at the cop. "I know Chief Gray taught you better than this. Did you check this guy out?"

Raleigh hesitated. He clearly had a healthy fear of his chief. "The guy's got an ID."

"You can get those at Kinko's." Faith nodded toward the doors. "Go downstairs and check with HR."

"Yes, ma'am." Had Raleigh been a few years older, he would've told Faith where to stick her order, but he was new enough to jump when she snapped her fingers.

Ruth looked up at the ceiling, all business as she asked Will, "What do you think, Bud?"

Will looked up, too. "I think something's leaking."

Faith suggested, "Maybe we can move Mr. Long to a different room?"

Ruth shook her head. "It's just me up here for the next hour and I can't move him by myself." Faith offered, "I can help."

"We're not really allowed to—"

Will interrupted, "I'll need the room cleared anyway." He pushed up the ceiling tile and used the flashlight on his belt to look inside the drop ceiling. Will had been looking into ceilings in the hospital almost every day of the last ten. He knew that his chances of finding at least one suspicious-looking pipe were good,

but the nest of lines crisscrossing the ICU still surprised him.

He pushed the tile aside so everyone could see as he tried to sound authoritative. "That'll be oxygen, the condense line for the AC, PVC pipe, some old polybute. I'm gonna need a schematic so —"

"I get it," Ruth stopped him. "Let me call my supervisor and see if I can get her up here."

She left, Faith on her heels. Will kept his flashlight pointed toward the ceiling, but his eyes were on Jared Long.

The young man's face had blown up like a balloon. There were tubes sticking out of everything. His eyes were taped shut. Dried blood was caked around his nostrils. The flesh on his hands was a waxy, yellow color. No cop wanted to see another cop in a hospital bed. Will wasn't normally superstitious, but he had to suppress the shiver working its way up his spine.

Then again, Jared Long wasn't the only cautionary tale in the room.

Slowly, like she didn't want to break anything, Lena uncurled herself from the chair.

Will asked, "You holding up?"

"No." She stood on the other side of the bed with her arms wrapped around her waist. "Sara doesn't know you're doing this, does she?"

Lena had always been an astute observer, but Will wasn't going to talk to her about Sara. He glanced over his shoulder, checking Ruth. The nurse was talking on the phone. Faith was practically glued to her side.

Lena said, "I won't tell her. I haven't told anybody." She rubbed her lips together. They were cracked and dry. "You'll find out eventually. I'm good at keeping my mouth shut. I've learned to do the right thing."

Will asked, "What happened last night?"

"They shot him." Lena stopped the story there, dismissing her involvement in a wholly predictable way. Still, Will could tell she was reeling from the aftershock. Her eyes were bloodshot. The bruise under her eye mottled the skin. She couldn't seem to keep her balance. Her pupils were wide open, though he didn't know if that was from the dark room or some kind of medication.

He said, "Tell me what brought this on."

Her head moved slowly side to side.

“Was it the raid last week?” He paused. “Two cops were hurt. Were you part of that? Were you on the team?”

She paused before answering, “I’m not allowed to talk about the raid.”

“You and I both know you don’t play by the rules.”

“Ask Branson.”

“I’m asking you.”

Her head started shaking again. She looked down at Jared. Her voice was barely a whisper when she told her husband, “I’m sorry, baby. I’m so sorry.”

Will said, “Lena, something happened to set this off.”

She didn’t respond.

He tried to be diplomatic. “Did Jared pull somebody over who might want to hurt him?”

She gave Will a confused look, as if it never occurred to her that a motorcycle cop working part of a drug corridor that ran up the Eastern Seaboard might find himself in a dangerous situation.

She asked, “You think he got in the way of some traffickers?”

“I don’t know. You tell me.”

She seemed to think about it. “They would’ve shot him then and there.”

Will knew she was right, but he still asked, “Jared didn’t mention anything?”

“We weren’t really talking.”

Will let her words settle. He wasn’t surprised there was marital discord. The first thing he’d seen when he walked through the front door of their house was a pillow and sheet on the couch.

Will asked, “What about you?”

“What about me?”

Will checked on Ruth again. Faith made a motion with her hand, indicating that there wasn’t much time.

He tried to keep his patience as he told Lena, “Whatever brought this on—I know you didn’t mean to do it. You’re not a bad person. But you did something, and it got us here, and you need to tell me what that thing is so I can stop whoever did this.”

There was still a small shake to Lena’s head. Her hand was resting on the guardrail. She flexed open her fingers, letting the tips graze the sheet covering Jared’s body.

Will said, “You know you can trust me. There’s a reason I’m here.”

She didn't acknowledge his plea. "Your partner. You work with her long?"

"Faith." Will tasted blood on his tongue. Without thinking, he'd chewed at the cut in his cheek. "A while."

"She any good?"

"Yes." Will tried another tack. "Who's Big Whitey?" That snapped her out of it. He saw a flash of anger as the old Lena started to surface. "What did Branson say?"

"Who is he?"

"No one." She seemed genuinely afraid now. "He doesn't exist. He's a lie."

"Lena—"

"Stop." Her voice took on a pleading tone. "Listen to me, Will. If you love Sara, you'll stay away from this." She gripped the bed rail, desperate. "I mean it. Stay away."

Will looked back at the nurse again. She was obviously finishing up her phone call.

He told Lena, "Talk to me. Let me help you."

Lena shook her head. Tears started to flow. "We're supposed to protect people. We're supposed to keep them safe."

"The best way to keep Jared safe is—"

"How do you decide?" She swallowed hard. The sound was louder than the hum of the machines. "How do you decide whose life is more important?" Her hand went to her stomach. The palm was flat, fingers splayed. "He would want this," she whispered. "This is what Jared would want me to do."

Faith cleared her throat loud enough to announce her return.

Ruth was behind her. She asked Will, "How bad is the leak? I mean, are we talking the whole ceiling's gonna come down?"

Will took his time, clicking off the flashlight, dropping it back into the loop on his belt. Finally, he shook his head and shrugged at the same time. "I won't know until I get up there."

Ruth sighed. "It's gonna be an hour before my boss can help move him. Can you come back?"

Bill Black took over. "You're gonna have to put in another request."

Ruth sighed again, but she was obviously used to dealing with the hospital bureaucracy. "All right, Buddy. Thanks for coming, anyway." She went to Jared and started checking the machines. Lena watched her like a hawk. It was unnerving the way she just

stood there. Except for stretching her fingers, she didn't reach out to him. She barely looked at his face.

Ruth must've felt it, too. She told Lena, "It's okay to touch him, hon. He's not gonna break." As if to prove this, she put her hand to Jared's cheek. And then she kept it there. Her brow furrowed.

Something was wrong.

Ruth's hand went to Jared's forehead. Then his neck. Then his wrist. She looked at her watch, checking his pulse against the flashing number on the monitor. Will could see the thumping heart was beating faster than usual. The blood pressure was low.

"What is it?" Faith asked.

"He's just a little clammy." Ruth grabbed the control and raised the foot of the bed. The floor vibrated beneath Will's feet. The nurse put some false cheer in her tone. "I'm sure it's nothing, but let me get the doctor, all right?" She left the room at a brisk pace. Faith followed her, though Will doubted Lena would tell him anything else.

He picked up his toolbox. He tried one last time. "Lena, I know you think you've got all of this under control, but you don't."

She didn't look up as she said, "I've never been able to control anything in my life."

Will waited, giving her another chance to come clean. She ignored him. She just stood there staring down at Jared. Her hand was still pressed flat to her stomach. Her mouth moved soundlessly, as if in prayer.

All Will could do was leave the room. Ruth was on the phone by her desk. She barely registered his presence, which Will took as a bad sign. Jared's condition was obviously a more serious matter than she'd let on.

He walked down the hallway toward Faith. She was reading her emails. Or pretending to. Will could see the screen was dark.

He stopped a few feet away from her and opened his toolbox.

Faith kept her voice low. "Well?"

Will found his clipboard and pen. He looked at Ruth again. She had her back to him, the phone pressed to her ear.

Still, he kept his voice down. "She's protecting someone."

"She's protecting herself."

Will wasn't so sure about that. He checked some boxes on his form. "I think she was at the raid on the shooting gallery. She told me she wasn't allowed to talk about it."

“Of course she was at the raid. I wouldn’t be surprised if she was leading it.”

“She warned me off Big Whitey.”

Faith looked up from her BlackBerry.

Will kept checking boxes. He was giving himself time to decide whether or not to tell Faith the rest. In the end, he knew he didn’t have a choice. “She told me if I love Sara, I’ll drop the case.”

Faith looked back at her phone. Her thumb scrolled across the black screen. She seldom registered any emotion beyond irritation, but Will could tell Lena’s words had hit home.

She asked, “Why do I get the feeling that, five years ago, she told Jeffrey Tolliver the same thing?”

7.

THE DAY BEFORE THE RAID

Lena sat at her desk staring at her computer monitor. Fireworks filled the screen. She knew if she tapped one of the keys, the desktop would appear. She also knew what the files would be—open cases, closed cases, court documents, witness statements, suspect statements—endless bytes of data that summed up the lives of thousands of people.

There was only one life on the computer that she cared about.

Not that there was life anymore.

Lena closed her eyes. Let the grief have its way.

She had been electrocuted once. Not electrocuted like on death row, but shocked by an electric current. Lena was fifteen when it happened. She'd been helping Sibyl with her hair. They were both standing in front of the mirror. The glass was steamed over from a recent shower. The smell of mold was in the air.

The house they grew up in had been wired by their uncle Hank, so they were used to smoking outlets and popping lightbulbs. He'd also built the bookcases that had no shelves, and removed a load-bearing wall, which resulted in the roof settling into a camel-back sway. Just walking through the front door, you knew you were taking your life into your own hands.

Which is why Lena should've known better than to plug in the hair dryer without first unplugging the box fan. The shock had streaked up her arm, down her spine, then legs, and into the tips of her toes, which happened to be touching standing water from the shower. There was some sort of delay. Lena didn't feel the brunt of the electrocution until she saw the water. She thought, *This is dangerous*. The lights zapped out. Her body seized. Then, the next thing she knew, she was lying on the bathroom floor and Sibyl was screaming for Hank to call an ambulance.

That's what Lena felt like now—shocked. Almost electrocuted. Laid flat on her back. Her body tensed. Her nerves on fire. Only this time, there was no one around to help her. This time, she was completely alone.

Lena watched the colorful bursts of light explode across the computer screen. She rested her hand on the mouse. She gently pressed down. The desktop came up. She moved the arrow to the file that contained the ultrasound. Lena had torn up the photo, but the video remained. Her hand froze on the mouse. She didn't need to open the file. She didn't need to see the picture. The image was forever seared into her retinas. She felt weak as rain every time she saw it.

Little black bubble. White folds and ridges. The tiny flutter of a beating heart that was no bigger than a drop of rain.

How could she love something so much when she couldn't even see it with her naked eye? How could she feel that heart beat inside of her when it took a machine just to let her know it was there?

How could she have lost it so easily?

How could one horrible moment erase weeks of happiness, destroy a prospective lifetime that had made Lena's heart feel weightless with anticipation?

The arrow hovered over the file. There was a slight shake to the image.

Her cell phone rang. Lena moved her hand off the mouse and picked up the phone. "Detective Adams."

"Oh." The woman seemed surprised that Lena had answered.

"Yes?" Lena asked. She touched her hand to the mouse. She didn't need to see the file again. She should get rid of it. Throw it in the computer's trash.

"Ma'am?" the woman said. "Hello?"

"Yes." Lena turned away from the computer. She made herself listen to the call.

The woman was saying, "... from Dr. Benedict's office? You saw me yesterday?"

Lena couldn't stand people who raised their voices at the end of every sentence. "Are you calling about the bill? We haven't gotten it yet."

"Oh, no, of course not." She sounded offended. "I just wanted to check on you? Your husband said you were back at work?"

Lena rubbed her eyes with her fingers. Jared had slept on the couch last night. He was gone this morning when Lena woke up. She'd checked the duty roster when she got in. He'd changed shifts so he didn't have to see her.

"Ma'am?"

Lena dropped her hand. "Is there something you wanted?"

"Dr. Benedict asked me to check on you, see if the cramping's subsided?"

Lena put her hand to her stomach. "It's better," she said, not knowing whether or not this was the truth. Every time she thought about it, she could feel it happening all over again. The excruciating pain that woke her from a deep sleep. The panic as she tried to dress herself. The fear as they raced to the hospital. The agony as they heard the doctor's words. The screaming argument she'd gotten into with Jared when they got home.

He wouldn't let Lena throw away the bloody sheets. He said she was trying to pretend it hadn't happened. That she was unfeeling. Incapable of grieving. That throwing away the sheets was her way of getting rid of the evidence.

As if Lena needed a visual reminder to understand what she had lost.

They had lost.

"Ma'am?"

Lena shook her head, trying to get rid of the thoughts. "Yes?"

"I asked, no excessive bleeding?"

Lena didn't know what "excessive" meant. She had no point of reference.

"Mrs. Long?" The woman's voice filled with a warmth that was ten times worse than her stupid interrogatory tone. "I can have Dr. Benedict write you a note for work. You shouldn't be back so soon. Most women take a few weeks, sometimes a month or even two if they can get off that long."

"Well, I can't do that," Lena said. Yesterday was bad enough. They'd gotten home from the hospital around ten in the morning. Lena had slept away the afternoon, then stayed up arguing with Jared well into the night. The thought of being trapped at home again with nothing to do but wait for Jared to walk through the door was unbearable. Besides, no one at work even knew she was pregnant.

Had been pregnant.

Lena told the woman, "I have work to do."

"I'm sure you do, Mrs. Long, but people will understand. What you lost—"

"I'm fine," Lena interrupted. She wanted to correct her, to tell the woman that her last name was Adams, that Jared had told her to keep it because Lena Long sounded like something you'd buy off an infomercial.

Instead, Lena said, "I don't need a note. Thank you."

"Oh, darlin', please don't hang up." She was obviously concerned. "You should go home. Be with your husband. Trust me, he might not be showing it, but he's hurting just as much as you."

Lena pressed her fingers into her eyes again. Jared was showing it. Lena was the problem. According to her husband, she was some kind of machine. She wasn't the woman he'd married. He wasn't sure she was the woman he wanted to stay married to.

Lena looked at the clock. She had a briefing in five minutes. Her team was waiting for her. She should end the call. She should shut up. But the words came out of her mouth before she could stop them. "I wondered—"

Instead of pushing Lena, or making an inane statement with her voice raised at the end, the woman was silent. The trick was a good one. Lena used it in interrogations. People naturally wanted to fill silences, especially when they felt guilty about something.

Lena said, "I had an abortion."

Still the woman was silent.

"Six years ago." Lena put her hand to her face. Her skin felt hot to the touch. "I wondered—"

"No. That has nothing to do with what happened the other night." The answer had a certain finality to it. "If that were the case, I wouldn't have my two little ones."

Lena felt some of the tension leave her chest. She opened her mouth for air. For just a moment, she could breathe again.

The woman said, "Give yourself time to grieve. You and your husband can try again. Trust me, what you're going through now—it gets easier. It doesn't ever go away, but it gets different."

Lena pulled a box of tissues out of her desk. She had to get her shit together. She was at work. She had to stop dwelling on this. There was no way she could lead her team if they saw her sobbing at her desk. She wiped her eyes, blew her nose.

“Okay,” Lena told the woman. “Thank you. I need to get back to work.”

“Mrs. Long. Lena. You really should go home. Don’t do this to yourself. Nobody gets a medal for being tough.”

“Okay.” Lena made her voice stronger. “Thank you for calling. I have to go.”

“But—”

Lena hung up the phone. She blew her nose again. She wiped her eyes until they felt raw. Maybe it was different at a doctor’s office, but at the police station, they gave out medals all the time for being tough.

Lena turned to her computer. She clicked on the ultrasound file and dragged it into the trashcan. She clicked on the Finder menu, then scrolled down to Empty Trash. Her finger stayed pressed down on the mouse. Her heart thumped in her chest.

“Lee?” Paul Vickery banged on the door as he walked into her office. He stopped. “What’s wrong? Somebody yank your nose hair?”

“I’ve gotta stupid cold.” Lena scrolled back up the menu, went to Edit, then selected Undo Move to Trash. She didn’t look up at Paul until she saw the file safely back on her desktop. “What is it?”

“You make a decision yet, boss?”

The decision. They’d planned the raid for next week, but their snitch had told them a big shipment was coming in tonight. Even before she lost the baby, Lena wasn’t comfortable moving up the schedule. She wanted more time to prepare. Apparently, no one else felt this way. She was feeling pressure from all sides to go in. More money, more guns, more dope, more jail time.

She told Paul, “Yeah, everybody else knows but you.”

“Just checking, Kemosabe. No need to get your panties in a wad.”

She heard a familiar chug from her computer. Paul wasn’t the only one who was getting antsy. Denise Branson had sent another email. Lena scanned the first line, which dove straight into the fact that after last night’s overtime, Lena’s investigation had crossed the one-million-dollar mark.

“Damn, girl.” Paul read over her shoulder. “You pissed her off something righteous. What’re you gonna do?”

“She’ll be fine once she gets her picture in the paper.”

“Vanhorn and Gresham,” Paul read from the email. “Sid Waller’s lawyer’s from that firm, right?”

Lena clicked the email closed as she stood up. “We’re gonna draw straws to see who goes down into the basement first. I’m gonna hold them. One person gets to pick from each team.”

Paul grinned like a possum. “Good thing I’m feeling lucky, partner.”

“Did y’all finish taping off the diagram?”

“Yeah. Had to keep DeShawn from using his protractor.”

“Good. We’re going to rehearse this thing until we know it in our sleep.” Lena grabbed her jacket on the way out.

Paul said, “It’s eighty degrees in the shop.”

“Thanks for the weather update.” Lena pulled on the jacket as she walked down the hallway. Her hormones were still out of whack. She was cold all the time, except when she was burning up. That’s what she should’ve asked that stupid woman from Dr. Benedict’s office about, not something that had happened six years ago.

Paul said, “You’re going to—”

“Shit.” The zip was caught in her shirt.

“Here.” Paul stood in front of her. He started working on the zipper like she was three. Paul wasn’t the only one who’d been treating her more delicately lately. Lena guessed she was putting out some pregnant woman pheromones. Or at least she had been.

Paul said, “I think we’re gonna have a problem with Eric. He’s acting weird.”

“How?”

“He’s being too quiet.” He added, “That thing in the van the other day was funny, but he’s hiding something.”

“Hiding what?”

“Exactly.”

Lena watched Paul’s fingers as he tried to free her shirt from the zipper. She thought about the little blue jacket she’d ordered online. Jared’s family loved Auburn football to the point of making it a religion. Lena had yelled at him for painting the nursery, but she couldn’t resist going online last week and ordering a baby-sized Auburn hoodie from Tiger Rags.

The jacket was on back order. She wondered when it would be delivered. What day in the near future would she go home and find a tiny jacket waiting for little arms that would never exist?

“Lee?” Paul asked. “Where’d you go?”

She shook her head. “It’s too late to switch out Eric. He’s just gonna have to man up.”

He finally freed the zipper. “You’re the boss.”

The word grated; it had started taking on mocking undertones. “Lucky me,” she muttered. Technically, their lieutenant was supposed to be the boss, but a particularly aggressive form of leukemia had taken him out of the equation and Denise Branson had yet to find a suitable replacement. At first, Lena had been happy to fill the role, but now she was seeing the downside of her new responsibilities.

Paul said, “Shit, look smart.” He puffed out his chest and pressed his back to the wall as he stood at attention.

Lena didn’t have to ask why. Lonnie Gray was talking on his cell phone as he walked down the hallway. He ended the call when he saw Paul and Lena. There was no preamble. He asked, “Status?”

Lena provided, “We’re doing run-throughs. No mistakes this time. We’re gonna nail Waller.”

Gray’s voice was stern. “That’s exactly what needs to happen, Detective.”

“Yes, sir,” she said, knowing he wasn’t kidding around. Lena had seen more than one detective leave the Macon PD before he was planning to because he’d disappointed the chief. “You have my word that the entire team is at one hundred percent.”

Paul added, “You can count on us, sir,” sounding like a third-grader bringing an apple to his teacher.

“Good.” Gray headed back down the hallway, but not before giving Paul a curt nod. Lena could practically hear Vickery’s ball sac quiver. She felt the same respect toward Gray, but she hoped she didn’t look like she was creaming her pants every time the chief was around.

As soon as Gray was gone, Paul clapped his hands together. “You heard the chief. Let’s rock this bad boy.”

He preceded Lena down the hall toward the shop. Paul was obviously pumped, and not just because of the chief. He walked on the balls of his feet in that weird way that made him look a little effeminate. Lena knew Paul had served two tours in Afghanistan before a piece of shrapnel got lodged in his arm. Physical therapy had brought him back to one hundred percent,

but being home had made him lose his taste for war.

Paul still relished a good fight, though—one of the many characteristics they both shared. At first, Lena thought their matched temperaments made for a good partnership, but she was beginning to see that maybe a differing opinion would offer a better balance.

Part of the reason Lena had respected Jeffrey Tolliver so much was that he'd always told Lena when he thought she was wrong.

Paul kicked open the door to the shop. The sound of metal hitting metal reverberated through the hangar-like building. The shop was where they brought seized automobiles and boats so they could take them apart and look for drugs or contraband. They also used it to do routine maintenance on the squad cars, which was why three cruisers were hanging on lifts.

The mechanics had cleared out a large space for Lena's team to work. The footprint of the shooting-gallery house was thirty-five by sixty, and even in the large building, space was at a premium. They were using the log sergeant's duty desk as their workspace, which had infuriated the sergeant, but orders were orders. Lena was surprised Denise Branson hadn't taken the space away from them. She was pissed enough at Lena to strike out, and Branson didn't get to the rank of major without knowing how to punish people.

DeShawn Franklin, Mitch Cabello, and Keith McVale stood around the duty desk. Lena took the lead ahead of Paul. She lengthened her stride so that he wouldn't pass her. Back in Grant County, Lena had been the only female detective on an all-male force. She knew the rules when she signed up. Every second of the day, she had to fight to keep her place in the pecking order.

"Hey, boss." Mitch looked up from the diagram they had gotten from the tax assessor's office. "You gotta cold?"

Lena knew what she probably looked like: red-rimmed eyes, bloodshot from crying. She wiped under her nose with the back of her hand. "Yeah. Jared gave it to me."

"I bet he gave it to you." DeShawn made a grunting sound that invited a chorus of porn music from the team.

"Shut up, assholes. I just ran into Chief Gray in the hall. He made it clear we'd better come back here with Waller or keep on driving out of town." She gave DeShawn a pointed look. "That means you, too, golden boy."

Mitch made a “rut-roh” sound straight out of a Scooby-Doo cartoon, though they all knew DeShawn was one of Gray’s favorites.

Lena looked around the shop. The mechanics had gone to lunch and the duty sergeant was probably sulking in his car. The B-Team had worked surveillance last night. Lena told them they could come in late. During the raid, they were assigned to guarding the perimeter, so they didn’t need to run the inside drills like the rest of them.

Still, someone was missing.

She asked, “Where’s Eric?”

DeShawn provided, “Shitting out lunch from the sound of it.”

Lena glanced at Paul, whose face tended to show every single thought that crossed his mind. He was still worried about Eric. Maybe he had a right to be. To mangle the old saying, Eric’s stomach was the window to his soul.

DeShawn asked, “Something wrong, boss?”

Lena tried to summon up her old self. “Yeah, I gotta bunch of little girls on my team.”

They greeted this with the expected howls and finger pointing.

Lena ignored them. She looked down at the concrete floor where they had taped off the house. The diagram was to exact scale. Den, two bedrooms, bathroom, dining room, kitchen. They could pace off the steps here so that it came as second nature when they were doing the raid in real time. The only unknown was the basement.

Thumb latch. Deadbolt. Slide lock. There was no telling how the door would be secured, though they had wasted plenty of time considering the options.

The biggest issue was the four guys, maybe five, who were usually in the house. Sometimes a couple of junkies stayed the night, but that tended to be after a weekend of partying. Traffic started flowing around seven-thirty in the morning—either kids on their way to school or adults on their way to work. Two or three hours later, the moms came in their SUVs, seeking a bump to get them through their daily chores. Lunchtime traffic was unreliable, but rush hour started at four-thirty and didn’t slow down until after three in the morning.

This was when Sid Waller showed up. Like clockwork, he took the northbound exit onto Allman Road, hung a left onto Redding

Street, then slowly drove his Corvette down the rutted gravel driveway to the shooting gallery.

Waller usually stayed at the house for three hours. No one knew what he did while he was there. It was too dangerous to send in the snitches at that time of day. They were usually passed out by then, anyway. Paul thought Waller was sampling the product. DeShawn thought he was banging some girls. Denise Branson thought he was counting all the money.

Lena prayed to God he was doing all three, and that by the time they made their way into that dark, dank basement, Sid Waller was too stoned, too fucked, and too scared to do anything but watch helplessly as Lena ratcheted the cuffs around his wrists.

She looked up. They were all waiting on her. DeShawn was staring at his hands like he was trying to decide whether or not he needed a manicure. Mitch and Keith were mumbling to each other because the two of them couldn't shut up if you held a gun to their heads. Paul's face said it all. He was like a puppy, bouncing around on his feet, about to wet himself with anticipation.

The door creaked open. Eric Haigh gave a sheepish smile as he walked into the shop. Paul was right. There was something off about the man. He seemed too hesitant, which became enormously clear as he joined the rest of the team around the desk. They were all ready to go. Eric looked like the only place he wanted to go was back out the door he'd just walked in.

Well, they all had shit going on in their lives.

"All right, ladies." Lena clapped her hands together. "Decision's been made. We're hitting this place at oh-dark-thirty tomorrow morning."

8.

THURSDAY

Sara sat in the passenger's seat of Nell's truck watching the Macon landscape scroll by. Atlanta was a city filled with beautiful gardens and trees, but there was something about being surrounded by a forest that made Sara feel at home. Like Macon, Grant County was a college town, located in a part of the state that still moved at a slower speed. Just seeing the trees made Sara feel like her lungs were working again. The vulture on her shoulder had temporarily left its perch. She felt more like herself.

Maybe it wasn't entirely the scenery that had brought her this sense of calm. While Nell was shopping for cleaning supplies, Sara had frantically poured her heart out in a long email to her sister. Tessa's response had been just as long, but instead of filling the message with clichés about soldiering on or enjoying sweet revenge, she'd made lists: Ten things she loved about Will Trent. Three of the stupidest jokes their father had ever told. Eight new words that Tessa had said around Izzie, Sara's niece, that would probably end up sending Tessa to hell. Six reasons no one would ever be able to make biscuits as good as their grandmother's. Five things that their mother did that they both swore they would never, ever do, but that they were now doing almost every single day of their lives.

The only direct acknowledgment to Sara's situation came in the postscript:

Please don't start listening to Dolly Parton again.

Nell said, "I do that all the time."

Sara was pulled from her thoughts. "What's that?"

"Remember something about Jeffrey and smile." Nell smiled, too. "He loved being in the woods. Used to go hiking all the time when he was in high school."

Sara opened her mouth to correct her, then thought better of it.

“It’s all right,” Nell said. “You save whatever story you just thought of for Jared when he wakes up. We’ll all smile about it then.”

Sara nodded. This was a familiar refrain that Nell had started the minute they’d left the hospital. She needed to get some clean pajamas for when Jared woke up. She needed to make sure the house was clean for when Jared woke up. Sara didn’t begrudge Nell the goal. She could tell it was the only thing keeping her going.

Nell’s cell phone beeped. She was using the GPS to find Lena and Jared’s house. “I guess it’s down here,” she murmured, taking a lazy, right-hand turn.

Sara pressed her lips together. Nell drove like an old woman, never exceeding the speed limit, slowing to let over every car that even looked as if it might want to merge. Occasionally, she would stop the truck in order to read a sign or remark on a pedestrian. She was still stuck in small-town time, where rushing was considered rude and you didn’t beep your horn unless a dog was in the road.

Nell took in the houses lining the street. “Not too bad,” she commented, which was the most positive thing she’d said about Macon since they got into the truck. “I guess they got all the plans from the same magazine.”

Sara followed her gaze. There was a uniformity to the subdivision, but the houses weren’t overbuilt for the lots or stuffed with extra bedrooms that no one would ever use. People kept their lawns tended. There were minivans in the driveways. American flags hung from porch posts. The street looked exactly like the kind where you’d expect to find two police officers living.

Nell didn’t need her GPS anymore. She parked near a white GBI crime scene van. Charlie Reed stood at the open back doors. A younger man handed him plastic crates that Charlie packed carefully into the cargo area. Sara recognized the sealed evidence bags from her medical examiner days. The past started to creep up again, especially when she noticed the two cops standing around a cruiser parked at the end of the street.

“Well,” Nell said. She was looking up at the house with some trepidation.

Sara guessed the woman had been expecting something closer to a witch’s cottage, not the quaint, single-story clapboard house

at the top of a steep hill. The structure was shotgun style, deeper than it was wide, with the front door planted squarely in the middle. Instead of an American flag on the front porch, there was an orange and blue banner with the logo of Auburn University.

Nell seemed to approve of the flag. She said, "At least he's still standing where he's from."

Sara made some mumbling noises that might be interpreted as encouragement. Maybe it wasn't Nell, but Sara who was having a hard time thinking about Lena living in this house. The lawn was a dark carpet of green. There were some leggy petunias planted around the mailbox. Monkey grass splashed over the front walk. The front door was painted red. More petunias spilled from wooden planters on the porch. Sara couldn't imagine Lena tending flowers, let alone sitting down and taking notes from a book on feng shui.

"You coming?" Nell asked.

Sara pushed open the door. The air felt chilly compared to the stuffy cab of the truck. The police officers at the end of the street stared with open curiosity. Sara waved. She got two nods in return.

Nell told Sara, "I'm'll call Possum and see if he checked in with the nurse yet." She flipped open her phone and dialed the number. Her hand went to her hip. She looked up at the house as she waited for Possum to answer.

Sara hoped Nell was reconsidering her plans. The first thirty minutes of their drive had been spent discussing the realities of what cleaning the crime scene would entail. Sara hadn't held back toward the end. She'd been fairly brutal, which only seemed to galvanize Nell's resolve.

Nell spoke into the phone, "How is he?"

Sara walked away from the truck to give her privacy. A breeze stirred the air as she headed toward the crime scene van. Sara rubbed her arms, wishing she'd thought to bring a jacket.

"Dr. Linton." Charlie Reed smiled at Sara. He was a nice-looking man except for a well-groomed handlebar mustache, which gave him the appearance of a lounge singer. "Please tell me Amanda finally managed to snag us your services?"

"Lord no." The last thing on earth Sara would ever want to do is work for Amanda Wagner. "I'm here with a friend." She indicated Nell. "Her son's Jared Long."

“Oh.” Charlie’s smile dropped. “Surely, she doesn’t want to see ...?”

“Worse than that. She wants to clean it up.”

Charlie indicated for Sara to follow him to the front of the van. He glanced at Nell, probably to make sure she couldn’t hear them. “It’s pretty bad in there. I mean, not as bad as most, but they used a shotgun and there was quite a struggle. The volume of blood—”

Sara held up her hands. “I would gladly leave right now if I thought I could get her to go with me.”

Charlie looked at Nell again. Her determination must’ve been apparent. “Well, it’s good that she has you here to walk her through it.”

“I’m still trying to change her mind.”

“She doesn’t look like the type who does that,” he noted. “I can give you a quick rundown if you like?”

Sara nodded, ashamed that she was so eager to hear the details.

Charlie’s voice took on a practiced tone. “The man we’re calling Assailant Two entered through the front window.” He indicated the window in question. Black fingerprint powder smeared the white trim. “He more than likely used a pocketknife. Slid it between the frames, pushed open the thumb latch.”

Sara nodded. The entry method was typical for burglaries.

He continued, “We can assume from fingerprints that Assailant Two then opened the front door, letting the man we’re calling Assailant One enter the house. From the gunpowder residue on the floor and walls, we can conclude the first assailant was standing in the front room at the mouth of the hall when he initially fired the shotgun. Sawn-off Remington 870, twenty-eight gauge.”

Sara knew from past cases that a shotgun blast from that distance could rip apart a half-inch piece of plywood. The sawed-off barrel had spread the pellets, which was probably the only reason Jared hadn’t dropped dead on the spot.

Charlie said, “I’ve read the hospital admitting report. My preliminary field investigation supports the shotgun pellets mostly clustered in a twenty-centimeter circle in the victim’s thoracic region, roughly T-2 through T-7, with some penetrating the skull. At the scene, a few pellets were found lodged into the wood around the doorframe. We can assume that the majority of

the pellets went into the victim.”

Sara had gotten out of the practice of listening to people talk as if they were giving testimony. “Jared was standing in the doorway?”

“Yes. The victim’s body was almost exactly centered in the doorway. He likely had his arms crossed or in front of him. According to the hospital report, he had no wounds on the back of his arms or hands. He was wearing a toolbelt, which we can surmise is where Detective Adams got the hammer.”

Sara had been wondering about that detail. She didn’t imagine Lena kept a hammer in the bedroom, though who knew what the hell she got up to.

Charlie continued, “Adams used the hammer to take out the first assailant, the shooter, at the doorway to the bedroom.” He pointed just below his eye socket. “Claw went in here. Got lodged in the orbita, went straight through the vitreous. The shotgun went off a second time, blasting a hole approximately thirty-two centimeters into the far wall. At some point, the assailant fell to the floor, whereupon the hammer was yanked out of his face. We found splatter and bone on the walls approximately ten to sixteen inches from the floor, so he was likely supine when it was removed. Some spatter arced onto the ceiling as it was wrenched away.” Charlie shuddered. “Sorry, hammers freak me out.”

“You’re not alone.”

“Nonetheless.” He shuddered again. “At some point, Assailant Number Two tried to come to the rescue. Residue puts him at approximately six feet outside the bedroom when he fired three shots from a Smith and Wesson five-shot revolver. He ended up shooting his buddy instead. I’m not certain how that happened, but Assailant One was standing with his back to the door when he was shot. Obviously, he fell to the floor shortly after. Then somehow the second assailant fell, and Adams went at him.”

“The second assailant fell before she hit him?”

“Fell to his knees,” Charlie clarified. “Sorry. We found knee and hand prints in the blood where he fell to the floor. This was when Detective Adams likely hit him in the head with the butt of the shotgun. We’ve got blood and hair on the gun, and the spatter on the wall and bed, which is approximately thirty-two inches from the floor, backs up a baseball swing. We took the dislodged teeth for evidence, so at least the mother won’t have to see them.” He

glanced at Nell again. She was off the phone now, digging around in the back of the truck for her bags of cleaning supplies.

Sara asked, "What happened after the second shooter was taken out?"

"The neighbors arrived." Charlie nodded up the road. "There are two officers on the block as well as a paramedic and a fireman. Sorry, firewoman. They got Jared's heart pumping again. Fortunately for me, the on-duty officers who responded to the 911 call stayed out of the bedroom. The scene was fairly pristine when I arrived."

Sara asked, "You said Jared's heart stopped?" That would explain why they'd taken him to the closest hospital instead of the trauma center.

"Correct," Charlie answered. "As I understand it, the neighbors worked on the victim for quite a while before the ambulance arrived. I'm surprised he made it, if you want to know the truth. He lost a significant amount of blood. My estimate—and don't quote me on this until I do the math—is maybe two liters."

Sara let the information settle. If Charlie was right, Jared had suffered a Class III hemorrhage, losing thirty to forty percent of his blood volume. The cascade of respiratory distress and organ failure were second and third only to severe tachycardia. If not for his neighbors physically pumping Jared's heart, Sara would've met Nell at the funeral home this morning instead of the hospital.

And that didn't even take into account the severity of the wounds that had caused the bleeding in the first place.

"Hello," Nell said. Plastic shopping bag handles cut into her hands, but she shook her head when Sara offered to take some. She told Charlie, "I'm Darnell Long, Jared's mama."

"Charlie Reed," he answered. "I work for the state. I'm so sorry about your son, Mrs. Long. I know he's in capable hands."

"The Lord never puts more on us than we can bear."

Charlie clasped his hands together. " 'He who follows Me shall never walk in darkness.' "

Nell seemed surprised to hear the man quoting from the Bible. Sara felt the same. Charlie had never struck her as a churchgoer. Then again, he was born in the South, where babies drank Scripture with their mother's milk.

"I should get back to work." Charlie's smile said he was pleased with their reactions. "If you'll excuse me, ladies." He headed back

to his van.

“Well,” Nell said, watching Charlie leave. Sara was beginning to understand that there was a certain amount of judgment in the word, which Nell had first uttered when she’d seen the packed parking lot of the strip club beside the dollar store.

She asked Sara, “What’s with that mustache?”

“Charlie’s one of the top forensics experts in the state. And very nice. He cares about what he does.”

“Well.” Nell didn’t say anything else. She headed up the driveway. The bags were heavy. Sara could see the crisscross of the handles cutting off the circulation to her fingers.

She asked, “Are you sure you don’t want me to help with those?”

“I’ve got it, thank you.” Still, Nell grunted as she made her way up the last part of the driveway.

Jared’s police bike was parked in front of the garage. The floodlight above the door was still on. Sara looked back at the street. There was no mistaking that a police officer lived here. Even in the dark of night, the light would’ve put the bike on display.

Nell asked, “What do we do about this?” Police tape was draped across the door, but Charlie had yet to seal the house.

“They’ve got more,” Sara told her, pulling the tape down. She didn’t open the door yet. “Nell, I need to tell you again that this is a bad idea. It’s going to be so much worse than you’re thinking.

There was a violent fight. Jared lost a lot of blood. It’ll be on the floor, on the walls, on every surface. It’s a biohazard. Medical waste has to be properly disposed of. You really need to leave this to the professionals.”

Nell hefted the bags. “I think I know how to clean up a mess.”

“I can let you borrow the money. Or give it to you. I don’t care which—”

“No,” Nell said, her tone making it clear that she was finished discussing the matter. “Thank you.”

She stood waiting. Finally, Sara turned the knob, pushed open the door.

There was a distinctive odor that could be found at all crime scenes—not the metallic scent of blood that came from the oxidation of iron, but the stench of fear. Sara had always been a firm believer in intuition. There was a baser part of the human

brain that cued every living being to danger. That part became fully engaged the minute Sara walked through the front door of Lena and Jared's home.

A man had died here. Two men had almost been killed. A woman had fought for her life. The threat of violence lingered in the stale air.

Sara watched Nell take it all in. Her posture changed. She nearly dropped some of the bags. Sara suggested, "Why don't you sit down?"

"I'm all right."

"Let's sit down."

Nell shook her head. She looked around the front room of the house. The floor plan was open, with a combined family room and kitchen. Sunlight streamed in through the windows. The ceiling fan over the couch gave a soft whine as the blades moved. Nothing bad had happened in this space. The furniture was not overturned. The walls were a muted light gray. The only area in disarray was the kitchen, which was obviously being remodeled. Flat packs of unassembled cabinets were stacked in a neat pile. The kitchen sink was a bucket resting on an old washstand. The dishwasher was in the corner, the cord and drain hose wrapped around it like a bow. The stove was pulled away from the wall, but Sara could see the gas line was still attached.

Without thinking, she said, "He's just as bad as Jeffrey."

Jeffrey always had to have some sort of project going. Restoring an old car. Adding a second sink in the bathroom. Redoing his kitchen. Fixing things gave him a sense of accomplishment, if not completion. When he was dating Sara, a thick plastic sheet served as the outside wall to his kitchen. The refrigerator was in the dining room. A garden hose ran through the front window and attached through various valves to the ice maker.

Nell said, "Jeffrey always liked working with his hands." She set the bags down on the countertop, which was a piece of plywood on some two-by-fours. She ran her finger along the wood. Her eyes traveled to the sink bucket, the bare but cleanly swept floor. "I guess I can't fault her housekeeping. There's no way Jared cleaned up like this."

Sara didn't answer. Lena had always been neat. Her desk at the station looked like something out of an office supply catalogue.

"I'll get his daddy in here to finish this up." Nell nodded toward the stacked boxes. "Possum'll get those assembled in a day. I'll help him hang the top cabinets. He can do the bottom on his own. I don't guess they have a countertop, but we'll pick something out that—" She stopped talking. Sara followed her gaze to the couch. There was a pillow with a sheet neatly folded on the top. On the coffee table beside the remote were a pair of glasses, a glass of water, and a plastic case for a retainer.

"Hello?" Faith Mitchell walked through the open front door. She'd already met Nell and Possum at the hospital. Sara had made the introductions.

Faith asked, "You just get here?"

"Yes, ma'am." Nell wouldn't take her eyes off the couch. Faith seemed to note the arrangement, but made no comment. She smiled at Sara in a way that let her know there was enough discomfort to go around.

Sara said, "We saw Charlie."

"He's still packing up the van."

Nell noisily started unpacking the bags, banging the bottle of bleach and box of gloves down on the plywood counter.

Faith walked around the front room, picking up items, obviously trying to get a feel for the place. Will's partner was one year his junior, but she'd come up through the Atlanta police force before joining the GBI and was equal parts pragmatic and cynical. Sara could not have wished for a better agent to back up Will. Faith was clever and competent. She hated taking risks. In other words, she was the complete opposite of Lena Adams.

She was also nosy as hell. She walked around the room with a judgmental air, taking in the curtains and furnishings with the same sharp eye as Nell.

Sara felt slow on the uptake. Nell wasn't just here to clean. Lena was pushing her out of Jared's hospital room, so Nell was invading Lena's home.

Nell had finished unpacking the bags. She braced her hands on the wooden counter. "I should probably look at it first."

There was no use arguing with her. Nell was obviously determined to keep moving forward. Sara and Faith silently followed her toward the hallway.

Nell didn't get far. She stopped just outside the guest bathroom. The shower curtain was pulled back. A dirty sliver of soap was

beside a bottle of Axe shampoo. The seat was up on the toilet. The counter was cluttered with men's toiletries—deodorant, a razor and shaving cream, a toothbrush that needed replacing and a half-empty tube of toothpaste. Little hairs filled the sink where Jared had shaved and failed to wash out the bowl.

Nell continued down the hall, mumbling, "I guess she kicked him out of the bathroom, too."

Faith mumbled in an equally low voice, "You couldn't pay me to share my bathroom with a man."

"Amen," Sara answered as she trailed Nell down the hallway. She stepped over a white chalk outline on the floor where Charlie had taken some DNA. Sara guessed from the look of it that someone had spat in the hall, probably to make a point.

Which further supported the idea that the shooters hadn't randomly chosen their victims.

There was a spare bedroom on either side of the hall. The first one was being used as an office. The second appeared to be another unfinished project. The walls were a cheery yellow. The closet door was propped up on two sawhorses. Nell shook her head as she passed by, probably adding it to the list of Possum's chores. She stopped a few feet from the master bedroom.

Sara heard Nell draw in a sharp breath. The woman's hands shook as she grabbed the doorframe.

Charlie's estimate may have been too conservative. Despite the passage of time, the pool of blood where Jared had fallen was still congealing. Light glimmered on the wet surface. The edges had curled into a dark rust that seeped into the hardwood floor.

The rest of the blood had dried hours ago, leaving burgundy stains that told the story of violent altercation. The ceiling and walls weren't the worst of it. Large boot prints mixed with Lena's bare footprints back and forth across the floor. Splatter. Spatter. Spray. Drops. Knee prints. Handprints. Smears where an area rug must've gotten bunched up beneath Jared's body. Tracks that showed where someone had crawled toward the bed. Still more shoe prints indicated where the neighbors and first responders rushed in to work on Jared. They must have all been covered in blood by the time they left. Long trails of red even managed to seep into the grout lines in the bathroom floor.

But the area around the door to the bedroom told the real story. This was where Jared had been shot. This was where Lena

had first taken on the intruders. The dried blood splattering and spattering the walls and ceiling could fill a forensic textbook. They varied in size and shape, in coverage and scope, and would help map out every second of what had obviously been an extremely violent struggle. Even with the pieces of tooth and bone gone, the hammer and weapons taken into evidence, the shadow of death lurked in every corner.

Nell's voice caught. "I can't ... I don't know what ..."

Sara didn't say anything.

Nell sniffed, but no tears came. "Do you think a wet-vac would ..." Her voice trailed off again. Her grip tightened on the splintered wood around the door.

Sara looked at Faith, who just shook her head.

"All right." Nell thrust herself into the room. She picked her way toward the dresser. Though she was careful, there was no way to avoid the carnage. Her sneakers walked across dried footprints. Boot prints. Shoe prints. Handprints.

Her voice came out at a higher pitch. "Jared's always been more comfortable in his pajamas." She started opening drawers, which had presumably been photographed and inventoried by Charlie's team. "No self-respecting man sits around in a hospital gown. I know he'll want to put on something normal as soon as possible."

Sara stood outside the door with Faith. They both silently watched the woman riffle Lena and Jared's private things. The top three drawers obviously belonged to Lena. Her underthings were mostly utilitarian, though Nell managed to make a huffing sound when she found something that crossed the line. The bottom drawers belonged to Jared. They were filled with basketball shorts, T-shirts, and boxers. He wore a uniform eighty percent of his day. He probably had one suit in the closet for weddings and funerals and a couple of polos and khakis for less formal occasions.

Nell stopped her search. She rested her hands on her hips as she looked around the room. "I know he hasn't stopped wearing pajamas."

Sara kept her mouth shut right up until Nell made her way to the bedside table. "Nell."

She looked up, but kept her hand on the drawer pull.

"That's probably Lena's." Sara indicated the flattened book,

which was clearly a romance novel, beside the hand lotion and tube of lip balm.

When Nell didn't move, Faith said, "You probably don't want to know what your son's wife keeps in her bedside table." She added, "Or your son, for that matter."

"What on earth does that—"

She was cut off by the sound of motorcycle engines. Sara turned around. The front door was wide open. She saw at least six motormen in the street. If Sara knew cops, they'd come here to look after Jared's mother. And just in time, too.

Faith seized on the opportunity, suggesting to Nell, "Why don't you go talk to Jared's friends? I'm sure they want to know how he's doing."

"I don't have time to be everybody's mama," Nell grumbled, but she stomped out of the room anyway.

"Man." Faith waited until Nell was out of earshot. "That woman has a razor for a mouth."

Sara kept her own counsel. "Did you talk to Charlie?"

"He briefed me earlier." Faith looked back at the bedroom. "Nell's gonna get a call in a few minutes from the hospital. Jared's fever is up."

"He has an infection?"

"That's what the nurse said."

Nurses were seldom wrong about these things. Sara thought of Nell's steely determination, all the plans she'd made in the last few hours for when Jared finally woke up. "I don't think she'll make it if he dies."

"It's always the strong ones who break the hardest."

Sara tucked her chin to her chest.

Faith entered the room, walking across the dried blood with a cop's impunity. "I guess I should look for those pajamas. Maybe that'll make her feel like she's helping him."

"Maybe." Sara leaned against the doorjamb as Faith searched the closet. She stared at the footprints scattered across the floor. The blood was so dry that it had skeletonized, but Charlie had been careful. Sara could still track the progress. It helped that Lena had such small feet. Sara always forgot how petite she was, barely five-four and probably one-ten on a heavy day.

Charlie Reed had said that four initial responders came from the neighborhood. Judging by the bloody prints on the floor, they

had each waited by the bathroom door as the others took turns working on Jared. That left the two sets of boot prints to the assailants. They had both sported the cowboy variety, with flat plastic soles that left distinct exclamation points in the blood. One had a skull and crossbones carved into each heel. The other pair was an off brand with a generic set of furrows. Both of the attackers pronated, probably from riding motorcycles.

But that didn't account for all of the prints.

Sara walked over to the bed. She knelt down, asking Faith, "Two attackers, right?"

Faith's voice was muffled as she dug around the closet shelves.

"That's right."

"Four responders?"

"Uhhh ..." She drew out the word. "Yep. Two cops, an off-duty paramedic, and a chick with the fire department."

"What about this?"

Faith turned around.

Sara pointed to a shoe print right up against Jared's bedside table. This one was also from a boot, but it was larger than the other two and the heel had the distinctive logo of a Cat's Paw no-slip rubber sole.

Faith turned back to the closet. She didn't seem interested. "I'm sure Charlie got it."

"But look at the prints. Lena was barefooted. The attackers wore cowboy boots." She pointed to the other prints. "Two of the neighbors wore sneakers, the third one probably had on bedroom slippers, and the fourth one was wearing socks."

Faith pulled a couple of pairs of sweatpants off the shelf. She added a T-shirt from the dirty-clothes basket. "These can pass for pajamas, right?"

Slowly, Sara stood up. "Aren't you concerned that a third assailant might've been here last night?"

"Are you saying that I'm not doing my job?"

"No." Sara felt properly chastened. "No, of course not."

"You're forgetting the EMTs." Faith counted it off on her fingers. "Three crews, right? Jared was taken out first. The second shooter was next, the first was taken to the morgue, so that's six more guys at least, which is twelve more possibilities for prints. And God only knows who traipsed in here from Macon PD."

“Charlie told me the cops from the 911 call stayed out of the bedroom.”

“Really?” Faith didn’t sound happy, but Sara kept talking.

“He also said that the first ambulance took a while to get here. The extraneous blood would’ve been dry in five, ten minutes tops. So unless an EMT purposely stepped in the pool of blood around Jared, then walked over here, there’s no way that any of them could’ve made this third print.” Sara put a finer point on it. “Whoever left this boot print was here when the crime occurred.”

“That’s where the second assailant fell,” Faith said, her voice straining to sound reasonable. “I’m sure one of the first EMTs checked on him. Right? They wouldn’t just rush in, see one body, and leave the other two without checking on them.”

“The EMTs were most likely in 5.11 Tacticals.” Sara was familiar with the boots, which were specifically designed for paramedics and firefighters. “And even without that, the blood was obviously dry by the time they got here. You don’t see any other prints from the EMTs, do you? Not even around Jared.”

Faith gave a heavy sigh. “There was a lot going on in this room last night. There’s no telling where that print came from. All right?”

Sara nodded, but only to keep the peace. It was absolutely possible, even probable, that one of the EMTs had checked on the second assailant before leaving the house. But there was no way in hell he’d stood over the body and leaned down to do it. The EMT would be on his knees as he ran vitals. Unless he was a contortionist, there was no reason for him to wedge his foot against the bedside table.

“Look.” Faith closed the closet door. “I know you’re good at this, Sara, but this is Charlie’s scene. He’s been here practically from the minute Jared was carried out. Maybe it’s Charlie’s shoe that made the print, or one of his guys. Or maybe he’s tracked it back to an EMT who tripped or stepped where he shouldn’t’ve or whatever. Charlie will do all the rule-outs and trace it back to someone. You know the process. No stone unturned.”

“You’re right,” Sara agreed, but she had seen Faith lie enough to know what it looked like. Obviously, something else was going on.

Faith said, “Come on. Let’s see if my plan worked.” She left the room.

Sara assumed she was supposed to follow. She took one last look at the boot print before heading back up the hallway. Her medical examiner's mind wouldn't shut off just because she hadn't done the job in years. The Cat's Paw logo said a lot about the owner of the boot. He was frugal, the type of person who would resole a shoe rather than throw it out. Going by the size, he was at least six feet tall or more. He worked in a job that required a nonconducting, nonslip sole—probably a mechanic or electrician or builder. Analysis would show if there was any oil or residue transferred from the porous rubber sole. Known associates of the assailants could be narrowed down from there. Barring that, a simple phone call to the shoe repair stores in the area could easily generate a list of customers who'd purchased Cat's Paw soles.

Which was probably what someone on Charlie's team was doing right now.

Faith was right. Charlie was very good at his job. So was Faith, for that matter. If they were hiding something, it was probably for a good reason. As much as Sara felt otherwise, she had to keep reminding herself that she was firmly on the outside looking in.

Faith stood at the open front door. In the street, the motormen had surrounded Nell in a protective huddle. They all seemed relaxed and talkative. Sara was sure they were telling Nell stories of Jared's many exploits. Whether or not they were true didn't matter. There was no better liar than a cop spinning a yarn.

"I'm shocked they listened to me," Faith admitted. "I told them to take up donations for the cleaning service. I figured even old Razor Mouth wouldn't be rude enough to say no."

Sara laughed despite herself. "That's pretty smart."

"One of Amanda's tricks—but don't tell her I'm using it. People think they're gonna be judged if they hire someone else to clean up their mess. I think it's a southern thing." She walked back to the kitchen. "I'll see if I can get them to pitch in and finish the kitchen, too. Jesus, I woulda killed him myself if I had to wash dishes out of a bucket."

"It's not as bad as it looks," Sara pointed out. The bucket had a hole in the bottom that led to the drain. A garden hose was threaded to the faucet to extend the reach. It was exactly the kind of thing that Jeffrey would've done—completely rigged yet

unquestionably functional.

By contrast, Will would've been horrified by the contraption. He shared a lot of qualities with Jeffrey, but he would not rest until a project was not just finished, but finished right. Or at least the way he felt was right. It drove Will crazy that the builder who'd worked on Sara's apartment hadn't painted the top edges of all the doors.

"Do me a favor?" Faith was rummaging through the stack of mail on the kitchen table. "Check to see if Nell's still outside."

Sara stood on the tips of her toes to see down the hill. Nell was still talking to the cops. "Yes. Why?"

Faith ripped open one of the envelopes.

"Isn't that illegal?"

"Only if I get caught." Her eyes skimmed what looked like an invoice. "Jared opened it, right? Only he can't remember because of his head injury."

"That's inviting some bad karma."

"And it wasn't even worth it." Faith folded the invoice. "You'll be pleased to know that Lena's Pap smear was normal." She tucked the paper back into the envelope. "I should go tell Nell about Jared. The doctor should've called by now."

"Wait." Sara said, "I know it's not likely to come up, but Nell doesn't know about Will. I mean, me and Will. Together." She felt her heart start to jump, like she was telling a fib to her mother. "I'd like to keep it that way."

If Faith was surprised, she didn't show it. "Okay. I won't say anything."

Sara felt compelled to give an explanation. "It's just that Will's still legally married and ..." She let her voice trail off. There was no reason to lie. "They just loved Jeffrey so much. They wouldn't understand how I was able to move on." Sara paused. "Sometimes, I wonder how I did it myself."

"I'm glad you did." Faith leaned against the table. "Will loves you, you know? I mean, crazy love. He was never this way with Angie. From the day he met you, his feet stopped touching the ground."

Sara smiled, though the last thing she wanted to think about right now was Will's elusive wife.

Faith said, "Seriously, I've never seen him like this before. You've changed him. You've made him—" She shrugged, as if she

couldn't quite believe it. "Happy."

Unreasonably, Sara felt tears well into her eyes. "He's made me happy, too."

"Then that's all that matters." Faith wriggled her eyebrows. " 'This, too, shall pass.' "

Sara wiped her eyes. "There's been an alarming number of people quoting Bible verses at me today."

"My mother got my name from the Bible. I'm supposed to be the substance of things hoped for. Talk about wishful thinking." Faith pushed away from the table. "I really should get Nell. How bad is an infection at this stage?"

"They'll probably bring in somebody from the CDC." The Centers for Disease Control had a dedicated team serving the Atlanta area. "It's good that we're close."

"That doesn't sound cheerful."

"No," Sara admitted. "Infections are unpredictable. People respond differently to treatment. No two patients have the same outcome. If the infection is somewhere like his heart or his brain, then the odds are low he'll survive, and even then, it's a tough recovery." She felt the need to add, "But he's young and otherwise healthy. That counts for a lot."

"Shit, here she comes." Faith waited for Nell to make her way up the porch steps. She had a FedEx padded mailer in one hand and a small envelope in the other.

"I guess you'll get your wish." Nell tucked the envelope into her back pocket. "They say they take up a collection when stuff like this happens. I didn't want to be rude, but it's not like I'm an invalid." Her words were hard, but Sara could see the relief on Nell's face. The deep lines had smoothed from her forehead. Some of the tension was gone from her jaw. "They're nice boys. I shouldn't complain."

Faith said, "They feel as helpless as you do, Mrs. Long. Doing something for you, even something that you're capable of doing on your own, makes them feel better."

"I suppose," Nell admitted. She held up the FedEx mailer. The word PERSONAL was written across the back in red marker. "The delivery guy dropped this off while we were in the street. It's addressed to Lena. Says it's personal. I didn't know if I should open it or not."

"Is there a return address?" Faith sounded disinterested, though

Sara knew better.

Nell squinted at the label. "It's all smeared. Should I open it?"

Faith's shrug was almost believable. "If you want. It might be something Lena needs."

Nell guffawed. "They say the same thing here as in Alabama—you can piss on my face, but don't tell me it's raining?"

Faith's smile showed her teeth.

"That's what I thought." Nell went to the kitchen and retrieved her purse from the counter. Sara wasn't surprised when she pulled out a large utility knife, but Faith obviously was. Her eyebrows shot straight up.

"Let's see what personal thing we got here." Nell sliced open the top of the padded mailer. She peered inside the envelope, her eyes narrowed as if she wasn't quite sure what she was seeing.

Sara asked, "What is it?"

Nell reached into the package. "I don't—"

The mailer dropped to the floor.

Nell held up a tiny jacket, the sort of thing you'd buy for a baby. It was dark blue with orange piping down the sleeves and an Auburn University logo across the back.

Her lips parted in surprise. She looked at Sara, then Faith, then down at the little jacket again. She cupped the hoodie sewn into the back of the collar.

Wordlessly, Nell ran into the hallway, her shoulder catching the corner. Sara was close on her heels as Nell entered the spare bedroom.

"He didn't—" Nell's voice caught. She stood in the middle of the room, the jacket gripped tightly in her hands. "How could he not—" A strangled cry came out of her mouth. She buried her face in the small jacket. "Oh, God."

Faith came up behind Sara. Her mouth was set. Guilt virtually radiated off her skin.

"This is a nursery," Nell whispered, clutching the jacket to her chest. "He was working on a nursery." Her fingers traced the back of the closet door. The outline of several balloons had been drawn with a pencil. Cans of brightly colored paint were on the floor. There were art brushes and sponges and trays to hold the paint.

Nell stared at Faith. Her tone was deadly sharp. "You knew."

Faith didn't bother to lie this time.

A phone started ringing. Nell checked her pocket for her cell phone. Her voice shook as she answered, "Possum, what is it? I'm busy now." She listened, nodding a few times before she closed the phone and put it back in her pocket. "Jared's got an infection." Her tone was matter-of-fact. "They say I need to get back up there."

"I'll drive you," Sara offered.

"No." Nell held the baby's jacket against her chest. "I need some time alone, all right? Can you drive her back?" She was talking to Faith. "I just need some time, okay?"

Nell didn't wait for an answer. She left the room. All the air seemed to go with her.

Faith let out a long sigh. "That was awful."

Sara said nothing.

Faith studied her carefully. "Sara?"

Sara shook her head as she took in the nursery, the way the light from the windows fell across the floor. The yellow walls were cheery and warm. She could imagine sheers hanging in the windows, a summer breeze rustling the edges. Balloons would be painted around the walls to match the closet door. The jacket would hang on a tiny plastic hanger—something colorful to match the décor. The hoodie wasn't sized for a newborn, but at three to six months, Lena's baby would be big enough to wear it. Faith said, "I'm sorry I didn't tell you."

Sara could only keep shaking her head. She didn't trust herself to speak.

One of the last things that Sara and Jeffrey had planned together was adopting a baby. Sara couldn't have children of her own. It had taken years for her and Jeffrey to be in the same place about adoption, to decide that they were ready to raise a child together.

Then Jeffrey had died, and Sara had come completely undone. The adoption agency returned their application. At the time, Sara barely registered the rejection. She'd been incapable of taking care of herself, let alone a baby.

"Sara?" Faith asked. "Will you please say something?"

Acid filled Sara's mouth.

It wasn't fair.

That's what Sara wanted to say. To scream at the top of her lungs.

It just wasn't fair.

Lena wasn't strong. She would bend, not break. She would recover from this tragedy the same easy way she recovered from every other tragedy before.

Even if she lost Jared, Lena would always know what it felt like to have his child growing inside of her. She could always hold her baby's hand and think of holding Jared's. She could see her child laugh and learn and grow and play sports and do school projects and graduate from college and Lena would always, always remember her husband. She would see Jared in her grandchildren and great-grandchildren. On her deathbed, she would find peace in the knowledge that they had made something beautiful together. That even in death, they would both go on living.

"Sara," Faith said. "What's happening here?"

Sara wiped her eyes, angry that she was back in the same dark place she'd started at this morning. "Why does everything come so damn easy to her?" She struggled to speak. Her throat clenched around every word that wanted to come out of her mouth. "Everything just opens up, and she always walks through unscathed and—" Sara had to stop for breath. "It's just so easy for her. She always has it so goddamn easy."

Faith indicated the door. "Come on."

Sara couldn't move.

"Let's go." Faith took Sara by the arm and led her out of the room. Sara thought they were leaving the house, but Faith stopped at the kitchen table. She held up the envelope she'd opened before.

Sara didn't take it. "I don't care about her Pap smear."

"Look who it's from."

Sara scanned the return address. Macon Medical Center.

Driscoll Benedict, OB-GYN. "So?"

Faith opened the envelope, unfolded the doctor's invoice. She held it up for Sara to see. The treatment date was ten days ago. The amount was zeroed out with the advisory that the hospital would bill Lena separately for her emergency room visit.

Across the bottom, someone had written, "God bless you both. You are in our prayers."

Sara took the invoice from Faith. Her knees felt weak. She sat down at the table. Even without the note of condolence, she recognized the medical billing code.

Lena had lost the baby.

9.

Will rode his motorcycle down a neglected state highway, his head rotating like a gun turret. While there was the occasional eighteen-wheeler on the back roads, it was the deer he was most worried about. Less than ten minutes ago, Will had seen a buck dart right out in front of him. The creature was magnificent. There was no other word for it. Muscles rippled along his chest and back. His spindly legs were like a ballerina's. His antlers were branched like a tree. The animal hadn't even bothered to look Will's way, which was good because Will would've been humiliated if any living creature had seen the look of sheer terror on his face. He did not need a mathematician to calculate the odds of survival when a speeding motorcycle slammed into a speeding deer. The coroner would've spent the rest of his days picking pieces of Will out of the buck's rib cage.

He supposed there were all sorts of wild animals living close to Atlanta, but the possibility seemed remote when you stood amidst the skyscrapers, watching buses and cars and trains zoom by.

One of the most startling things Will had found in Macon was not the wildlife, but the divide between rich and poor. In Atlanta, Will's modest house was only a few blocks from Sara's penthouse apartment, which in turn was not far from a methadone clinic.

Macon didn't really have a literal wrong side of the tracks, but a meandering avenue skirting the city limits seemed to be the point at which the carpet ran out. Old mansions gave way to cottages, which gave onto clapboard houses and derelict trailer parks and, eventually, unpainted shacks. Working cases around the state, Will had seen his share of poverty, but there was something particularly depressing about fresh laundry hanging outside a structure that looked as if it didn't even have running water.

Will slowed the bike. He squinted up the road, checking for loose deer. Closer proximity revealed a yellow Volkswagen Bug—not the new kind that looked like something George Jetson would

drive, but the older model that emitted a sound like a child blowing a raspberry. There were bumper stickers all over the back. The blinkers were flashing in lieu of brake lights. Will downshifted another gear. The Bug swung into the oncoming traffic lane, doing a sharp U-turn toward a row of mailboxes on a strip of dirt. A hand went out, a mailbox was checked, then the Bug swung another heavy U-turn that would've provided a nice ramp for Will's bike if he hadn't been paying attention.

He shifted the gear down another notch and pulled over opposite the mailboxes. He checked the time on his cell phone. Will had given himself almost an hour to make what was supposed to be a twenty-minute journey. He wasn't good with directions, and a phone that told you to go left or right was not exactly helpful to the average dyslexic. Also, he felt mired in a quicksand of guilt. Sara wasn't happy with him being undercover. She sure as hell wouldn't be happy with the prospect of Will going on a date. Not that he was technically dating Cayla Martin, but the fact that the nurse seemed to think so gave the exercise an air of uncomfortable legitimacy.

After talking with Faith, Will had decided that it was time to confront the Big Whitey of it all. He'd spent nearly an hour looking for Tony Dell. Cayla Martin seemed like a good fallback plan. The nurse was much easier—in more ways than one. Will was eating his lunch in the cafeteria when a furtive hand slid a note under his tray. The move was practiced. No one seemed to notice. Will wanted to believe he rose to the occasion, discreetly tucking the note into his pocket like Aldrich Ames. Though Will was pretty sure the master spy hadn't read his missives while hiding in a toilet stall.

7 p.m.—Left off exit 12, right on dirt road. Only house with lights on.
Don't be late!!

Cayla had put a smiley face under the exclamation points, which served to heighten Will's guilt. He left smiley faces for Sara sometimes. He texted them to her. She texted them back. Once, when they were fooling around, she kissed them all over his stomach.

Will let out a long, pained sigh as he got off the bike.

He pulled up the telephone keypad on his iPhone. He dialed in the twelve-digit code to access the secret apps. The screen flashed

up quickly, so he had his finger ready to select the number-cloaking program. The app opened. He dialed in a ten-digit number.

The edge of the phone bumped his helmet. Will undid the strap and hooked it on the handlebars. Four unusually long rings passed before Sara answered. In the background, Will heard a piano playing and the soft murmur of conversation.

Instead of saying hello, Sara asked, "Brunswick?"

Will guessed the cloaking app had done its job. "Not exactly." He tried to identify the background noise, which sounded more like a bar than a hospital. "Where are you?"

"Where am I?" Her drawl was more pronounced, which tended to happen when she got away from the city. "I am drinking a glass of scotch at the hotel bar of the Macon Days Inn."

Will immediately thought of all the scumbags who were probably trying to hit on her. He worked to keep his cool. "Yeah?"

"Yep." She hit the *p* hard at the end. Will thought about the shape of her mouth. The bowtie of her lips. And then he imagined some idiot in a gold necklace sidling up to her and asking if she wanted a refill.

He said, "That's not like you to be in a bar."

"No," Sara agreed. "But I'm doing a lot of things today that aren't like me."

Will couldn't decipher her tone. She didn't sound drunk, which was a relief. He'd never known Sara to be a drinker.

He offered, "I could probably get there around midnight, one at the latest."

"No, sweetheart. I don't want you anywhere near here."

Will felt a jolt of fear. Sara usually called him sweetheart when he was being dense. Had she figured out he was in Macon? Will ran through the possibilities, trying to find an area of weakness. Faith wouldn't tell—at least not without giving Will a warning. Denise Branson knew better, and even if she didn't, she had no idea who Sara was. Lena had promised to keep quiet, but what kind of idiot trusted a woman who killed a man with a hammer, then lied about what came next?

"Will?"

He swallowed back his paranoia. One thing he knew about Sara was that she didn't play games. If his cover was blown, she'd be

demanding an explanation, not listening to piano music in a bar.

He asked, "How's Jared doing?"

"Not good." She paused to take a drink. Will heard the glass hit the bar when she finished. "One of his surgical incisions turned septic. He went into shock. They've got a guy from the CDC running the case. He knows what he's doing, but—" She stopped. "Lena was pregnant. She lost the baby ten days ago."

He still couldn't decipher the edge in her tone. Sara couldn't have children, but that didn't have anything to do with Lena. Will asked, "Does Faith know?"

"She was there. I basically lost my shit in front of her."

Will looked at his bike. He should turn around right now and go see her. The Days Inn was just off the interstate, less than half an hour away.

Sara said, "Faith was very nice about it. I guess if you're going to lose your shit, she's a good person to do it around."

"Yeah." Will heard a semi barreling down the road, the lights slicing through the dusk. The noise of the engine vibrated the air, cut out whatever Sara was saying.

He asked, "What?"

"Doesn't matter." He heard the tinkle of ice cubes, her throat work as she swallowed. "Are you sitting on the side of the road?"

"I wanted to check on you. You were pretty upset this morning."

"Well, I'm pretty upset tonight," she quipped. "You know, my daddy told me a long time ago that wanting revenge is like sipping poison and waiting for the other person to die."

"Is that what you're doing?"

"I don't know." She paused again. "I feel like I've trespassed. Like I've stolen something from Lena. Something private that didn't belong to me." She gave a harsh laugh. "My pound of flesh isn't nearly as filling as I thought it'd be."

Will stared at the mailboxes. Numbers had been spray-painted on the doors in various colors by different hands. Someone had drawn a daisy on one box. Another had the Georgia Bulldogs logo.

Sara said, "I miss you."

Will had seen her less than twelve hours ago, but hearing the words made him realize that he ached for her. He tried to think of a way out of this mess. He should tell her that he was sorry for

keeping secrets. That he was sorry he wasn't there right now. That he was a coward and a liar and he didn't deserve Sara but he was pretty sure he would fade away to nothing without her.

"Anyway." Abruptly, her tone changed. "Since one scotch is clearly my limit, I should go back to the hospital and sit with Nell. I told her that Lena lost the baby. She already knew. I guess Lena told her. I don't know. She's not talking much. Of course, neither am I—at least not to Nell." Sara gave a stilted laugh. "I'm sorry I'm rambling. I'm just tired. I've been up since this time yesterday. I tried to sleep, but I couldn't."

"Are you going home tonight?" Will started to make plans. He'd finish with Cayla, then jump on his bike and head straight to Atlanta.

Sara quashed the idea. "I already booked a room for the night. The dogs will be fine, and I shouldn't be driving long distances right now."

"I could come get you." He tried not to beg. "Let me come get you."

"No." There was no equivocation in her voice. "I don't want you here, Will. I want you separate from this."

He felt trapped by his own lies. "I'm so sorry."

"I don't want you to be sorry." She paused again as if she needed to catch her breath. "I want you to keep doing whatever you're doing, wherever you're doing it, and then when it's over I want you to come back home to me and for us to have dinner and talk and laugh and then I want you to take me into the bedroom and—"

Another truck roared by, but Will heard every single pornographic detail she whispered into the phone. Sara asked, "Can you do that?"

Will's tongue felt too thick for his mouth. He cleared his throat. "I can do all of that."

"Good, because that's what I need, Will. I need you to make me feel like I'm firmly planted in my life again. The life I have with you."

The piano music had stopped. Ice hit a glass.

Someone laughed. She said, "What we have is good, right?"

"Yes." At least on that point, he could give her a straight answer. "It's really good."

"That's what I think, too."

“Sara—” Will heard the desperation in his voice, but he couldn’t think of anything to say but her name.

“I need to go.”

“You don’t have to.”

“Just think about later, all right? Us at home, and what you want to eat for dinner, or maybe we’ll go to a movie, or walk the dogs. Just live our lives. That’s what I’m thinking about right now. That’s what’s getting me through this.”

“We’ll do it. We’ll do all of it.” He waited for her to say something else, but she ended the call.

Will stared down at the phone as if he could make Sara get back on the line. Not that he had any words of great comfort. If anything, Will had been too quiet on the call. He realized that now. He’d forced Sara to do most of the talking when it was obvious that she was waiting for Will to say something—anything—that would somehow bring her some peace.

He mumbled, “Idiot.”

Will dialed the twelve-digit code again to access the app. He wasn’t fast enough when the screen popped up. Will dialed the code again, but he stopped shy of the last two numbers.

He didn’t know what to say to her. He wanted to go to her. He could be there in ten minutes if he blew through all the red lights. He would do everything she wanted him to and more.

And then she would ask him how he’d gotten there so fast.

Will had ten minutes to figure out how to tell her. Fifteen if traffic near the Days Inn was bad. He unhooked his helmet from the handlebars. A chunk of paint had been scraped off. He strapped the shorty on his head. Once he was on the bike, he turned the front wheel back the way he’d come.

He didn’t have a choice anymore. The only thing to do after that call was go straight to the hotel, or the hospital, and sit down with Sara and tell her exactly what was going on. Faith was right—this was too close to the bone. What had started out as a small lie of omission had built up into a giant deceit that could take out their entire relationship.

Will wasn’t going to have Sara drinking poison for him one day.

He gunned the bike as he headed back toward the interstate. He looked up at the darkening sky. The hotel was near an airport, so he could use the planes to make sure he was heading in the

right direction. At least Will assumed that was the Days Inn Sara was talking about. The chain was big. There was probably more than one location in Macon.

He just happened to glance back down in time to notice a black pickup truck parked in the middle of the road. The oncoming lane was blocked by a white Honda. Will slowed the bike, wishing he had a horn. There was no way to pass on either side of the road—at least not without risking a slide down an embankment. Will let his boots scrape the ground as he stopped the bike.

“Hey!” Will shouted. “Get out of the way!”

“Hold your horses!” The pickup driver craned half his body out of the cab. Will recognized Tony’s voice before he saw his face. “Damn, Bud, what’re you doin’ comin’ from that way? Cayla’s is down there.”

He was pointing to a dirt road shooting off at a steep angle. Tall trees obscured the entrance. There was no sign, no marker to indicate that this was anything but a dirt track. Will would’ve never been able to find it, and Cayla had played this game well enough to know she was better off giving a man an address he had to locate rather than a phone number he could use to cancel.

“Come on.” Tony waved for Will to follow him.

Will revved the bike, pretending he wasn’t checking out the driver in the white Honda. He saw the top of a head, dark wavy hair and a high forehead, as the window snicked up.

Tony turned onto the dirt road. His radio was loud enough for the melody to make its way back to Will. Lynyrd Skynyrd. “Free Bird.” Not much of a surprise.

Will hung back from the truck, which kicked up enough red dust to suffocate an elephant. There was no way to get out of this now. Will would spend two hours at Cayla’s, tops, then find Sara and do what he should’ve done in the first place.

She was probably on her way to the hospital. Will couldn’t very well ambush her in front of her friends, and besides, what he needed to say to her should be said when they were alone. He would tell her at the hotel. They’d never been in a real fight before. He couldn’t guess what Sara would do. Maybe she would throw things or cuss him like a dog. Then again, he’d never seen her throw anything out of anger and she seldom cursed, a by-product of working around children all day.

Maybe she would get really quiet, which she did when she was

worried. Will hated when she got quiet. Though that might be better than the alternative. All he knew for certain was that he'd pretty much lie down in front of a speeding train to keep her from leaving him.

The back wheels of Tony's truck spun as he dipped into a rut. Will steered the bike away from the pothole, which was filled with muddy water. The dirt road thinned to a single lane. Will tried to take in his surroundings, but he could only see the outlines of a few houses. Day was completely giving over to night. Tony was too far ahead for his headlights to do Will any good. The man drove with his foot on the brake. The taillights turned the red road an icy black.

Will wondered if Tony was leading him to the middle of nowhere to kill him. The man didn't seem capable of murder, but Will had been surprised before. Death generally didn't announce itself. He'd bet the forty-three-year-old entrepreneur who died on the toilet last week wasn't planning on being found with his pants down.

A small lighted sign announced the entrance to a trailer park. Palm trees surrounded the flowing script announcing the compound's name. The place was well tended, obviously catering to families. Children's bicycles were stacked neatly in front of porches. All the trashcans had been collected from the road. Cars were parked evenly in their spaces. He could see the soft glow of televisions behind drawn curtains.

The road doubled up again as the trailer park disappeared in Will's side mirror. He squinted up ahead. Tony's hand was raised in the air. He was snapping his fingers to the music. George Michael's "I Want Your Sex." A song like that could get a man killed this far from civilization, but Will guessed Tony didn't care.

Suddenly, the dirt road gave onto a paved street. The bike kicked up. Luckily, Will wasn't going fast, otherwise he would've taken a vault over the handlebars.

Streetlights illuminated every inch of the paved surface. Foundations had been poured for hundreds of houses, but the builder had either run out of money or run out of town. Probably both. Plumbing pipes and drains stuck up from the poured slabs like toothpicks. Incongruously, some of the driveways had mailboxes but no houses. Others had weeds breaking through the white concrete sidewalks.

Cayla Martin's was one of four completed houses at the end of a cul-de-sac. Macon wasn't the only city in America that had its share of abandoned subdivisions, but Cayla's had a particular sadness about it. The lawn was overgrown with weeds. The one sad tree by the front door was bent and dying. No one had cared about this house from the very beginning. The trim paint was peeling where the wood had not been primed. Some of the windows had been installed crookedly. Even the front door had a strange tilt like no one had bothered to plumb it in. Will wondered if the builder was related to the lazy jackass who'd worked on Sara's apartment.

Tony Dell pulled into a short driveway, parking the truck behind a black Toyota. The door opened. Tony practically fell out of the truck. The F-250 was too big for him, like a kid clomping around in his daddy's shoes. Tony had the same jaunty gait as he approached Will in the semidarkness. "Damn, Bud, ain't your balls freezin' on that thing?"

Will shrugged, though the man was right about the cold. He nodded toward the truck. "Where'd you get that?"

"Borrowed it from a friend."

"Nice friend," Will noted. The truck was a considerable step up from Tony's impounded Kia.

"Hope you weren't plannin' nothin' romantic tonight." Tony tucked his hands into his pockets as he walked toward the house. "I kinda invited myself over. Cayla's gotta faucet been leakin' for a while, so I said I'd come by and fix it."

"She knows you're going to be here?"

"Sure," Tony said, but his voice went up a bit higher than honesty would dictate. "You get off work early?"

"Little bit." His boss was six months from retirement and had a lady on the side. Will was about to say something derogatory about Salemi's work habits, but then Tony Dell stood under the porch light and Will was rendered speechless.

The man had gotten the shit kicked out of him. There was no better description. His nose was sideways. Both eyes were bruised. A long, open gash on his cheek had been sewn shut with thick black stitches.

Tony smiled, despite the pain it must've caused. "Cop caught up with me."

"Vickery?" Will guessed. He'd joked about it with Faith before,

but now that he saw Paul Vickery's handiwork, it wasn't funny. "What the hell happened?"

"We're cool, Bud." Tony held up his hands in defense. "I didn't tell him a damn thing. I think that ol' boy just needed to give somebody a beat-down. Coulda been you. Ended up bein' me."

Will couldn't believe the man's cavalier attitude. "You gonna file a report on him?"

He practically guffawed. "Shit, that's funny, Bud. Like they work for us or somethin'." He raised his hand to knock on the door. "Act like you invited me, all right?"

"Like—"

Cayla had a huge grin on her face when she opened the door. And then she saw Tony Dell and looked like she wanted to murder him. "What're you doin' here?"

"Bud invited me." He patted Will on the back. "Didn't you, Bud?"

Will mumbled, "Yeah."

Cayla didn't seem concerned that Tony had been beaten. She sneered at him, saying, "You sneaky little prick."

"Aw, don't be like that." Tony pushed himself into the house. He had to slither under Cayla's arm to do it.

For the first time since he'd met Tony Dell, Will was glad to have the little freak around. Cayla had obviously prepared for their date. Her makeup was so heavy that it clumped in the corners of her eyes. Her jeans cut her into two separate parts and her white lace blouse clearly showed the dark purple bra underneath. Even from the porch, Will could smell her perfume. He didn't know enough about these things to guess whether the scent was cheap or not, but going by how much she used, Will hoped she got a volume discount.

Tony made a show of sniffing the air. "Damn, girl, you smell pretty."

"Shut up, Tony. I told you not to talk to me that way." She gave Will a tightly coiled smile as she motioned him inside. "He's my brother."

"Stepbrother," Tony corrected. He winked at Will. "Not by blood."

Cayla groaned as she shut the door. "His daddy married my mama when we were in junior high. Ever since then, he's been a sticky turd I can't scrape off my shoe."

Tony's laugh said he took this as a compliment.

Will grunted, not out of any Bill Black response but because he was at a complete loss for words.

"You look nice," Cayla said, though Will had specifically dressed down for the occasion. His jeans were torn at the hem. His blue Oxford shirt had been nice two years ago, but the collar was frayed. The black T-shirt he wore underneath had holes in the armpits.

"You wanna beer?" Cayla asked.

"I'm good." Will didn't drink or smoke, which presented a serious handicap as far as his con cred was concerned. "Maybe later." Tony said, "I could do with a cold one."

"Then get your scrawny ass back in that truck and go get you one," Cayla suggested. Tony grumbled a response. They certainly talked to each other like brother and sister.

Will looked around the room as he waited out the argument. The house was clean if not tidy. Cayla liked her figurines. Large dolls in fancy dresses were on almost every available surface. Some were under glass like wheels of cheese. Others were on stands that helped them hold up umbrellas or push baby carriages. Cayla had decorated everything in pastels, mostly pinks and blues. A large flat-screen television took pride of place across from a baby blue sectional sofa.

The fight was over. Or at least Tony seemed to think so. He hurdled the back of the sofa and plopped down in front of the set. "We gonna eat out here? I think the game's coming on."

"You can eat out here by your damn self." Cayla motioned for Will to follow her, telling him, "Just so you know next time, I prefer it's just me and you."

Will grunted as he trailed her into the kitchen. The house was choppy, which was strange for a new build. The wall bisecting the kitchen and family room looked taped into place. The saloon doors in the middle weren't even on the same plane. At least an inch separated the top edges, like blocks in a game of Tetris.

"We can eat in here." Cayla held open one of the saloon doors.

Will glanced around the kitchen, which was small and crowded but smelled so good he felt his stomach start to weep. Even the stench of a cigarette burning in the ashtray couldn't hide the delicious aroma of fried chicken, biscuits, and some kind of sweet cobbler.

“You hungry?”

Will nodded. His mouth was too filled with drool to answer. Sara could do a lot of things, but she could not cook to save her life.

“I told you I gotta good scald on some chicken.” Cayla took down a plate from the cabinet. There were pots warming on the stove. She picked up a spoon and started to fill the plate.

Will sat down at the table.

She asked, “You hear that cop’s not doing good?” Will didn’t answer.

“Got an infection or something. Went into septic shock.”

Will tried to keep her talking. “What’s that mean?”

“Means he’s got blood poisoning.” She took her cigarette from the ashtray as she placed the heaping plate of food in front of Will. Fried chicken, green beans, black-eyed peas, mashed potatoes and gravy, and two biscuits perilously balanced on top.

She put the cigarette to her lips and inhaled deeply. “Sepsis happens a lot with surgeries. They got all those tubes going in and out of them. Bacteria gets into the bloodstream. The heart can’t take it. Poison floods through the body, shuts it all down.”

He noticed her grammar had suddenly improved. Cayla Martin seemed to have an accent for every occasion. “Sounds bad.”

She took another long drag before stubbing out the cigarette. “Yeah, it can be. You want that beer now?”

Will nodded. “Is he going to make it?”

“The cop?” She was at the refrigerator. She looked back over her shoulder. Underneath all the makeup, Cayla Martin wasn’t unattractive. She seemed to have that weird quality that made otherwise smart men do stupid things. “He might make it. He’s young. Pretty strong. Why do you care?”

Will shrugged as he picked up his fork. “I don’t.”

The saloon doors opened. Tony eyed them suspiciously. His jealousy was like a lighthouse beacon scanning the room.

Cayla gave him a nasty look. “I thought you were watching the game.”

“I bet you did.” Tony walked into the kitchen with his hands clenched. He told Will, “I heard you were up there today. In the ICU.”

Will took a big bite of peas. The bacon grease and salt caressed his taste buds.

Tony asked, "She recognize you?" Will glanced at Cayla.

"It's all right." She popped open the beer and put the can in front of Will. "He tells me everything whether I wanna hear it or not."

"The cop," Tony pushed. He was just as changeable as his stepsister. Suddenly, he was sounding less like a nuisance and more like a criminal.

Will let some time pass before answering. "What about the cop?"

"She recognize you?"

"No." Will shoveled another mound of peas into his mouth. And because there was some space left in his cheeks, he crammed in half a biscuit to help soak up the grease.

Tony pulled back a chair from the table. He sat down a few feet away, arms crossed, legs spread. His injuries were more pronounced in the harsh kitchen light. The gash on his face would leave a bad scar.

Tony said, "That was smart thinking, Bud. Make sure she don't recognize you. Make sure we don't gotta problem."

Will struggled to swallow. "I don't know about you, but I don't have a problem."

Cayla laughed. Just as quickly, her expression turned dark. "What are you doing down here?"

Will turned around. There was a little boy standing in the doorway. His hair was a mess. His pajamas were too big for his spindly body. He clutched a picture book to his chest. The material seemed a little young for him, but Will was hardly an expert.

"Shit," Cayla cursed. "What did I tell you about staying upstairs?"

The boy opened his mouth to speak, but she didn't let him answer.

"I told you you'd get hungry." She got up from the table to fix another plate. She introduced the kid to Will: "This'n's Benji, my sister's kid. Benji, this is Mr. Black."

"Her *real* sister," Tony amended. He pushed his chair back until it touched the counter. Benji wouldn't go near him. He took the long way around, sitting opposite Will with the book in his lap.

"Here." Cayla plopped down a plate that was considerably less generous than the portions she gave Will. She asked Tony, "I

guess I gotta feed you, too?”

“Gimme one a them breasts.” He grabbed at her, giggling like it was a game.

Cayla slapped away his hands. “Jesus, Tony.” She turned back to the stove, muttering to herself.

Will looked at Benji, who was staring down at his lap. Will tried not to be too obvious as he studied the boy. He had a familiar look about him, like he expected at any moment that something bad was going to happen. His shoulders were rolled inward. He kept his head bowed. His ears practically rotated as he listened for a change in tone, an indication of danger. Will recognized the survival tactic. When adults got mad, kids usually ended up being collateral damage.

Will asked Benji, “Are you from Macon?”

Rather than answering, the kid looked at his aunt.

Cayla supplied, “Baton Rouge. At least that’s where they were this last time. His mama’s on the pipe. Can’t break the habit. The po-po found ’em livin’ in her car.” She rested her hand on Benji’s bony shoulder. Will would’ve missed the flinch if he hadn’t been watching.

Cayla said, “I couldn’t let ’em put Benji in a home again. Last time, he near about got killed. And I mean real killed, not just pushed around.”

Will guessed Benji knew all of this, but he didn’t like that the kid was hearing it again. He asked Benji, “How old are you?”

This time, he answered himself, showing Will nine fingers.

“What’s that book you’re reading?”

Benji held up the book. Will couldn’t read the cursive letters, but the C at the beginning and the smiling monkey told him he was looking at *Curious George*. The book had obviously been read a lot. The pages were dog-eared. The cover was worn. Will wondered if something was wrong with the boy. “Which school do you go to?”

Benji returned the book to his lap. He stared down at his hands.

Cayla blew out a put-upon sigh. “What’s gotten into you, child? Tell him where you go to school.”

Benji’s voice was squeaky. “I’m in Miss Ward’s fourth-grade class at Barden Elementary School on Anderson Drive.”

Will gave a low whistle, as if he was impressed. “That sounds like a nice school. Do you like it there?”

The boy's slender shoulders went up in a shrug.

"What's your favorite subject?"

He glanced at Cayla, but before she could answer for him, Benji said, "Math."

"I like math, too," Will said, which was actually true. Numbers had offered a respite, some sort of weird proof that despite Will's inability to read like the other kids, there was at least one thing he could do right.

"Fractions," Benji whispered. "My mom does them with me." He looked up at Will, his eyes moist with tears. The fluorescent bulbs made the corners glow. He looked so desperate that Will couldn't meet his gaze.

"Eat up, hon." Cayla pushed Benji's plate closer. She'd given him a spoonful of peas, a biscuit, and a chicken leg. The meal didn't seem like enough, but Benji didn't complain. He didn't start eating, either. He seemed to be waiting for permission.

Will picked up the large piece of fried chicken Cayla had smothered in gravy. She was right about her scalding skills. The crispy skin practically melted in his mouth. Too bad he wasn't hungry anymore.

Will had seen a lot of shell-shocked kids passing through the Atlanta Children's Home, but Benji was the loneliest child he'd ever shared a table with. He resonated at a different frequency. His movements were stilted. His expression was a mask of neutrality, but his eyes—there wasn't a nine-year-old on the planet who had yet mastered concealing the kind of pain Will read in Benji's eyes.

He missed his mother. She had obviously neglected him, likely abused him, but he still needed his mom. She'd helped him with his fractions. Maybe she'd worked on the rest of his homework, too. She'd undoubtedly moved him around a lot, staying one step ahead of child welfare services because even crack whores didn't want to admit that they were bad mothers.

Benji's lack of accent was the big giveaway. He'd probably never stayed one place long enough to pick one up. He sounded better educated than the three adults in the house. He had better table manners, too. He used his fork and knife to peel away the skin on the chicken leg.

Tony snorted. "Where'd you learn them airs, boy?"

"Leave him be," Cayla shot back. She moderated her tone as

she asked Will, "You like working at the hospital?"

Will nodded and talked with his mouth full. "How long have you been there?"

"About five years," she answered, which was a lie. Cayla's tax records had her working part-time for several different doctors before landing the pharmacy job six months ago. Even then, she still rotated in and out of the offices on her off days, probably to help pay her DUI fine. And pay for a house with a mortgage that was so far underwater she could see China from her front porch.

She said, "The hospital's all right. I like the pharmacy hours. With Benji here, I've gotta be home when school's out."

Benji stiffened, as if he was surprised to hear the news.

"How long has he been living with you?" Will asked.

"This time?" She shrugged. "I guess a couple of weeks or so. Ain't that right, Benji?"

"A month," Benji told Will. He probably had a calendar in his head where he marked each day. His voice was quieter when he said, "They took me away a month ago."

Tony offered, "I been at the hospital a year. Can't say I like it. Cleaning up shit and puke all day. People treatin' me like I'm the help."

Cayla's face creased with an angry frown. "Then why don't you go back to Beaufort, with the rest of the Geechees?"

Will ignored her sharp tone, concentrating on her words. "Beaufort? That's where the Sea Islands are, right? Over in Carolina?"

Tony narrowed his eyes at Will. "Why you askin'?"

Will shrugged his shoulders. "I rode my bike through there a while back. Hit Charleston, Hilton Head. Made my way down to Savannah. Pretty coastline."

Cayla's lighter snapped as she lit another cigarette. "Yeah, well, Tony ain't from the pretty parts. He spent his summers livin' with his mama on the wrong side of Broad."

While Will wasn't surprised to learn that Tony was on the wrong side of anything, he was very curious about this new piece of information. The GBI had run an extensive background check on Anthony Dell. He was born just outside of Macon. His records had him living in the area all of his life, but there would be no mention in the files of where Tony spent his school vacations.

Will asked Tony, "You ever been to Hilton Head?"

Instead of answering, Tony just stared at Will. Suspicion oozed out of every pore.

Will stared back, wondering how far he should push it. Big Whitey had been tracked through both Hilton Head and Savannah. Tony had probably been hearing about the man for years. It suddenly made sense why he was so desperate to be part of the action. Little guys always wanted to run with the big dogs.

Cayla supplied, "Tony spent a coupla three summers on Hilton Head." She arched an eyebrow at Tony. "His mama was a waitress when she wasn't spreadin' her legs for rent money."

Tony's face soured, but he didn't contradict her.

Cayla continued, "She hopped around all the dive bars, worked until they got tired of her or realized she was stealing too much." She took another hit from the cigarette. "Tony lived with her every summer since he was, what, Benji's age? Weren't you eight or nine when they got divorced?"

Tony gave a sully one-shoulder shrug, but at least Will knew why this bit of history hadn't come up on the background check. Unless a kid got arrested or ended up in juvie, there were very few public records until they turned old enough to buy a car, rent an apartment, or start paying taxes.

Will said, "I like it up there."

"You mean over there," Tony countered. His eyes went beady. "It's over, not up."

Cayla cut in, "It's over *and* up, you idiot."

"I know what a map looks like."

Will let them argue. Geography had never been his strong suit, but he knew that South Carolina's Lowcountry dangled into Georgia's coast. He waited for a lull in the sibling spat, then said, "Better beaches on the coast than Florida's got, anyway."

"Whatta you know about Florida?" Tony demanded. He seemed angrier than the conversation warranted, which led Will to believe he was on the right track.

Will said, "It's a state."

"Don't fuck me around, son."

"Jesus, Tony." Cayla huffed a stream of smoke. "What crawled up your ass?"

Tony leaned forward, his fists pressing into the table. He asked Will, "When you ever been to Florida?"

"He's from Georgia," Cayla said. "Where else is he gonna go on

vacation?”

Tony wasn't mollified. His anger filled the room. Benji went into lockdown mode. He slid down in his chair. His neck all but disappeared into his shoulders. He stared at his book like he'd never read it before.

Will took a bite of chicken. He chewed slowly, drawing out the time. Tony fidgeted. He was not a patient man. Will finally swallowed. "I was at MacDill."

Cayla asked, "You were in the Army?"

"Air Force." Will stared at Tony as he took another bite of chicken. The man had damn good reason to be suspicious. The coincidences were stacking up. MacDill Air Force Base was in South Tampa, not far from Sarasota, where Big Whitey had reportedly killed his first cop off the Tamiami Trail.

Cayla asked, "Were you an officer or anything?"

"I was target practice." Will used a biscuit to soak up some grease on the plate. He popped it into his mouth, still keeping his eyes on Tony.

Cayla asked, "They kick you out?"

"We agreed to go our separate ways."

She laughed, like he'd made a joke. "I woulda liked to've seen you in your uniform. You got any pictures?"

Will pretended he didn't hear the question. Tony seemed incapable of doing the same.

"Why do you want a picture of him?" Tony yelled. "You ain't never asked for no damn picture of me."

Cayla rolled her eyes. She asked Will, "You ever been to Miami?"

Will shook his head. "Didn't seem worth the trip." Because Tony had a racist streak, he added, "A little too dark down there for my taste."

Tony nodded, but he was still on edge. He obviously thought he had a shot at Cayla, which was equal parts alarming and disgusting. Will guessed it was better for Tony to be jealous than suspicious. Either way, he kept his eye on the man. It was always the little ones who fought dirty.

"Hey, Tony." Cayla tried to break the tension. "You remember I went up the Tamiami a few years ago. Hit Naples, Venice, Sarasota. Me and Chuck took his Harley up the trail."

"That fuckin' tool," Tony grumbled, the name obviously

grating.

Will feigned disinterest. He peeled off the last piece of chicken and tossed it into his mouth. There was a toughness to Tony's posture that he hadn't seen before. Faith had a working theory that Tony Dell was more dangerous than they suspected. Will had shot her down because the guy came across as an irritant, more like a gnat. Looking at Tony now, Will wondered if Faith was right.

"You gonna drink that?" Tony asked.

He meant the beer. Will shrugged. "Help yourself."

Tony pounded back the beer. His Adam's apple bobbed as he drank too fast. Beer slid from the corners of his mouth. The requisite burp was followed by a bang as he slammed the can on the table.

Cayla ignored the display. She twisted the tip of her cigarette in the ashtray, shaping the end. She asked Will, "What were you in for?"

She meant jail. Will shrugged.

Cayla eyed him. "I bet you gotta strong temper on you." She said it as a compliment. "That what got you into trouble?"

Will shrugged in a way that let her know she was right.

"Think I'll have another." Tony walked around the table, pressing his hand on the top of Benji's head as he went to the fridge. Bottles rattled as he opened the door. Cayla had enough beer for the zombie apocalypse. There was hardly any food.

Tony asked Will, "Why'd you bail on the Air Force?"

Will gnawed at the chicken bones, sucking the marrow.

Again, Cayla tried to intervene. "I love those Gulf beaches with their white sand. Don't you think, Tony? The Atlantic's too cold."

Tony beamed. All it took was a little positive attention. The tough guy was gone. The gnat was back. He joked, "Shit, girl. You don't know what you're talking about."

"I know what beach I like."

"You don't know nothin'."

Will let Tony and Cayla debate the finer points of sands and tourist bars while he watched Benji. The boy moved like a bird, his arms held close to his sides like he was afraid of knocking something over. At the children's home, they had all eaten like ravenous animals, shoveling down food, wrapping their arms around their plates to keep thieves at bay. This kid had obviously

been trained to be seen in public. He kept a napkin in his lap. He wiped his hands and mouth. He made sure that he chewed each bite before swallowing.

Will was a teenager before he realized that the reason he kept choking every time he ate was because he wasn't chewing enough.

Benji gave Will a furtive glance. He knew he was being watched. Will winked at him. Benji quickly looked back down. He was probably thinking about his mother—wondering where she was, if she was thinking of him, what he'd done wrong to make her go away in the first place.

Will had seen that look before, too.

"Hey." Tony snapped his fingers in Will's face.

Will was with Bill Black on this one. He slapped away Tony's hand.

"Damn, son." Tony held his hand to his chest. He nodded toward the faucet. "I was just asking could you help me with that?"

Will realized he'd been hearing the leak since he walked into the kitchen. "Probably needs a new washer."

Cayla's voice got high-pitched, the way some women's did whenever they asked a man to help them. "You wouldn't mind fixing it for me, would you, Bud? I'm not good with tools."

Will hesitated. Fixing things was what he did for Sara, like replacing a blown lightbulb or painting the tops of her doors. "Don't have the right tools."

"I got some in the truck," Tony offered.

Before he could stop himself, Will said, "I thought you told me you borrowed the truck."

Tony grinned. "Borrowed everything on it, son."

"You got a washer?" Will asked. "That's probably what it is. Might be ceramic. That's not a cheap faucet."

Cayla seemed pleased to hear this. "I got it at the Home Depot. Figured I could treat myself for once."

"Store's still open." Tony started playing with the faucet. "Why don't you and me go fetch a washer, fix this sink right up?"

Will sat back in his chair. He felt trapped between his job and Sara. He hadn't forgotten about their conversation on the phone. His girlfriend needed him. At least she would until Will told her the truth. Then again, Tony seemed relaxed and chatty. He might

be more forthcoming about his past without Cayla around.

Tony turned off the faucet. "Shit, Bud, come on. It ain't like I'm askin' you on a date."

"Speaking of which," Cayla inserted. "Bud, why don't you follow Tony on your bike? That way you can drive yourself back here."

"Hey, now," Tony said. "That ain't nice."

"Ya think?" she countered. "Come on, Bud. That sink's been driving me crazy for weeks."

Will looked at Benji. The kid stared back. Will asked him, "What do you think?"

Benji chewed his lip. The skin was chapped. His eyelids were heavy. Will could see dark circles underneath. Maybe he stayed up nights looking out the window, waiting for his mother. Or maybe he couldn't sleep because the guilt of losing her was too much.

Will stood from the table. Being around this kid was screwing with his head. "All right," he told Tony. "Let's go."

Will rode alongside Tony in the truck. His bike was in the back, strapped down with some bungee cords Cayla had in her garage. Every turn, Will could hear the bike groan in protest, but the night had turned cold and rainy and Will was grateful to be in the warm, dry cab.

Tony was supposed to drop him off at the home improvement store. Will still couldn't decide whether or not he was going back to Cayla's. She'd seemed certain Will would return. She'd kept touching him—rubbing his back, grabbing his arm. She'd even kissed his cheek before he left. Will had tolerated the contact, but he couldn't stomach the thought of returning to that cramped house with its stuffed dolls and air of desperation.

Besides, Tony was looking like the better way into Macon's ever-changing drug scene. He'd loosened up on the drive. He talked a bit about Hilton Head, his boyhood summers spent sleeping on the beach and stealing wallets from stupid tourists who left their stuff out in the open while they swam in the ocean.

As with the previous night when they'd driven to Lena's house, Tony was fidgety—playing with the radio, tapping his fingers on the dashboard, keeping one hand barely on the wheel. His music

selection was surprising. The Madonna CD in the player was from the eighties. He hit the replay button on "Like a Virgin."

"I saw her at the Atlanta Omni back in '87." Tony took a sip of beer. He'd already washed down a couple of pills from a Baggie in the glove compartment. "She's a tiny little thing. Got them weird bras make her tits look like bullets." Will stared out the window.

"Sorry about before," Tony said. "When I got mad about Florida."

Will shrugged.

"I had some bad shit go down in Sarasota when I was sixteen." Instead of asking for more, Will shrugged again. "No problem."

"Got arrested down there. Near 'bout got my ass thrown in jail." He gave a wet-sounding belch. "Gave the cops my brother's name. Half brother. He's a stupid little shit. Got himself thrown in for twenty years off a bank holdup." Tony laughed. "Dumbass hit a bank. Can you believe that?"

Will shook his head. As crimes go, robbing a bank offered the lowest payout with the highest risk. "Not too bright."

"You damn right. They tracked him straight back to his old lady's door." Tony finished the beer. He rolled down the window and threw out the can. "Don't tell Cayla what I said about giving his name to the cops."

"She won't hear it from me."

"Good deal." He popped open another can of beer. "Cayla's all hung up on us being related, but my daddy was with her mama less than two years. That ain't nothin'. And even if it was, I don't care."

Will held back a response.

"I seen you lookin' at her, Bud. I don't mind that. I know she's pretty. Lots of men like to look at her." He pointed his finger Will's way. "Just don't touch her."

There was a threat in his voice, but Will was so far removed from being interested in Cayla Martin that he couldn't take it seriously.

"Her mama's got four other kids. They put me in the basement with the boys. She used to come down there when she was drunk and show me a good time."

Will's shock must have been apparent.

Tony snorted beer up his nose. He coughed it out of his mouth.

“No, man, not the mama. I’m talking about Cayla. She’d come down them stairs wearing her panties and a tight shirt and pretty soon the sheet I’m under’s lookin’ like a pup tent.” He chuckled at the memory. “I can’t even tell you the shit we got up to down there. Liked to burn down the house.”

Will fervently hoped he would not. “How long have you known her?”

Tony didn’t have to think about it. “Been in love with her since we was fifteen.”

“That’s a long time.”

“Damn right it is.”

Will looked out the window as Tony chugged his beer. There were three cans left in the six-pack. Will guessed from the shape and color of the pills in the Baggie that Tony had taken some Oxy.

Will said, “Slow down.”

Tony’s foot was already on the brake. He pressed the pedal, but the speed barely changed. “I know Cayla gives me shit sometimes, but I’m the one she always calls when she needs something.” He glanced at Will. “That’s when you know how a woman feels about you. The shit hits the fan, who does she call?”

Will tried not to think about Sara.

“You hear what I’m sayin’?”

Will nodded.

“I mean it, Bud. I love her. She’s the only damn reason I get up some mornings.” He wiped under his eyes with the back of his hand. “She’s all I got.”

Will didn’t have many male friends, but he gathered sitting around talking about love while listening to Madonna was not high on the list of manly pursuits. “You’re gonna grow a vagina if you keep talking like that.”

Tony barked a laugh. “Hell, Bud, that’s just what she does to me. Ain’t you never been in love?”

Will was so in love that he couldn’t see straight.

“What was it like at MacDill?”

Will took his time answering—not because he had to recall the details, but because Bill Black wasn’t the type to volunteer information. “Why do you want to know?”

“I dunno, man. Just curious. I knew a couple pilots from there. Sold ’em amp to keep ’em awake on long flights.”

So, that's what Tony Dell was doing in Sarasota.

Tony pressed, "What was it like?"

"Hot."

"That's Florida all right."

Will stared out the window. They were on the highway now. Several cars were out, stragglers with a long commute. "What's the story with your nephew?"

"Benji." Tony put a nasty spin on the name that Will didn't like. He probably thought the kid was in his way. "His mama's a whore. Cops caught her smoking crack in front of him."

"That's too bad."

"He's a little shit. Keeps mouthing off at school. Cayla had to leave work to pick him up. He was suspended for two days."

Will couldn't imagine Benji mouthing off to a kitten. "He's a skinny kid."

"Yeah, well, that's what happens when you're too busy hittin' the pipe to stop and feed 'em." Tony turned the radio back on. He scrolled through the song selections and settled on Cyndi Lauper.

"Seriously?" Will asked.

"I like strong women." Tony hit the blinker as he slowed for a turn.

"Where are we going?" Will asked. Home Depot was by the hospital. They were heading in the wrong direction.

Tony held up the beer can. "Thought we'd get a real drink."

"I'm not thirsty."

"You're not driving." Tony took the turn. His voice had changed. The tough demeanor was back. "You serve overseas?"

"Why?"

"Just wondering." Tony drank some more beer. "You been in Macon, what, two weeks?"

"Almost."

"You lived in Atlanta before that?" Will didn't answer.

"How'd you get the job at the hospital?"

Will tried to turn the situation back on itself. "You're asking questions like a cop."

"Shit." Tony laughed. "You think I'm a cop?"

"Are you?"

He looked at Will over his beer can. "Are you?"

"Hell no, I'm not a cop." Contrary to urban legend, law enforcement officers were free to lie with impunity. "Otherwise, I

would've busted your ass ten days ago when I saw you taking pills off that cart."

Tony laughed at the memory. "Near about shit my pants when I saw you looking."

Will doubted that. Tony had clearly been testing him.

The window rolled down again. Tony tossed the can out. "Cayla used to sell 'em for me on Craigslist."

"That's dangerous for a woman."

"I always did the drops." Tony opened another beer. "College kids, mostly. We ain't sellin' the cheap stuff."

Will didn't press for details, but he was looking at Tony Dell in a new light. Faith would need to make some calls to Hilton Head and Sarasota. Tony struck Will as exactly the type of criminal who would flip on his own mother if it saved him jail time.

"Anyway," Tony said. "We ain't doin' that Craigslist shit anymore. Big Whitey kicked my game up a notch. I got more cash than I know what to do with."

"Craigslist is safer."

"Nickel and dime, bro."

"Big bills, big problems."

"The bills get big enough, you can buy your way outta the problems." Tony turned the wheel hard into a packed parking lot.

Will recognized the building. They were at Tipsie's. The neon sign on the roof showed a woman sliding up and down a pole. "You sure you wanna be back here?"

"It's cool." Tony parked the truck. "I was by here before I went to Cayla's."

Will felt the hair on the back of his neck go up. "Why'd you do that?"

"Same as you checking out that cop in the ICU, seein' did somebody recognize me."

Will didn't believe him. "And?"

"And ... we're cool." The affable Tony was suddenly back. He pulled the keys out of the ignition, shouldered open the door. "Come on, Bud. I'm still thirsty."

Will got out of the truck, though every atom of his being told him something bad was about to happen. He didn't really have a choice. Jared Long was in the hospital. Lena Adams had almost been killed. There was a drug dealer out there who seemed to enjoy hurting people. If Will didn't do his job right, a lot more

people would wind up at the hospital. Or in the ground.

“Come on, Bud.” Tony walked like a bantam rooster. He was obviously hiding something. And he was very pleased with himself about it.

Will slowed his pace, trying to figure out what he was walking into. Not for the first time, he found himself wondering if Tony Dell was, in fact, Big Whitey.

Faith had brought up the possibility almost from the start. She was generally good at seeing around corners, but Will had disagreed with her. He’d met Tony Dell. He’d spent time with the man. He didn’t come across as a master strategist.

Maybe that was the point.

Everything about Tony screamed petty criminal. He worked a shitty job. He drove a shitty car. He lived in an apartment that was three doors down from a strip mall. As for his police record, he’d been arrested twice under the open bottle law, both misdemeanors. There was one charge for possession that had rolled off after a successful stint in rehab. Another charge for dealing had disappeared from the court docket on a technicality. Loitering. Jaywalking. He was a nuisance criminal, not a heavy hitter.

If Tony Dell was really Big Whitey, then the man was a genius.

Will’s iPhone was in the front pocket of his jeans. He wondered if the tracking chip would work through the club’s metal roof. Sara had GPS in her car. The system cut out the minute she drove into an underground parking lot. Will guessed it was all the steel and concrete messing with the signal. Probably the same thing would happen to his phone inside Tipsie’s.

They were ten yards from the door, but the music pounded so hard that Will felt it traveling up from the asphalt. His eardrums turned the noise into one long rumble.

Tony glanced back at Will before pushing open the door. He wasn’t smiling, which should’ve been Will’s first warning. The second warning was more obvious. The minute the door closed behind Will’s back, a hand gripped his shoulder.

Will turned around. He was used to being the tallest guy in the room, but the man behind him was approximately the size of a refrigerator. Not a standard one, either—more like a Sub-Zero with the motor on the top.

There was no use asking questions.

The Refrigerator nodded toward the back. Will got the message. The man's hand stayed clamped to Will's shoulder, acting as a rudder as he pushed Will through the crowded bar.

Tony led the way. He didn't appear to be surprised by this latest development. He certainly wasn't worried. There was a nasty grin on his face, which Will saw every time the man glanced over his shoulder to make sure Will was following. The strobe lights and mirror ball picked out the cuts and bruises on his face, making them look like badly applied makeup. Tony must've been hurting, but his expression was one of pure glee.

There was no denying that he'd set this up beautifully. Tony had wormed his way into Cayla's house. He'd tricked Will into leaving with him. It was Tony's idea to fix the sink. It was Tony's idea to strap Will's bike into the truck. He'd obviously anticipated the problem. There just happened to be a winch in the back of the truck along with a couple of four-by-four posts to use as a ramp. When this was all done, he would probably use them to roll the bike into the river.

Will took the deepest breath he could manage. The sour smells of alcohol and sweat filled his lungs. He reached his hand into his pocket. His thumb found the power button on the phone. He pressed it three times to engage the recording device. Either Amanda would listen to Will talking to some bad guys or she would listen to some bad guys murdering Will.

The Refrigerator jerked Will to the side, avoiding a crowd of boisterous drunks. The route to the back of the club was circuitous. The stage snaked through the room. Every pole had a woman doing something obscene to it. The men crowded in, pushing against the stage until a bouncer shoved them back, then pushing forward again on the off chance that it'd work the third or fourth or hundredth time.

Tony stood at a closed door with a sign on it. The shit-eating grin was still on his face. He waited for Will and the Refrigerator to catch up. The grin got wider as Tony pushed open the door. The room was dark. The hand on Will's shoulder shoved him forward. Will saw that the room wasn't a room, but a long hallway. What little light they had came from the open door. The last thing Will saw was the Refrigerator closing it.

Tony's mouth went to Will's ear. "Move." He pushed Will down the hallway.

Will considered his options. He could easily take Tony Dell. He'd pushed him around like a rag doll before. But that had been the old Tony, not the Possibly Big Whitey Tony. Sometimes, the physical size of a man didn't matter nearly as much as the size of the fight in the man.

And Tony had help.

He had a lot of help.

Will pressed his hand to the cement-block wall as he walked down the hallway. He became painfully aware of his full bladder. Sweat dripped down his back. He imagined his Glock, the way the grip felt in his hand, the fact that the safety was a hair trigger built into the main trigger that only engaged when your finger pulled back. Not that any of this mattered. The gun was locked in a safe in his closet back in Atlanta.

There must've been soundproofing in the back of the club, because the music wasn't so unbearable anymore. Will felt something in front of him. He panicked, then realized he was touching a curtain. Will pushed the material apart. There was more light in this part of the hall, courtesy of a green Exit sign over the door. Will would've run full out toward it if not for the second Refrigerator blocking the way. He made the first Refrigerator look more like a mini-fridge. His arms bulged at the sleeves. His shoulders were almost as wide as the doorway. He had a Bluetooth device stuck in his ear. As Will approached, he tapped the earpiece and mumbled something incoherent.

Refrigerator Two pulled back a curtain on the wall. There was another door with a sign. Will could recognize words he'd seen a million times before. This one said OFFICE. The second Refrigerator opened the door. His hand was so big that the knob completely disappeared.

Will shaded his eyes against the sudden bright light. The back room of the club was remarkably similar to the type he was used to seeing in mob movies: Black ceiling, dark red walls. Liquor posters with naked women. A white shag rug. A large metal and glass desk. A black leather couch with three fat rednecks sprawled across it.

They were eating pizza from a box on the glass coffee table in front of them. The odor of cheese and sausage turned Will's stomach. He tasted bile, felt some black-eyed peas roil up into his mouth.

The rednecks examined Will and Tony with idle curiosity. In a mobster movie, they would've been well-dressed Italians. Macon's version was considerably more down-market. They wore T-shirts that stretched across their bellies. Their jeans were low on their hips, but only because they didn't want to go up six sizes to accommodate their expanded waistlines.

Refrigerator Two closed the door. Will saw that he'd missed something across the room from the couch.

There was a man tied to a chair. Rope cut into the bare flesh of his arms and chest. His head hung down. The scalp was ripped at the crown. The head wound wasn't the only source of blood. His hands and feet had been sliced open. There were dozens of X's cut into his chest and abdomen. The wounds weren't deep enough to kill, but deep enough to cause excruciating pain.

The man had been tortured.

"Damn," Tony said, not with shock but with admiration. "Didn't know y'all had company."

"Shut up," one of the rednecks said. He used a folding knife to clean underneath his fingernails. "You do what I tell you to do?"

"Don't I always?" Tony answered.

"Watch your tone with me, boy."

"Yessir," Tony demurred.

So much for Tony being Big Whitey. Will gathered the redneck was in charge. He had the air of a man burdened with responsibility. His two henchmen ate their pizza like they were waiting for their turn at the bowling alley. One of them had a bottle of beer to wash it down. The other had a Diet Coke.

The redneck kept cleaning his nails. No one seemed interested in rushing him.

Will just stood there. This wasn't the first time tonight that he'd wondered whether or not Tony Dell was leading him to his death, but it was the first time he actually saw how it might happen. The man in the chair was still alive. Blood didn't run like that if the heart had stopped beating. His breaths were shallow. His muscles twitched involuntarily—first the arm, then the calf. A low humming noise came from his throat. He was probably praying for his death. They had cut him. They had beaten him. And then they had taken a dinner break because they were in no rush to end his suffering.

Tony wasn't as patient. Or maybe he was just stupid. He took a

Baggie of pills out of his pocket and tossed them onto the desk. "Where's the big man? You said we were gonna talk."

"Shut up," the redneck repeated. He finished cleaning his nails. The knife blade was about four inches—not long, but sharp, with a wicked curved tip. He slowly folded the blade back into the handle, his eyes on Will the entire time. "You gotta problem?"

Will shook his head.

"We gonna have a problem?"

Will shook his head again.

The redneck stood up, groaning from the effort. He was a big guy, not muscular like the matching refrigerators but fat around the middle.

He walked over to the desk. His gait was slow, cumbersome. He picked up a file folder from the desk. "William Joseph Black." Will waited.

The redneck picked up a pair of reading glasses. He didn't put them on. Instead, he used them like a magnifying glass on the file.

He read, "Born in Milledgeville, Georgia. Sealed juvie record. Joined up at twenty-two. Got kicked out at twenty-five. Couple of assaults on some women. Beat down a mall cop. Served time in the Atlanta jail. Pissed off some feds in Kentucky. Wanted for questioning on a stickup and a couple break-ins." The redneck waited. "That about sum it up?" Will didn't answer.

He tossed the file back on the desk. "You're renting a room at the Star-Gazer Motel off the interstate. Number fifteen. You park your midnight-blue Triumph motorcycle in the space two doors down. You eat at the RaceTrac. You work at the hospital. You come here to get your dick hard. Your mother died while you were serving in Iraq. Your father is unknown. You have no siblings and no family to speak of."

Will let his lips open a slit to take in some air. The only reason he'd chosen to ride a bike was to make sure no one followed him to Atlanta. To Sara. Will's heart thumped as he waited for the redneck to tell him her address.

Instead, the redneck asked, "Zeb-deeks?"

This time, Will didn't respond because he didn't know what the hell the man was talking about.

"Zeb-deeks?" the redneck repeated. "You know him?"

It was a name. A man.

The redneck waited. His patience seemed in endless supply.

Will stumbled through Bill Black's life. There was no high school or college, just Air Force and jail. The name sounded foreign, but his military file wouldn't have those kinds of details. Zeb-deeks was probably a nickname, which normally wouldn't help Will except that there was only one guy in Bill Black's life whose name started with a Z.

Zebulon Deacon had been knifed at the Atlanta jail for ratting out his crew. Bill Black had been in the same cell block. He would know of the guy. He would certainly know the nickname.

More importantly, Black would also know you didn't rat out anybody without a fight.

Instead of answering the redneck, Will shrugged.

"You don't know him?"

Again, Will shrugged.

The redneck said, "Junior?"

One of the henchmen lumbered up from the couch. Junior was as big as his boss, but younger. Undoubtedly stronger.

There was no preamble. Junior punched Will so hard in the face that he saw flashes of light. His head snapped back. His neck cracked. The bridge of his nose felt like a hatchet had struck bone.

"Zeb Deeks," the redneck said.

Will shook his head—not to disagree, but to get his senses back. He'd been punched in the nose more times than he could count. The worst part came when you sniffed and the chunk of blood sitting in the back rolled down your throat. Will struggled not to vomit as he swallowed it down.

For the fourth time, the redneck said the name. "Zeb Deeks?"

Junior pulled back his fist.

"All right," Will said. "Yeah, I know him. Snitch got what he deserved."

"Where'd he get it?"

"Quad."

"Where'd he get it?"

"In the junk," Will said. "They stabbed him with a broken toothbrush. He bled out in the yard." Tony chuckled. "Bet that hurt."

The redneck's chest rose and fell. He studied Will for a moment, then nodded toward the last henchman on the couch.

The third man stood up just as slowly as the others, his knees popping, his gut bulging. Contrary to physics, he and Junior worked fast. Before Will knew what was happening, his arms were pinned behind his back.

The redneck walked over to Will. He smelled of pizza and alcohol. He was a smoker. He breathed like a steam engine. He was big and he was white, but Tony had made it clear the redneck wasn't Big Whitey. Will doubted he would ever meet the man who was in charge of this gang of violent hillbillies. He doubted he would see anything other than the moldy back room of this club for what little time he had left in his life.

The redneck held up his hands so Will could watch what he was doing. The handle on his folding knife was pearl with gold accents. The light caught on the blade as he opened it. There was blood on the hinge, caked into the rivets, probably from carving X's into the man tied to the chair. The redneck was a natural with the knife. He held the handle with a light grip, almost like another thumb or finger.

Will flinched as he felt the sharp stainless-steel blade trace across his neck. Then up the side of his face. Then underneath his eye. The redneck pressed a little harder and the skin opened. Will was so terrified that it didn't even hurt. He wouldn't have even known he was cut but for the bead of blood that rolled down his cheek.

Will closed his eyes. He wasn't here. He wasn't in this room. Maybe talking to Cayla and Tony about the beach set him off. He could smell the salt in the air, feel the warm, gentle breeze rolling in off the ocean.

Three months ago, Sara had taught Will how to fly a kite. They were on the beach in Florida. The kite was yellow and blue and had a long white tail. Will had never taken a beach vacation before. All his knowledge about Florida came courtesy of Wikipedia and *Miami Vice*. Sara was a good teacher. Patient, kind. Sexy as hell in her bathing suit. Her father had taught her how to fly a kite when she was little. He'd been worried that Sara would feel pushed aside by her new baby sister, so he'd taken her on little day trips to make her feel special.

Will's eyes shot open. The knife was in his ear—not the soft fleshy part, but the bit right at the inside where a thin layer of cartilage lay against the skull.

The redneck was smiling, enjoying the effect. The man had perfect white teeth. His gums looked almost blue against them.

Will didn't move. The knife was needle sharp. The tip broke through his skin, sliced open the cartilage. A drop of blood slid inside his ear. With excruciating slowness, it traveled down the canal. Will felt a shudder coming on. It started slow, like the rumble of an oncoming train. A slight tremble, then a shaking that built and built until the earth started to move and his teeth were rattling and the ground felt ripped out from under him.

The redneck jerked out the knife just in time.

"Fuck!" Will shook his head violently. The grip on his arms got tighter. He shook his head again. The blood was still moving inside his ear.

The redneck laughed as he folded the blade back into the handle. "Take off your clothes."

Junior and number three released him. Will jammed his pinkie in his ear and moved it like a clapper in a bell.

"Take off your clothes," the redneck repeated.

Will glared at him. "Go fuck yourself." He headed toward the door, but Junior stopped him.

The redneck offered, "We can do this the hard way."

Junior pushed Will into his partner, who in turn slammed Will into the wall.

The redneck asked, "Hard way, easy way?"

Will couldn't think about the beach anymore. He couldn't think about Sara or anything else but staying alive.

Bill Black could handle this. He had been in his share of back rooms. He had dealt with lowlifes and bad guys all of his life. According to his records, he'd *been* a lowlife and bad guy all of his life.

Will didn't know what boot camp was like other than what he'd seen in the movies, but he was very familiar with the intake process at the Atlanta jail. Bill Black would've been one of at least a hundred new inmates the guards checked in that day. They'd stripped him, searched him, shaved him, deloused him, then thrown him into a five-by-nine cell with another man and an open sewage pit for a toilet. There were communal showers. There were occasional cavity searches. There was nowhere to hide.

Undressing for a bunch of violent hicks was not something that

would faze a guy like Bill Black.

Will ripped open his shirt. Some of the buttons popped loose. His T-shirt came next, then his jeans. Will used the toe of one boot to brace the heel of the other as he stepped out of the shoes. He kicked off the jeans.

The room went silent but for the muffled beats of club music.

They stared at him like an exhibit at the zoo.

Will didn't look at his body much. As grateful as he was to Sara, he didn't know how she could stand it. There wasn't a part of him that didn't tell some story of abuse—the cigarette burns around his ribs, the electrical burns that had seared a scattershot of black powder into his skin. The scars on his back where he'd been clawed by a woman who got high from huffing spray paint all morning and thought Will had bugs crawling underneath his flesh.

And that didn't include the wounds that were self-inflicted.

Tony broke the silence. "Shit, Bud. What the hell happened to you?"

Will said nothing.

For once, the redneck seemed to view Will as a human being rather than a problem to be dealt with. He asked, "Iraq?"

Will considered his options. His scars were not part of his cover. The redneck had obviously managed to get his hands on Bill Black's police record. He'd made some inquiries up the criminal food chain. Did the man have enough juice to get a military file? The GBI was good, but the United States government had offered only cursory support for Bill Black's stint in the armed forces.

The redneck pressed, "One a them ragheads get hold of you?"

Instead of answering the question, Will turned his head and looked at the wall. He figured Bill Black would feel the same way Will did. Someone had hurt him really badly, and he wasn't proud of it.

"Never mind." The redneck seemed resigned to never knowing, but he wasn't finished with his search. "Take off the shorts, too."

Will gave him a hard look.

The redneck seemed almost apologetic. "I knew a guy got caught by a cop with a wire taped to his balls."

Will knew he didn't have a choice. Either he'd undress himself or the two henchmen would. He pushed down his underwear.

The redneck glanced down, then took another look before saying, "Okay, then."

Tony raised his eyebrows. "Damn, hoss."

Will pulled his underwear back up. He reached for his jeans, but they were snatched out of his hand.

Junior searched the pockets. Bill Black's wallet and phone were found. The wad of cash he'd taken off Tony this morning was tossed onto the desk.

"Let's see what we got," the redneck held out his hand. He started with the wallet. The Velcro ripped open. Cayla's handwritten address was in the photo sleeve. He flipped past it, checking the pockets. He found four twenties, two credit cards, and the speeding ticket that passed for Bill Black's license. "Fifty in a school zone." The redneck tsked his tongue against his teeth.

Junior handed him the phone. Will grabbed his jeans.

The redneck asked, "What's the password?"

Will said, "Four-three-two-one." He yanked up his jeans as the man dialed in the code.

The redneck was more proficient than Will as he scrolled through the various screens. His lips moved when he read. "Who's the woman in Tennessee?"

Will pulled on his T-shirt. The hole in the arm had torn, ripping out the side seam.

Tony provided, "He's gotta baby by her." He felt the need to ask Will, "She the one into topiary?"

Will put on his Oxford shirt. There were three buttons left on the placket. He concentrated on closing them, though his fingers didn't want to work.

The redneck seemed to be scrolling through every screen. Will had tested the phone himself when he first got it, trying to see if there was a way to accidentally reveal the cloaked apps. Each time, he was foiled, but every system had a flaw. Will had never tested the phone with the recorder turned on. Maybe there was a software glitch that would pop up the apps and make the redneck pull out his knife again.

"Where's this?" He showed Will a photograph, one of the shots he'd taken from the highway.

"Off 16," Will said. "Thought it looked nice."

The man countered, "Geotag says it's off 475."

Will shrugged, but he felt his mouth go bone-dry. He'd

forgotten about the geotags. They were part of the iPhone's location service and showed the longitude and latitude of where the pictures were taken. He had no idea whether or not the GBI program cloaked them.

"You get these off the Internet?" He showed Will the naked women.

Will's brief feeling of safety evaporated. He'd downloaded the photos from his computer in Atlanta. He didn't know what the geotag would record—where Will was when he downloaded the photos or where they had originally been taken.

Will waited, watching the man's finger swipe across the screen.

"Don't like Asians myself." The redneck kept scrolling.

Will buttoned the cuffs of his shirt, pretending like he hadn't almost pissed himself. One of the buttons was dangling by a thread. It came off in his hands. Will didn't know what to do with it. He put it in his pocket.

If he died, he wondered who would find the button in his pocket. Probably the medical examiner. Pete Hanson had retired a few months ago, but Amanda had brought in a new guy who was young and cocky and believed everything that came out of his mouth. Will wondered what he would make of the button. He wondered if Sara would hear about it. Would she think about Will every time she put on a shirt?

He took the button out of his pocket and tossed it onto the floor.

Tony made a clicking sound with his tongue. Will looked at him. Tony winked, like they were in this together. Like he hadn't delivered Will to these men for slaughter.

What had turned Tony against him? It had to be the dinner. The only way that Tony could know about the date was if Cayla told him. She must've known Tony would show up. Will could see she liked playing them off each other. Stepbrother or not, she'd obviously been stringing Tony along for years.

Or maybe it was something more dangerous. Maybe Tony still thought Will was a cop. Running into Lena's house last night hadn't been Will's smartest move. No con in his right mind ran toward gunfire, even if he had a hundred pregnant girlfriends threatening to sue him.

"All right," the redneck finally said. He handed Will the phone.

Will didn't know what to do but take it. The case was warm.

His hands were so sweaty that he nearly dropped it before he could get it back into his pocket.

The redneck leaned across the desk and pressed a button on the phone. There was a buzz, then he pressed the button again. It was some kind of signal. They all waited. And waited. Will counted off the seconds in his head, but then he lost track and had to start all over again.

A cell phone rang. The redneck took his time. The Droid was buried under a stack of papers on the desk. He answered on the sixth ring. He listened, nodding occasionally. His eyes slid Will's way. He said, "Yeah, I think you're right," then ended the call.

"That Big Whitey?" Tony asked. He was as eager as a kid. "He tell you we're cool?" He slapped Will on the back. "I told you I'd make this right, man."

The redneck took a stack of hundreds out of his pocket. He glanced at the Baggie of pills Tony had thrown on the desk and counted out ten bills. He held out the cash to Tony. "That's more than you deserve, bringing this ass-wipe into our business. Get rid of him."

Will felt panic rise, but then he realized the redneck meant the man tied to the chair. Will looked at the guy. He'd forgotten all about him. At some level, Will realized he already thought of him as dead.

The redneck said, "Leave him somewhere he'll be found."

"No problem." Tony walked over to the chair. He slapped the man's head. "Let's go, dude."

The man groaned. Spit slid out of his open mouth.

"Come on." Tony slapped him harder. "Stand up, cocksucker. Time to go."

The man struggled against the rope. Even if he wanted to, there was no way to get up.

"You believe this asshole?" Tony's eyes looked as if they were on fire. He obviously enjoyed hurting people. He kicked the chair again. There was none of the gnat about him now, just a wiry tough guy who had no problem punching above his weight.

The redneck had had enough. "Stop fucking around and get him out of here."

Tony pulled a knife out of his boot. This wasn't a folding knife, but a ten-inch hunting knife with a nasty-looking serrated edge. He cut the rope around the chair. The man pitched forward,

moaning from the release. Tony caught him before he hit the floor. He flipped the knife in the air and pointed the handle toward Will. "Get his feet."

Will sawed through the rope that tied the man's legs to the chair. He glanced up as he sliced through the last few strands. The man's eyes were swollen slits in his face, but Will could see the bloody whites at the edges. Blood had trickled down his forehead, clotted in his eyelashes. His front teeth were broken. The bridge of his nose was smashed. Still, he looked familiar, but Will didn't have time to figure out why.

"Wake up, asshole." This time, Tony's fist came from below. The man's head arced back. Blood went flying. "I ain't playin', dude. Stand the fuck up."

The man tried to obey. His bare feet stuck to the rug. His legs shook. His knees wouldn't straighten.

Will stepped in. He couldn't watch this. He shouldered the man to standing, practically carrying all of his weight.

"Please ...," the man begged, his voice barely audible.

Will glanced around the room, but no one seemed moved by the plea. If anything, they were annoyed.

"Get him outta here," the redneck ordered. He went back to the couch, sat down in front of the open pizza box.

Will tried to drag the man to the door. If he could leave this room, if he could manage to get out of this club, then there might be a way to save him.

The redneck picked up a slice of pizza. "I'll be in touch, Bud. We have a job that Mr. Whitey thinks will suit your special skills."

Will grunted, but only from the effort of carrying the man. There was no helping him walk. Will lifted his full weight onto his back. Five feet to the door. Maybe three feet to the exit. Around the building, then to the parking lot. Will would take Tony's truck. He'd sucker punch him from behind, take away his keys. He would drive the man to the hospital. He would get Faith to put him into protective custody. And then Will would find Sara and fall down at her feet and pray for her to make everything better.

Will told Tony, "Get the door."

"What about the rug?" Junior asked. "Ain't no way that can be steamed out."

“Shit,” Tony complained. “I ain’t no damn rug cleaner.”

“Take it and burn it.” The redneck finished his slice of pizza. “Dump the body on his front lawn. That oughta be public enough.”

Tony made it clear he thought he was doing them a favor. He hitched up his pants. He got down on his knees. He started rolling the edge of the rug. Will turned because there was nothing to do but watch him and wait.

This was when the man decided to make his move.

Without warning, he pushed away from Will.

The man grabbed at the doorknob. His coordination was shot. His hands were slick with blood. Instead of opening the door, he fell against it. He started screaming, pounding at the door like there might be help on the other side.

Will’s instincts took over. Of all the guys in the room, he was the least lethal. He grabbed the man around the waist. He tried to cover his mouth. The man kicked him, bit him, punched him, until Will couldn’t hold on anymore.

There was nowhere to go—no windows, no doors but the one they’d come through. The man was so crazed with terror he was practically spinning in circles. The rug bunched up under his feet. He careened off the coffee table, the desk. Tony tackled him from behind, throwing him face-down on the floor.

Tony straddled him. The hunting knife was in his hands. He pounded the blade into the man’s back, his shoulders, his neck. Again and again the knife went up and down like a piston. The blade made a pop-slap noise as it pierced skin. Spaghetti strings of blood flew around him like he was inside some kind of horror-house snowglobe.

Junior jammed a gun into Will’s chest, making it clear he should stay out of it. The muzzle felt like it was touching bare bone. Junior was eerily calm as Tony wailed away with the knife. He caught the redneck’s eye, gave him a single shake of the head as if to ask, *What got into that guy?* His counterpart sat passively on the couch, watching the murder unfold the way he might watch a card game.

The stabbing continued long after the man was dead. Tony only stopped when he ran out of steam. He sat back on his heels. He was panting. Sweating. He wiped his face with the sleeve of his shirt. Forehead, mouth, cheeks. Blood smeared everywhere.

Junior put the gun back into the holster on his belt. Will could move now, but he didn't have anywhere to go. Twice in as many nights, he'd watched one human being attack another.

At least Lena had been responding to a threat. Tony Dell was like a jackal destroying its prey. He'd enjoyed each and every second of the kill. He'd grunted and screamed as the knife went in. The spray of blood that washed up into his face had only made him hungry for more.

And now he was laughing.

Blood smeared his teeth like lipstick. He asked Will, "How 'bout that, Buddy? You seen this nut job runnin' around? That was some crazy shit."

The redneck was not pleased. "You see the mess you made?"

"You was gonna throw away the carpet anyway."

"You didn't just get it on the carpet, did you?"

Tony looked around with awe at what he'd wrought. He shook his head, then wiped the hunting knife on his pants before trying to jam it back into his boot. The blade was bent, probably from striking the thick bone of the skull. Tony had to torque the handle to sheath the knife. And then he saw the open wound across the palm of his hand. "Shit, musta slipped over the hilt." He asked Will, "You mind takin' me to the hospital, Bud? This is the kind of shit gets infected."

The redneck sounded more put out than disgusted. "Junior, go get some of the girls to clean this up." He told Tony, "Get the body outta here. Drop him in his front yard, like I said."

Tony asked, "You sure 'bout that?"

"Came straight from Big Whitey. Put him somewhere he'll be found. The only way to send a message is make sure everybody's got a chance to read it." The redneck directed his next order to Will. "Keep an eye on him. Make sure he doesn't fuck it up."

"I ain't gonna fuck it up," Tony yelled. "You tell Big Whitey I'm the one what took care of this for him."

"You really want credit?" the redneck asked. He shook his head at Junior, who returned the gesture.

Will said, "We'll take care of it," because he thought that would get them out of here faster. He knelt down on the floor. "Roll the body onto the rug."

"Take a cue from your pal there, Tony. Good soldiers follow orders." The redneck sat back on the couch. He took out his knife

again to clean his nails. "Like I said, Mr. Black. We'll be in touch."

Will wasn't going to wait around for more. He motioned for Tony to move. "Hurry up. Roll him onto the rug."

Tony pushed the body, but the physics were against him. The man was dead weight. Tony's boots skidded against the concrete floor. His face twisted into a mask of sheer determination. Finally, the man flopped onto his back. His arm was over his eyes like he didn't want to see anymore.

Tony picked up the hands and crossed them over the chest. He started toward the other side of the rug.

"No," Will said. "We have to roll the body." He took the shoulders because that was the heavier end and he couldn't watch Tony pushing around the corpse anymore.

Tony asked, "Ready?"

Will looked down at the man's face. He recognized him now, though even in death, the pain still twisted his features. Faith had shown Will his picture on her phone just a few hours ago.

The man in the chair was Detective Eric Haigh.

10.

FRIDAY

It was just past midnight, and Sara was once again sitting on the couch in the ICU waiting room. She flipped through a magazine, trying to tune out the conversations around her. More patients had been admitted that afternoon. Family members filled the small room. The new people were a communal bunch. They wanted to swap stories. They wanted to compare tragedies. Nell had not been pleased. She couldn't take the prying, the crowded space. She'd easily let Sara talk her into going back to the hotel room to get some sleep.

There was no reason for her to be at the hospital right now anyway. Jared's condition remained unchanged despite the antibiotics they were pumping into him. Sara had dealt with surgical infections before. They were as relentless as they were indiscriminate. There were very few antibiotics left that could successfully treat them.

So, as Sara had many times throughout the day, she found herself back at the same point she'd started at this morning. The twenty-four-hour clock had been reset. Jared had survived the surgery. Only time would tell if he survived the infection.

Sara put the magazine back on the table. She'd read the same celebrity gossip story three times and still couldn't follow the details. She was in some sort of weird fugue state. Yet again, she regretted the large scotch she'd had earlier that evening. Self-medication was never a good idea, but stress, alcohol, and thirty hours straight without sleep were a lethal combination. Sara had all of the hangover and none of the buzz. Her head ached. She was jittery. The fact that Sara knew when she was drinking the scotch that she was making a huge mistake only added to her misery. Her only consolation was that she hadn't ordered another

one after talking on the phone with Will.

There was a conversation she wished she'd never had. Either Sara was a very cheap drunk or their relationship wasn't heading in the direction she'd thought it was. Her desperate sexual enticement had gone over like an IRS audit. Thank God she hadn't told him that she was in love with him. She could only imagine how embarrassing it would've been to have her pronouncement met with complete silence. Will was obviously pulling away. Sara had either done something or said something wrong. He was probably relieved she hadn't asked him to make the drive down. Or up. Or over. Sara still had no idea where he was.

She was just glad that he wasn't here.

And she fervently wished that she wasn't, either.

Sara couldn't sit anymore. She stood up and stretched her back. The vertebrae felt fused together. Polite smiles greeted her around the room. She walked into the hall for some privacy.

The lights were dimmed in deference to the late hour. Possum was exactly where she'd seen him thirty minutes ago. His back was to Sara. He stood at the closed doors to the ICU, looking through the window. He couldn't see into Jared's room from that angle. The cop was in his line of sight. Sara could tell the vigilance was grating on the young man. He kept glancing at Possum, then looking back at the nurses' station as if the poor woman could help him.

Possum could barely speak to Sara—not out of rudeness, but because every time he saw her, his eyes filled with tears. She didn't know whether he was crying over the loss of Jeffrey, the threat to Jared, or the unbearable combination of both.

Sara just knew she was sick of being here.

She went to the elevator, then decided the stairs would at least give her some exercise. She needed some air, to be in a room that wasn't stale with fear and tragedy. And she should probably have a conversation with herself about Will. Maybe she'd been blind to the deeper truth behind his silences. Sara had never told Will that she loved him, but then Will had never told Sara the words, either.

In her experience, the simplest explanation was usually the crappiest one.

Sara went down two flights before she saw a pink and blue

sign. The maternity ward. She gladly took the detour. Whenever she was having a particularly horrendous day at Grady, she would go look at the babies. There was something so reassuring about watching brand-new eyes blink open, toothless mouths pucker into a smile. Newborns were proof that life could not only continue, but thrive.

Sara guessed not many people would be there at this time of the morning, and she was right. Visiting hours were well over. There was no nurse to send stragglers away. No one had bothered to lower the shade over the large windows so the babies could sleep in peace.

The dimmed hallway lights cast a warm glow on the rows of bassinets. The newborns were all wearing pink or blue knit hats. They were swaddled tightly in matching blankets. Their little faces were like raisins, some of them so new that their heads moved gently side to side, as if they were still floating in the womb.

Sara pressed her forehead to the window. The glass was cold. One of the babies was awake. His squinty eyes scanned the ceiling. Colorful cartoons were painted overhead—rainbows and fluffy clouds and plump rabbits. This was more for the parents than the babies. Newborns were extremely nearsighted. The basic eye structures were there, but months would pass before they learned how to use them. For now, the ceiling art was a pleasant blob.

The door behind Sara opened. She turned, expecting to find a nurse coming out of the bathroom. Instead, it was Lena Adams.

She had a tissue in her hand. Sara could see the dismay when their eyes met, then something like resignation. Lena headed toward the elevator.

“Wait,” Sara said.

Lena stopped, but didn’t turn around.

Sara instantly regretted the word. She didn’t know what to say. Was she sorry? Certainly, she felt bad that Lena had lost the baby. But that didn’t change what had come before.

All Sara could manage was, “You don’t have to leave.”

Slowly, Lena turned. She didn’t acknowledge Sara. Instead, she walked over to the viewing window. Her fingers rested on the edge of the sill. She leaned her forehead against the glass, the same as Sara had. She seemed to wall off everything else around

her. There was something so tragic about the way she looked at the newborns. Her longing seemed to pierce the glass.

The familiar sense of trespass took hold. Sara opened her mouth to take her leave, but Lena didn't give her a chance to speak.

"Is he the same?"

"Jared?" Sara asked. "Yes."

Lena just nodded, her eyes still trained straight ahead. She moved her hand to her stomach, pressed the palm flat.

Again, Sara struggled against the instinct to offer comfort, to spin the situation in a more positive light. In the end, she couldn't summon the energy. Somewhere in the pit of her chest, there was the capacity to feel compassion for this woman. Sara felt it stir occasionally, like a car engine trying to start on a cold day. It would rev and rev, but eventually, it always sputtered out and died.

Again, Sara tried to leave. "I should—"

"I never realized they were so small." Lena's features softened as she watched the newborn in front of her. "It must be scary to know how fragile they are." Her breath fogged the glass. She seemed to be waiting for a response.

"You learn what to do." Sara had grown up around babies. She couldn't imagine a life without them.

Lena said, "I've never held a baby before."

"You don't have cousins?"

"No. And I never babysat or anything." She gave a low laugh. "I wasn't the kind of teenager people trusted with their kids." Sara could imagine.

Lena stuttered out a long sigh. "I didn't think it was possible to love something that needed me so much."

"I'm sorry," Sara said. "For what it's worth."

"For what it's worth," Lena repeated. "Nell doesn't hate me so much anymore."

Sara had felt the change, too, but she wasn't sure it would last.

Lena said, "It was better when she hated me. I knew how to deal with that. We both did." She turned her head to look at Sara. "It's like she thinks losing the baby makes me a better person."

Sara weighed the words, trying to decipher her motivations. Lena wanted something. She always wanted something.

"Thank you, Sara." Lena turned back to the window. "I knew I

could depend on you to not feel sorry for me.”

Sara needed to leave. She couldn’t muster her old hatred right now, but she knew she could be persuaded. “I should check on Possum.”

“It kills him every time he sees you.”

Sara couldn’t argue with that. “Still—”

“Did you get my letter?”

The letter.

Four years ago, Sara had opened her mailbox to find a handwritten letter from Lena. Sara had shoved the sealed envelope into her purse. She was late for work. She didn’t want to read it. Neither, apparently, did she want to throw it away. For almost a year, the letter had traveled around with Sara. To work, to the store, to dinner, back home. She moved it when she switched purses. She saw it every time she pulled out her wallet or searched for her keys.

Lena was studying her. “You read it.”

Sara didn’t want to admit it, but she said, “Eventually.”

“I was wrong.”

“Really?” Sara asked. The letter was three pages from a legal pad. Three tedious, tearstained pages filled with excuses and lies and blame shifting. “Which part were you wrong about?”

“All of it.” She leaned her shoulder against the glass. “I knew Jeffrey would come save me. And I knew that I was putting his life in danger.”

Sara felt her face start to flush. Her heart was a bird trapped in a cage. She had waited so long to hear this admission, this validation, and now all she could think was that Lena was working an angle.

Lena said, “You can’t light a match, then act surprised when your house burns down.”

Sara worked to keep her tone even. “You tried to warn him.” At least Lena had said as much in the letter. She’d devoted four lengthy paragraphs to her regret that Jeffrey simply would not take her sound advice. “You said you told him to stay away.”

“I knew he wouldn’t.” Lena stared openly at Sara. “I should be dead now, not him.”

Sara didn’t buy the sudden conversion. She tried to trick Lena, quoting the words Jared had told Nell. “He knew the risks when he put on the badge.”

"You think Will feels the same way when he goes to work?"

From nowhere, Sara was seized by the impulse to slap Will's name out of her mouth. He'd investigated Lena almost two years ago when she'd let a suspect die in custody and stood by as another cop was stabbed nearly to death. Sara had been more disappointed than Will that he couldn't make the case stick.

She told Lena, "The only thing you know about Will Trent is that he almost sent you to prison."

"Almost." Lena's lips teased into a smile. The mask was starting to fall. "You know what I remember about my time with Agent Trent?" There was a strange lilt to her voice. "Seeing that he was already lost in you. And you're in love with him, too, right? I can see it in your face. You were always so good at being in love."

Sara shook her head. Now she could see where this was going. "It doesn't make up for it."

"You've obviously moved on," Lena told her. "Both of us have moved on."

"I didn't have a choice, Lena. I had to move on because my husband was murdered." Sara bit back the venom in her mouth. "I didn't have a choice."

"No matter what you think, I'm not a bad person. I let myself believe that for a long time. I let you convince me I wasn't good enough. Wasn't worthy enough."

"Well, I'm so sorry," Sara quipped. "Please tell me how I can make it up to you."

"You're going to find out eventually that I've changed."

"You haven't changed. Neither one of us would be here if you had." Sara struggled to keep the bitterness out of her tone. "Everything is always a game to you. What we're doing right now is a game. You never walk away. You never let anybody get the upper hand. You think you're a good cop, but you don't care about the job or anyone else who's doing it. You just want to make sure that you win no matter what it costs."

Lena smirked. "Whatever you say, Doc."

"I'm not doing this." Sara started to walk away.

"I can't believe I used to be jealous of you."

Sara turned, mouth open in disbelief.

"Your family. Your life. Your marriage. Everybody in town respected you. Worshipped you." Lena shrugged. "And then I realized one day that I didn't want to be like you. Couldn't be like

you if I tried. No one can. You're too perfect. Too demanding. Nobody can meet your high standards. Jeffrey couldn't." She shook her head, as if she genuinely felt sorry. "Will doesn't stand a chance."

For a moment, Sara was too stunned to speak—not because of what Lena had said, but because she'd so masterfully turned the conversation.

Sara said, "You want me to feel guilty for moving on with my life?"

The smirk on Lena's face said it all. She echoed Sara's words from before. "Now you know how it feels."

Sara asked, "Are we going to do this now? Are we really going to do it?"

"Aren't you scared I'm going to win?" Sara crossed her arms, waiting.

"All those years I wasted thinking you were better than me. Poor Sara, the tragic widow. And then I find out you jumped right back into the saddle with the first cop you could find."

Guilt flooded Sara's senses. Lena had always been a shark who could smell even the tiniest drop of blood in the water. "That's not how it happened."

"That's exactly how it happened," Lena shot back. "You're just a fancy piece of trim. You know that?"

Sara laughed, relieved that was the worst of it. *Trim* was slang for women who slept with cops. "And?"

"You know what you loved about Jeffrey? That he took risks. That he went out there and beat down anybody who got in his way."

"Is that all you have?"

Lena stepped closer. "You never would've given him the time of day if he was just some pussy who let everybody else fight his battles."

"You mean like you?"

Lena pursed her lips, the only indication that she'd heard the words. "I saw the way you used to look at him—your hero. Your big, tough cop. I bet it's the same way with Will. Funny how you just slotted in one cop for the other. Wonder how Jeffrey would've felt about that?"

Sara shook her head, as if the blows weren't landing. "Is this going somewhere?"

"You wanted Jeffrey out there fighting the good fight. You loved it when he swung his dick around, kicked ass, and took names. Lemme tell you something, Sara, he took risks because you wanted him to. You got some kind of cheap thrill out of pushing him to the edge. I gave him a place to go, but you—you—were the one who rewarded him for it."

"Shut up," Sara snapped. The cut was too deep. "Just shut up."

"Doesn't feel so good, does it? Being blamed for something you couldn't control."

"This conversation is over." Sara tried to walk away, but Lena grabbed her arm. "Get your hand off me."

"I thought we were doing this."

Sara jerked her arm out of Lena's grasp.

Lena said, "You always think you're so damn smart, but you can't even see what's right in front of you." She gave a surprised laugh that echoed down the empty hallway. "Hey, I guess you make mistakes after all."

"You think I don't make mistakes?" Sara's voice shook with rage. She could barely restrain herself. "I was the one who told Jeffrey to hire you. I was the one who told him to promote you. I was the one who thought you could do your goddamn job and keep him safe."

Lena was backed against the window. Sara loomed over her. She couldn't remember moving, couldn't understand how her finger had jammed into Lena's chest or how her hand had clenched into a fist.

Slowly, Lena turned her head, offering her cheek. "Go on," she said, her voice smooth as silk. "Take your best shot."

There was a weird tickle in Sara's feet. She felt as if she was standing at the edge of a bottomless pit. She forced herself to look over Lena's shoulder at the rows of newborns swaddled in blankets. The cheerful rainbows and clouds painted on the ceiling above them.

Sara couldn't let Lena win. Not this time. Not like this. She stepped back from the edge. She dropped her hand. She straightened her spine. Sara held up her head as she walked down the long hallway.

Lena asked, "That's it?"

She just needed to make it downstairs. Once Sara was outside, once she had fresh, cold air in her lungs, she would find a way to

put this behind her. The last five minutes were not going to erase the last five years. Lena had no idea what Sara had been through. How she'd struggled. How she'd carved out a new life for herself. She didn't know Jeffrey and she sure as hell didn't know Will.

The sound of slow clapping echoed down the hall. Sara forced herself not to flinch. Each clap sounded like a gunshot.

"Good for you, Doc." Lena clapped louder. "Ride your high horse right on out of here."

Sara didn't turn around. She couldn't turn around. She'd end up giving Lena the catfight she'd been spoiling for.

She pushed open the door to the stairs. Her hands would not unclench. Sara rounded the landing at a jog. Each step she took only served to ramp up her anger.

Of course Sara had loved Jeffrey because he was tough. There wasn't a woman alive who didn't want a strong man in her life. That didn't make Sara responsible for his murder. She had begged him not to trust Lena, to just once let her hang herself with her own rope. And the idea that Sara could just slot in Will for Jeffrey was preposterous. The two men had nothing in common, except that both of them would've kicked Lena to the curb if they'd heard her talking to Sara the way she just had.

Sara almost wept with relief when she reached the main floor landing. She found herself in another dimly lit hallway. There were no stragglers or visitors at this time of night. Sara followed the green line on the floor, knowing it would take her to the elevators, to the exit.

Too demanding.

Too perfect.

If only.

Sara couldn't stop herself from making mistakes. She was overwhelmed with mistakes. Little ones. Big ones. Life-altering, earth-shattering fuckups had followed her for the last five years of her life, culminating in her drive down to this godforsaken hospital.

Her cell phone rang. Sara didn't answer. She passed the closed gift shop. Mylar balloons were pressed against the ceiling. The cooler was chained shut. Sara's phone stopped ringing. Almost immediately, it started back up again. She let it ring out, go to voicemail. There were a few seconds of silence, then the ringing started up again.

Sara checked the caller ID.

JASPER, GA.

Will.

A few hours ago, his phone said he was on the coast. Now, it said he was in the mountains.

Sara answered the call. She fought to keep her tone even. "I can't talk right now."

"Where are you?"

"I'm at the hospital."

"Upstairs?"

"No." She wiped away tears. The main entrance was up ahead. The lights from the parking lot gave the lobby an ethereal luminescence. "I'm leaving."

"To go to the hotel?"

"To go home." Sara didn't realize until she'd said the words that they were true. Her purse was locked in the back of her car. The keyfob was in her pocket. The rest of her stuff was at the hotel. She'd brought a change of clothes and some toiletries she kept in her locker at Grady. None of it was worth postponing her escape. The hotel cleaning staff could throw it out or keep it. Sara didn't care. She would call the front desk on her way out of town.

"Sara?" Will asked.

"I can't talk." Her hand was clenching and unclenching. Her teeth ached from grinding them together. "I'll call you later."

"Don't hang up."

She shook her head. "I can't do this now."

"I need you to just stop. Right now."

"Will, I—"

"Sara, stop walking."

Sara stopped.

"I need to talk to you."

Sara looked down at the phone. Then she looked up. How had Will known she was walking? She scanned the empty lobby.

"Where are you?"

"I need to tell you what happened." He sounded desperate. "Not just before, but tonight. Last night."

She saw him then. He was standing outside the glass entrance doors. He was wearing dark pants and a gray shirt. Sara had seen the uniform before. The hospital maintenance staff wore it.

His hand went up to the glass.

She gave him an out. Insanely, she gave him an out. "You're working with Faith."

Will didn't answer, and Sara finally understood. The rolling phone calls. The undercover assignment he wouldn't talk about. The guilty look on his face this morning. His refusal to tell her what he was hiding. There was only one reason he would lie to her.

Sara said, "You're investigating Lena again."

"No, but she knows I'm here." Will said, "I'm sorry, baby. I'm so sorry."

Sara's eyes burned with tears. Lena didn't just know that Will was here. She knew that he'd left Sara completely in the dark.

You always think you're so damn smart, but you can't even see what's right in front of you.

"You asshole," Sara hissed into the phone. She could still hear Lena's laughter ringing in her ears. "You let her make a fool of me."

"I'm sorry." Will's hand went up again. He pressed his palm to the glass door. "I didn't think that far ahead. I didn't—" He stopped. "I need you to go easy on me, Sara. Please."

"You lied to me." Her voice was shaking again. Everything was shaking. She'd blamed herself for pushing him away when all the time Will was the one keeping her at arm's length. "You looked me right in the face and you lied to me."

"I didn't tell you because I thought you would leave me."

She felt something snap inside of her. "You were right."

"Sara—"

The pain was too much. She clutched the phone in her hand, wishing she could break it into pieces. And then she realized she could. Sara smashed the phone against the wall. Chunks of plastic and glass popped back into her face. She picked up the pieces and threw them back at the wall.

"Sara!" Will shouted. He was still outside, pulling on the closed glass doors. "Sara!"

What an idiot she'd been. She'd opened her heart to this man. She'd shared her bed with him. She'd told him things she'd never even told her husband.

And he'd given Lena Adams a knife to stab into Sara's back.

"Sara!" The locks rattled on the closed doors.

She turned away from him, heading back toward the stairs.

“Wait!”

Sara kept walking. She wasn't going to wait on him. She would never wait on him again. She had to get out of this building. Out of this town. Away from Lena. Away from Will and his lies. There was nothing else Sara could do but run away. She'd been stupid and blind. He'd betrayed her. She had given him everything, and Will had betrayed her.

“Sara!” Will's voice was louder. He was inside the building.

She quickened her pace. Will's footsteps pounded through the empty lobby, echoed down the hall. He was coming after her.

Sara started running. She couldn't bear the thought of seeing his face again. She pumped her arms, lifted her knees. Will's footsteps grew louder. The door smacked against the wall as she ran into the stairwell. Instead of going up, she went down. The staff locker room would be in the basement. Maintenance. Storage. The morgue. There would be a loading dock or an exit she could use to get the hell out of here.

“Sara!”

She was on the landing when the door banged open above her.

Will yelled, “Wait!”

She tripped, grabbing the handrail as she slid down the last few stairs. Sara pulled open the door. Another hallway. The bright lights were like needles in her eyes.

“Stop!”

Will was already on the landing. He was faster than Sara. She would never make it to the exit without him catching her. Her shoes skidded on the floor as she darted into an open doorway.

“Let me explain! Sara!”

She slammed the door shut, furiously checked for a way to lock it.

The door pushed open. She fell backward. Will grabbed her arm. He jerked her toward him. Sara slapped at him as hard as she could. He caught one of her hands. She punched him with the other one. She hated him. She wanted to scratch out his eyes. To tear his heart out of his chest the way he had torn out hers.

“Sara, please—”

She punched him again. She couldn't stop. Hitting him felt too good. She slapped his face. Her fingernails drew blood. He caught both of her hands in one of his own. Sara couldn't break free. He pushed her back against the wall. Her head banged against the

cinder block. She brought up her knee, but Will was too close for her to do any damage.

He kissed her. Their teeth clashed. His fingers gripped open her jaw. His tongue filled her mouth. Sara slammed her fist into his chest. He ripped open her jeans. Sara didn't stop him. She helped him. She felt numb. Every emotion had drained away but one. She was sick of taking care of people. She was sick of being the good friend, of doing the right thing, of letting things go.

Will spit in his hand. It wasn't enough. Sara gasped as he pushed inside of her. He went deep. Too deep. It took her breath away. Still, she gripped his shoulders, holding tight, meeting each thrust until her body took over and she felt herself give.

Sara's mouth found his. She sucked his tongue. Bit his lip. Her heels dug into the backs of his legs. Will flinched when her hands slipped underneath his shirt. She didn't care. She scratched the scarred flesh on his back. Words came out of her mouth—filthy words that told him exactly what to do. Again and again she met each thrust until she had to clench her teeth to keep from screaming.

There was no slow build, just an uncontrollable rush that flowered deep inside her. The ecstasy was unbearable. Sara bit down on Will's shoulder. She tasted the salt of his sweat. Every molecule in her body pulsed from the intensity. She cried out his name. She couldn't help herself, couldn't stop the exquisite torrent of release.

Will collapsed against her. Neither one of them could stand. They slid to the floor, both breathless, both shocked by what they had done.

"Sara—"

She covered her face with her hands. She couldn't look at him. Couldn't acknowledge what had just happened.

"Sara—" Will's mouth was close to her ear. The brush of his lips brought an involuntary shiver. "Oh, God," he whispered. "Sara, please—"

She pushed him away. She could still feel him throbbing between her legs. She felt craven. Deviant.

"Sara ..."

She shook her head, wishing she could disappear. "Go," she begged. "Please, just go."

"Sara—"

“Go!” she screamed.

Will struggled to stand. She heard him zip up his pants, tuck in his shirt. There was a loud click as the door opened, then again as it closed.

Sara looked up.

He was gone.

11.

FOUR DAYS BEFORE THE RAID

Lena sat in the cramped surveillance van with her hands thrust into her jacket pockets. There were three monitors in front of her. The computers under the desk were blowing out heat. DeShawn and Paul were wearing short-sleeved shirts. They were both sweating, but Lena was so cold she could've been sitting in an igloo. She was only six weeks pregnant and already her body was out of whack. This was why pregnant women were always so cranky. Their thermometers bounced up and down like Ping-Pong balls.

DeShawn scrolled through the security cameras, asking, "Where are you, Mr. Snitch?"

"Mr. Snitch," Paul echoed, giving the name a showman's flourish.

All confidential informants had code names. Protecting a CI's identity was part of the devil's bargain. You used the name on all your paperwork. You used it in the field, where the slip of a word could mean the death of an informant. "Mr. Snitch" wasn't the most creative name, but it suited the junkie they'd turned a few days ago. There was something about the man that was slithery, like a snake. Lena thought maybe it was his scaly skin and beady little eyes.

"Come on, Snitchy." DeShawn tapped the keyboard, toggling back and forth through the cameras outside the Chick-fil-A. "Here, Snitchy-Snitchy."

Paul reminded him, "We padded in an extra hour for a reason."

Lena watched the monitors change as DeShawn scrolled through the different angles. She'd always hated junkies—probably because her uncle was one. Hank was clean now, but that didn't change his basic, junkie personality. Everything about

him asked, *What's in it for me?*

"Here we go." Paul pointed at one of the monitors. A white car pulled into a parking space near the door. The emergency brake was pulled. The windows rolled shut.

Lena asked, "Does he have his mic on?"

DeShawn twisted the dial on the tuner that picked up Snitch's transmitter. They heard his car radio playing an ad for a pizza place. The sound cut. Keys jangled. The car door opened.

Snitch was short and wiry and needed a shave. His ballcap was pulled low on his head. Dark sunglasses wrapped around his face. He was dressed in black jeans and a black T-shirt. He kept checking over his shoulder, looking left and right, as he walked toward the restaurant.

"Moron," Paul groaned. "He couldn't just get a neon sign?"

Snitch kept looking around as he entered the restaurant. He stood in line at the counter. A woman steered clear of him as she headed toward the side exit. Lena had scheduled the meet for just after the lunch rush, but a few stragglers were waiting around for refills. She heard soft conversation under the rustle of clothes. Snitch moved up in line. He ordered an iced tea. He kept scratching himself, shifting from one foot to the other.

"Junkie needs his pills," DeShawn noted.

Lena said, "Junkie needs to do what he's supposed to do before I pull his immunity."

Mr. Snitch waited at the counter. He kept twitching. Lena wanted to reach through the monitor and make him stop.

Their entire operation depended on this junkie scumbag. For almost two weeks, Lena's team had been surveilling a shooting gallery off an anonymous tip. They didn't want to just shut it down. They wanted to decimate Sid Waller's operation. The job had quickly become an exercise in futility. Normally, there was always some lowlife who was willing to flip for cash and prizes. This time was different. No one would turn on Sid Waller. No one would wear a wire while they made a buy. No one would go on the record about the drugs and guns.

No one, that was, until Mr. Snitch.

Paul seemed to read her mind. He asked, "You still think Snitch is working both sides?"

"I don't know," Lena admitted. Mr. Snitch had asked for her by name. She'd been leaving the doctor's office when the call came

through. Her celebratory dinner with Jared had turned into takeout at the station. "It's weird that he showed up right when our case was falling apart."

Paul asked, "How would he know it was falling apart?"

Lena shrugged. "Snitch was locked up for less than two hours when he told the guard to get me. How did he even know my name?"

Paul and DeShawn guffawed. Lena liked to break balls. Every junkie in town knew her name.

"All right, all right," she allowed. "Still, we've all been at this long enough to know that nobody does you any favors."

"I dunno," Paul said. "Scrawny guy like that, his first time behind bars—two hours sounds like the right amount of time for him to freak the fuck out."

DeShawn added, "Oxy's hard to come by in the pokey."

"Not if you suck enough dick." Paul held up his hand for a high-five. DeShawn readily obliged.

"Where'd he go?" Lena leaned forward, scanning the monitors.

DeShawn worked the cameras again, toggling through the different views. "There he is."

Lena saw the top of a door closing. Snitch had gone to the playground. Brightly colored plastic slides and swings circled around a sandpit. Two kids were playing on the rope climb, a boy and a girl. There were more cameras on the playground than inside the restaurant. Every corner was on display.

Snitch sat down on a bench. The sun was on his face. He stretched his arms out along the back like he had all the time in the world. They heard him humming through the microphone taped to his chest.

"They're gonna kick him out," Paul said. "Grown man ain't allowed on the playground without a kid."

"I think he'll be okay." Lena could see the staff moving lethargically behind the counter. They had all downshifted for the postlunch lull. One of the kids tossed a cup in his hand. The others watched him with a mixture of boredom and exhaustion.

"Looks like Mom's not gonna be a problem." DeShawn pointed to a lone woman sitting in a booth. She was typing on her iPad while simultaneously talking on her cell phone. Papers were spread out on the table. She was obviously working.

Paul said, "I bet she tells her husband she's spending time with

the kids.”

Lena held back a response. Now that she was going to be a mother, she found herself far less judgmental. “We’ve got forty-five minutes, right?”

“Give or take,” DeShawn said. “Waller has a reputation for being late.”

Paul always had to contradict. “He might show up early, case the joint.”

“Call me on my cell if he does.” Lena pushed open the door. “I’ll be right back.”

She kept her head down as she walked across the parking lot. There was little chance of her being seen. They had set up in front of a Target, fifty yards from the Chick-fil-A. Tapping into the restaurant’s wireless security system was less than legal, but the manager should’ve better encrypted his wireless hotspot. They weren’t going to use the video anyway. DeShawn wasn’t recording. They were keeping a tight leash on Mr. Snitch. At least Lena was. She didn’t trust just the audio. She wanted to see him with her own eyes.

There was something wrong with the guy. She’d only met him a few days ago, but in her gut, Lena knew there was something off about him. She had felt it when she first sat across from him at the jail. She had especially felt it when he’d told her he could hand her Sid Waller.

Sidney Michael Waller.

Lena was more than familiar with the name. Everyone at the station was. Waller wasn’t just a drug dealer. He wasn’t just a pimp and a gunrunner. Last year, they’d all worked around the clock to make a case against Waller for raping his niece and murdering his sister. And then the niece had recanted. Witnesses disappeared. People changed their stories. The case had fallen apart three days before the trial started and everyone, especially Lena, had walked away with a bad taste in their mouths.

But then Mr. Snitch had showed up with a golden ticket. She couldn’t have written a better script for the man. He’d confirmed details about the shooting gallery off the interstate. The guns. The whores. The vast amount of drugs moving through the city while Sid Waller sat back and counted the dough. The case practically made itself. Waller would spend years behind bars. He’d get far more time for the guns than he would have off the rape.

But only if Lena ignored her gut. She had to keep tamping down the little voice inside her head that said this was too easy. She'd been gunning for Waller for a year and suddenly he fell into her lap? What was Mr. Snitch getting out of this? The immunity deal was good, but was skipping eight months in prison really worth risking his life?

Lena couldn't let herself dwell on the questions too long. She couldn't let this operation fall apart.

The truth was that Sid Waller had gotten under her skin. Lena was determined to return the favor. She brought him in for questioning every time she found a plausible excuse. She couldn't put him behind bars—yet—but she could certainly run up his legal bills. Just last week, Waller had called her a cunt during an interview. Two weeks before that, he'd told her all the different ways he could fuck her. That all of this had been recorded for prosperity didn't seem to bother him. Waller had a good attorney, the kind of attorney who knew the law better than most cops.

Maybe that's why the judge was being so difficult. Lena had tried to get a warrant for the shooting gallery based on the suspicious traffic at all hours of the night. The judge had said no. Denise Branson presented evidence that Mr. Snitch, a confidential informant, had given up the location. The judge had said no. It was only through blind persistence that they had talked the man into letting them record today's meeting. And even then, he'd only authorized audio.

This was their last chance. Lena knew there was no way the judge could say no if they got it on tape. All Mr. Snitch had to do was get Waller to talk about the house, to say something about the guns or the drugs or the money, then they could go in and bust some bad guys.

At least that's what Lena was praying for. Sid Waller was the last big case she was going to work for a while. She was looking at months of her life being consumed by her pregnancy, then a couple of weeks, maybe another month, home with the baby before she returned to work.

Just the thought of being away from the job that long made her feel antsy. Lena had always been a cop. She couldn't lose that part of her identity. Lately, it seemed like she wasn't going to have a choice. She was too tired to sleep, too sleepy to concentrate. She had to pee all the time. She was cold. She was

hot. She was cold again. If this was what pregnancy was like, Lena wasn't sure she could handle it. And the nausea was unrelenting. Why did they call it morning sickness when it was more like all-day sickness?

Lena sat on a bench in front of the Target. She had to unzip her jacket because she'd started sweating at some point during the easy walk across the parking lot. She found a tissue in the pocket and blew her nose. She wasn't sure why her nose ran all the time now. Jared said she was making snot for two.

Lena checked the time on her phone. Sid Waller wasn't due for another forty minutes. She'd rest for a little while, then go back to the van. That is, if she didn't fall asleep first. Her eyelids felt heavy as she looked around the parking lot.

Lena found herself wondering if the world had always been filled with so many kids or if she was just seeing them now because she was pregnant. A toddler screamed as his mother pulled him toward the store. A child ran screeching around a minivan as his harried mom chased after him. Just outside the entrance to the store, another poor woman was bouncing a wailing baby on her hip.

Topping off this happy tableau was an extremely pregnant woman who was loading bags into the trunk of her car. Her belly was the size of a beachball. Sweat glued her hair to her head. She was parked in one of those expectant-mother parking spaces that Lena had always resented but now completely understood. The woman deserved to be closer to the door. She looked miserable. She dug her fist into her back as she unloaded the last bag from the cart. Her dress was way too tight. Even from a distance, Lena could see the thong sticking like dental floss between her ass cheeks.

"Jesus," Lena whispered. She felt like a cow glimpsing behind the counter at the butcher's shop.

Lena shivered. Her hands were cold. That's how it usually started. The change in temperature worked its way from the edges. She stuck her hands into her jacket pockets. Her fingers curled around the photo. Lena guessed the ultrasound could be called a photograph. At the very least, it was a snapshot of what was going on inside of her.

Over the years, Lena had looked at her share of X-rays and medical reports. She'd seen ultrasound pictures taped on

refrigerators, shown on TV screens, and even presented as evidence in court cases where the mother had been murdered.

Lena had never been particularly moved by the images. To her, they were just black and white blobs. She assumed that the ability to ooh and ahh over the tiny splotches and weird folds was lost on her. Also, there was something disturbing about looking at a person's interior workings. Maybe Lena was a prude, but she couldn't be the only one thinking that showing an ultrasound was tantamount to showing the world irrefutable proof that you'd had sex.

But that was before Lena had seen an ultrasound of her own baby. Everything had changed two days ago. She couldn't understand it. How had that tiny, pulsing little bean opened up such a large space in her heart?

And how had it made Lena love Jared so much? She couldn't explain the shift. Loving Jared was nothing new, but the sudden depth of her feeling was terrifying. Lena had never felt this way about a man before. She was completely out of control, incapable of hiding her vulnerabilities. At night, she clung to him. During the day, she couldn't stop touching him. At first, Jared had been mildly annoyed. He generally wasn't up for touching unless it led to something, but he'd become more receptive over the last few weeks. There had to be some hormone Lena was giving off. Even the guys at work were looking at her differently.

Work.

Lena couldn't think about what would happen when she started to show. Not that she wasn't already. They probably just thought she was getting fat—which she was. Her pants cut into her waist. She spilled out of her bra. Jared was ecstatic about this particular development. All Lena could think was that there was no way she could chase after some thug with her breasts flopping around. In a few months, she'd probably end up stuck behind a desk. She'd be doing paperwork and following up on witness statements while everyone else had all the fun. Was it worth it?

Lena looked down at the ultrasound. She touched the tiny little bean resting in white crescent arms. Of course it was worth it.

Her phone vibrated in her jacket pocket. Denise Branson. She was probably pacing the station house waiting for news.

Lena said, "What's up, D?"

"Any news?"

Lena looked at the time. She should head back to the van. "He's got another thirty minutes, but he's always late."

"I'm already pushing back a meeting," Denise said. "You know it's both our asses on the line now."

"I know." Lena reluctantly pushed herself up from the bench. "I appreciate it."

"Listen." Denise seemed eager to move on. "I got another piece of the Big Whitey puzzle."

"Denise—"

"Just hear me out like I do with you, okay?" Lena owed her that much. "Okay."

"I found an article in the *Savannah Tribune*. Eighteen months ago, two white girls showed up dead behind a church. Runaways from good homes. Heroin overdoses, both of them. From honor students to stone-cold junkies in less than a month. The needles were still in their arms. That sound familiar?"

"Honor students OD on heroin all the time," Lena told her. "I could find a hundred other cases on the same day. Maybe thousands."

"It's just like what happened here."

There was no use arguing. "Denise, I'm saying this as a friend. You're obsessed with this. You're too close."

"So what if I am?"

Lena shook her head as she made her way back across the parking lot. Only in law enforcement was obsession considered an asset.

Denise said, "You're obsessed with Sid Waller."

"And I'm about to bust him," Lena countered. "I've got a case. I've got a witness. I've got leads, photos, timelines. All you've got is a ghost."

"You start out with all of that or did you put it together?"

Lena didn't want to admit she had a point. Before Mr. Snitch magically appeared, Denise could've been asking Lena the same questions about Waller. But she hadn't. She'd given Lena the support and time to do what she needed to do. "Did you track down that law firm?"

"I'm working on it. There's some kind of connection there."

"If you're right, then maybe we can help each other out. Sid Waller's the big man on campus. Once we take him down, he can give us Big Whitey."

Denise huffed a laugh. "You think Sid Waller's gonna turn? He's got just as much juice inside the joint as he does out."

She was right. The gangs ran the prisons and Waller would be a top dog. Still, she said, "It could happen."

"I'm not giving Waller any deals. He can rot away his sick ass in jail. I can get Big Whitey on my own."

Lena realized her fist was stuck in her back, just like the other pregnant woman. She dropped her hand. "All right. If you think you can put together a case, then you should get help. This is too big for one person. Two, if you count me, because you know I'm there for you."

Denise snorted. "You know I'm off-book. How am I gonna go to Lonnie for help when he told me to shut this down months ago? He's not gonna spend one dime of department money on Big Whitey. At least not until it's too late."

She was right again. By budgetary necessity, police forces were more reactive than preventative these days.

Lena had an idea. "I know somebody with the state who can give us a hand."

"I can't jump over Lonnie's head."

"I know that," Lena said. Gray was relatively new to Macon, but he'd spent the past fifteen years heading up forces all around the state. They both respected him too much to stab him in the back. Not to mention that when push came to shove, Gray could twist that knife right back in theirs. "You could reach out informally. I know an agent who's discreet." She didn't mention that the man had investigated her almost two years ago. "He's a cop, but he doesn't act like one. He'll give you the support you need. At the very least, he can help you put together some of these pieces."

"You think I'm gonna let the GBI come stomping onto my turf and taking credit?" She gave a harsh laugh. "You know how many hours I've put into this? How many miles on my car? How many sleepless nights? I've got blood in this fight, Lee. I'm not going to let go of it now."

Lena recognized the righteous indignation in her tone. Five years ago, Lena would've been saying the same thing, sounding the same way. She'd been so sure of herself before Jeffrey died. She was the one who was always right. She didn't need help. She didn't need some asshole trying to grab credit. Lena had taken on

the world single-handedly every day—right up until the world knocked her flat on her ass.

Denise said, “If you’d talked to that girl, listened to her mama, then you’d feel the same way as me.”

“I know,” Lena said. She was glad she hadn’t spoken with either of them, otherwise she probably would’ve been sucked in right along with Denise. “You work the case. You don’t let the case work you.”

“What does that mean?” Denise shot back.

“This ghost you’re chasing—it’s affecting your life.”

“In what way?”

Lena didn’t answer. Denise wanted some bowling pins she could knock down. Lena knew from experience that the job wasn’t kind to lonely women. It could make you too driven. Too hard. It could scare people away from you.

Having Jared in her life had changed that for Lena. He’d shouldered some of the burden. He’d made her feel like it was okay to let go.

And then there was the baby. Lena put her hand to her stomach. Her face felt hot. An idiotic grin spread across her mouth. It was the hormones. She was glad she wasn’t in the van with Paul and DeShawn. She was probably fucking glowing.

“Come on, Adams,” Branson prompted. “Give it to me straight.”

Lena shrugged off the challenge. “Did you hear DeShawn’s getting divorced again?”

“And you think ’cause he’s black and I’m black that we’re a match made in heaven?”

“Please, he should be so lucky.” As hypocritical as it sounded, Lena told her, “I’m just saying that you can’t do both—be married to the job and married to a wife. What are you working for if you don’t have someone to come home to?”

Denise’s words were pointed. “You mean husband.”

The phone line was deadly silent. Denise Branson went to church every Sunday. She made the appropriate noises when a good-looking man walked by. But so had Lena’s sister, and Sibyl had been as gay as a three-dollar bill.

Denise was all business again. “Call me as soon as the meet’s over. If you can’t get Waller on tape, Lonnie’s gonna give us a come-to-Jesus talk. And I’m not gonna argue with him, because he’ll be right.”

“Denise, give me a break.”

“Don’t talk about break, girl, talk about broke. Do you know how much this is costing the department? Twenty-four-hour surveillance going on ten days. Overtime for everybody and their mother. We passed the half-million mark last weekend. I can’t even do the math on where we are now. I’ve been waiting for this meet to pan out so when I take it to Lonnie, he doesn’t kick my ass out the door.”

“I know you’re taking heat for me.”

“Shit,” Denise muttered. “I wish it was heat. I’m standing in a damn ring of fire.”

Lena was almost to the van. She glanced around, making sure she wasn’t being watched. “I’ll get Waller. I promise.”

“You don’t, then get a newspaper. We’re gonna both need to start looking for new jobs.” She let the phone slam down in Lena’s ear.

Lena slipped her hand back into her pocket. She traced the edge of the ultrasound as she walked toward the white van with the AT&T logo on the side. As far as she knew, no one had bothered to get clearance from the phone company. Lena figured they should shut up and take the free advertising.

“Hey, boss.” DeShawn came around the side of the van. He was so big he cast her completely in shadow.

Lena’s hand went to her throat. “You sure move light for a Mack truck.”

“That’s what the ladies say.” He winked at her. “You doing all right?”

Lena felt her defenses go up. “Why?”

He shrugged and shook his head. “No reason.”

“You take yourself off the monitors and stand out here waiting for me for no reason?”

He had the grace to admit he’d been caught. “I know this whole Waller thing’s been weighing hard on you.”

“Why? Has Lonnie said something?” Lena knew that DeShawn was Gray’s eyes and ears, but she’d never thought of him as a tattletale. “What did he say?”

“Nothing, and I didn’t say anything to him.” DeShawn looked at her like she was paranoid for no reason. “Come on, gal. You know I’m on your team.”

“What’s going on?” Lena asked. Now that she was looking at

him, he seemed on edge, like something else was going on. "Why are you acting weird?"

DeShawn gave a heavy sigh. "I just noticed you've been tired lately."

"So? We're all tired. We've been butts to nuts for weeks."

He gave the sigh again. "I just wanted you to know that it's okay by me if you decide to take a back seat on—"

"Fuck your back seat," Lena snapped. "I've never taken a back seat on anything in my life."

"All right." He held up his hands. "Just worried about you, is all."

"Worried about me why?"

His mouth twisted to the side, like he was debating whether or not to tell her something. Lena knew DeShawn's sister had two girls. Maybe he'd figured out that Lena was pregnant. In which case, she had to shut this down fast.

She said, "Get your panties out of your cooch, Shawn. I appreciate your concern, but the best thing for both of us right now is for you to do your job and me to do mine. All right?"

He held up his hands in surrender again. "You're the boss."

She knocked on the side of the van. "It's me."

Eric Haigh cracked open the door. The whole gang was here. He told Lena, "We got a call from Waller's tail. He's about five minutes out."

Paul couldn't help but add, "I was right. He's probably coming early to case the restaurant."

Lena wasn't interested in giving credit. She started to hold out her hand for help, then decided it would be better to show DeShawn she was capable of moving her own weight. Still, she groaned as she pulled herself up.

DeShawn vaulted in without assistance, probably to prove a point. He slammed the door shut behind him.

"Jesus Christ." Lena clapped her hands over her face. The smell was disgusting. "What've you guys been doing in here?"

"Sorry," Eric said. "I had Mexican for lunch."

"Thanks a lot, dickslit." Paul punched him in the arm. Eric rewarded him with the wettest-sounding fart Lena had ever heard.

"Oh, God." She pinched her nose closed and breathed through her mouth. "Please tell me Snitch is still there."

Paul provided, "Mr. Snitchy is on the bench looking at the kiddies."

"Looking at them how?" Lena checked the monitor to see for herself. Snitch still had on his sunglasses. His arms were sprawled across the back of the bench. "Are you sure he's not asleep?"

"Look at his foot."

He was right. Snitch's heel was hopping up and down so fast the camera barely registered the movement. Lena asked, "Where's Mom?"

DeShawn was back in his chair. He pulled up the appropriate camera. The mother was still on the phone, stretched out in the booth as if she planned to stay there for a while.

"Good thing he's not a pedophile," Lena said. She motioned for Eric to get out of her chair.

Eric said, "The seat might be a little warm."

Paul laughed again, and she slapped him on the back of the head. "Why is everyone in this van an asshole except for me?"

Paul asked, "You okay, boss?"

Lena scowled at him. "Since when am I the boss?"

"You're in charge, right?" Paul indicated his empty chair. "What's going on with you? Your face is all red."

She put her hand to her cheek. The skin was hot. "It's probably gas poisoning."

"You sure about that?" He cocked an eyebrow at her, but he didn't push it.

"All right, ladies and Lena." DeShawn rubbed his hands together. "Mr. Waller has arrived."

A red Corvette idled in the parking lot. The windows were down. Sid Waller circled the lot twice before parking in a space by the road. He'd brought weight with him. Diego Nuñez was in the passenger seat. He had his arm resting on the door. A cigarette dangled from his fingers.

Eric squinted at the monitor. "Is that a joint?"

DeShawn checked it out. "Looks like it."

"Damn," Paul said. "Chick-fil-A don't like queers. What're they gonna do with a spic toking a doobie?"

"Shut up," Lena said. She tried to tune out their voices as she watched Sid Waller get out of the car. The metal chain on his wallet swung as he strutted across the parking lot. His long, skanky hair was pulled back in a ponytail. He wore ragged jeans

and a flannel shirt with the sleeves ripped off. Tattoos covered both arms. Like Paul, he was incapable of just opening a door. He flung it open to announce his presence.

All four of them swiveled their heads in unison, watching the monitor that showed the lobby camera. Waller raised some eyebrows inside the restaurant, but this was Macon and it was hard to tell a harmless long-haired redneck from a violent one. The girls behind the counter figured it out quickly. Lena had always believed that women were better than men at spotting danger. It was why her gut wouldn't let go of the bad feeling she had about Mr. Snitch.

The junkie in question had noticed Waller's arrival. He sat up straight on the bench. His hand shot up in a wave. And then he kept waving, because Waller wouldn't look his way. Finally, Snitch stood up and went to the door. Instead of going inside, he motioned for Waller to join him on the playground.

Lena checked on the woman in the booth. The mother's jaw dropped when she saw Sid Waller.

DeShawn said, "Come on, Mama. Time to check on the kiddies."

Waller jerked open the door. Lena startled when his voice blared from the speaker in the van. "What the fuck, dumbass?" Snitch nervously looked at the kids.

Thankfully, their mother had scrambled to the door on the other side of the playground. They heard her strident tone on Snitch's concealed mic. "Britney. Randall. Now."

The children didn't have to be told twice. Sid Waller had a way of clearing a room.

"Move over," Waller said, and Snitch slid down the bench. "What're you doing here? I thought they didn't let faggots in this place."

Snitch chuckled like he was in on the joke.

"Shut up, pencil dick." Waller took a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. He shook one out, fumbled for his lighter.

Snitch looked around, checking all the corners.

"You worried about something?" Waller asked. He held the open flame of the lighter a few inches from his cigarette.

Snitch shook his head.

"Take off those fucking glasses."

Snitch took off his sunglasses.

Waller lit the cigarette. He inhaled half of it down before blowing out a long stream of smoke. "What are we doing here?"

"I got some more pills." Snitch reached for his pocket.

Waller stopped him with a look. "I look like a drug dealer to you?"

Snitch froze, his hand halfway in his pocket. They'd told him to pass the pills so at the very least, they'd have Waller on taking stolen narcotics.

Inside the van, they all tensed.

Eric said, "Look at him. He's freaking out."

He was right. Snitch was panicking.

Waller stood up to leave.

"Come on," Snitch said. "Don't be that way."

Instead of opening the door, Waller leaned against it. His arms crossed over his broad chest. The cigarette dangled from his mouth.

Lena held her breath. She watched the two men. They were having some kind of staring contest.

Unbelievably, Snitch won. Waller looked down as he tapped the ash off his cigarette.

Snitch said, "I wanna move up."

Waller put the cigarette back in his mouth.

"I can get more product."

"What makes you think I need it?"

Snitch stood up. He took off his ballcap and ran his fingers through his hair.

Lena asked, "Was that a signal?"

"I think he's just sweating," Paul said. "Look at the way he keeps pulling his pants away from his sac."

He was right. Snitch couldn't keep his hands off his crotch.

"Well?" Waller prompted. "You gonna make your case?"

Remarkably, Snitch remembered his lines. "I've gotta source at the hospital. I can get the good stuff. Name brand. Not that shit from China."

Smoke wafted up into Waller's eyes. He was thinking about it. Lena knew that he was thinking about it.

"Come on," she begged. Everyone in the van edged closer to the monitors. This was the make-or-break moment—maybe their only chance to get him.

Waller turned around and opened the door.

“Fuck.” DeShawn banged his fist against the table. The monitors shook. “I can’t believe he blew it.”

Snitch seemed to be thinking the same thing. He took off his hat again. “You’re a dumbass.”

Waller stopped.

Eric whispered, “Holy shit.”

“Shut up,” Lena ordered.

Waller was turning around. He didn’t speak until the door had closed.

“What’d you just call me?”

“I said you’re a dumbass.”

Lena felt her heart stop beating. Waller was coiled like a snake. They would have to peel him off Snitch before he killed him.

“You think I’m a dumbass?” Waller asked, like he wanted to be absolutely clear.

Instead of backing down, Snitch said, “I offer to double my deliveries, to give you top-notch product, and you walk away from me?” He took a step toward Waller, seemingly blind to the fact that he was taking his own life into his hands. “I want to move up, Sid. I been a good soldier, but I want to be a general one day.”

Waller seemed amused. “That so?”

“Yeah, that’s so.” Snitch jammed his hat back on his head. “I think I’ve earned some respect.”

Waller took out his cigarette pack again. He lit a fresh one off the old one. “What do I get out of this?”

“You know I’m an earner,” Snitch said. “You know I can do the dirty work.”

“Seems to me you like the dirty work.”

“You wanna get me wet?”

Waller didn’t answer, but Lena shook her head. Snitch was pushing it too far. He was asking if Waller wanted him to murder someone.

Waller flicked the old cigarette into the sandpit. “Let’s stick with what you know how to do. Double the order. Bring it to the house off Redding. We got junkies clawing at the door.”

DeShawn offered silent high fives all around. The shooting gallery was the house off Redding. They had their probable cause.

Snitch wouldn’t leave well enough alone. “When do you want it?”

“Soon as you can. Shipment’s late this week.” Sid puffed his cigarette. “We had a truck rolled in Miami. Cubans took two hundred K worth of Oxy.”

Snitch’s inner junkie took over. “I get payment on delivery. That’s the deal.”

Waller laughed. “Look at the big man giving orders.” He patted Snitch on the back so hard that Snitch almost fell into the swing set. “I go by the house at three every morning. Don’t be stupid and don’t be late.”

“Holy motherfucker.” Lena laughed incredulously as Sid Waller took his leave from the playground. “Ho-lee shit.”

Paul was laughing, too. “Grab your ankles, Waller. Get ready for the big pokey.”

Eric cut a bugle of a fart, which made the men laugh harder.

Lena groaned as she crawled past them to the front of the van. “You’re all disgusting.”

They were laughing too hard to hear her.

She plopped into the driver’s seat. She rolled down the window and filled her lungs with clean, fresh air. She prayed to God she wasn’t carrying a boy. Or worse, two boys. Twins ran in families. Dr. Benedict had told her they’d know for sure when he did the next ultrasound.

Lena took out her phone and pulled up Denise Branson’s number. She could see the Chick-fil-A building through the windshield. The distance was too great for detail, but she could tell that Snitch was still on the playground. He had returned to the bench, arms and legs spread wide. The sunglasses were back on. Lena couldn’t see his expression, but she gathered he was feeling pretty pleased with himself. He knew he was safe now. The minute he’d gotten Waller to talk about the house, Snitch’s immunity deal was set in stone.

Lena heard Denise Branson’s voicemail. She ended the call. Denise was probably in a meeting. Lena pulled up the text messaging and typed out a quick note: *Baldy will have package within the hour.*

Baldy was their nickname for the judge who kept telling them no. Lena was probably being paranoid, but she didn’t want to take the chance that her phone was hacked.

She checked over her shoulder. The men were still celebrating, trying to one-up one another with crass jokes about prison rape.

Lena rolled her eyes as she turned back around. Mr. Snitch was still on the playground bench. The sun was in his face. Kids were playing on the swings in front of him. He didn't have a care in the world.

She hated this part of the job. The junkie had been caught selling pills to kids, and he would go back to selling them pills because the police had let him go. There was no way for her to sit on him, wait for the inevitable fuckup. No criminal would ever deal with Lena again if they knew she couldn't be trusted. She would have to sit back and wait for Mr. Snitch to screw up on his own.

Or maybe she wouldn't.

Lena pulled up email on her phone. She selected the Google account that she used for ordering off the Internet. The email address could probably be traced back to her, but she didn't really care. She was going to take the advice she had just given Denise Branson. No cop should go it alone. There was no shame in asking for help. Besides, Mr. Snitch's immunity deal was with Macon, not the state of Georgia.

Lena couldn't touch Anthony Dell, but Will Trent could.

12.

FRIDAY

Will stumbled out of the hospital. Even outside, he could still hear Sara crying. Could feel the marks she'd left on his skin. Could smell her. Taste her.

He passed his bike, crossed the parking lot. His foot hit the curb. He stepped up, walking into the woods behind the building. Will didn't get far. He fell to his knees. He opened his mouth, tried to bring up the acid eating him inside.

What had he done?

He pressed his forehead to the cold ground. His mind kept flipping through the last twenty-four hours. All the violence. All the pain. What Will had seen. What he had wrought. Lena with the hammer. Tony with his knife. And then there was Sara.

What had he done to Sara?

He had lost her. In that one brutal moment, he had lost her forever.

"Hey, asshole!"

Will looked up. Paul Vickery was barreling toward him. Before Will could react, the man kicked him in the head.

Will slammed to the ground. Stars burst in front of his eyes. The air was knocked out of his chest.

Vickery jumped on him. He rained down punches like a windmill. Will bucked, trying to heave him off. Vickery grabbed Will's neck. The man put all of his weight into it, crushing Will's windpipe. Will tried to pry away his fingers. His mouth gaped open. Vickery pressed harder, strangling him. Will's tongue swelled. His eyes burned. He started to black out. Was this how it was going to happen? After all he had survived, was this how he was going to die?

Suddenly, the pressure stopped. Will gagged on the sudden

rush of air.

Paul Vickery flew off him. He landed hard on the asphalt. His head thumped against the curb.

Will coughed so hard his feet kicked out.

“Are you okay?” Faith was there. She had a twenty-inch-long steel police baton in her hand. She asked Will again, “Are you okay?” She kept looking at Vickery, then back at Will. “Can you see me?”

Will saw two of her, then three.

Vickery tried to push himself up.

Faith slammed the baton into Vickery’s kidneys. Two brutal blows, one after the other.

“Bitch!” he screamed, writhing on the ground. “Jesus!” Faith jammed the baton in Vickery’s face. “Stay down.”

“He murdered a cop!”

The baton stayed in Vickery’s face. She drew her Glock on Will. “Get up.”

Will blinked at the gun. Her finger was on the trigger guard. He wasn’t sure he could move. He hurt so bad. Everything hurt so bad.

“Black,” Faith said. “I told you to get the fuck up.”

Black.

Will didn’t understand what she was saying. Was it some kind of a code?

“Up,” Faith repeated. She was using her cop voice, the one that said she had drawn down on a suspect before and was ready to do it again. “I said get the fuck up.”

Finally, Will’s brain managed to make contact with his arms, his legs. He pushed himself to sitting. The effort almost wasted him.

“Stay there,” Faith ordered, as if Will had a choice. “Bill Black, I’m placing you under arrest for parole violation.”

“Parole?” Vickery shouted. “He killed a fucking cop!”

“You got proof?” When Vickery didn’t offer an answer, she told Will, “You have the right to remain silent.”

Vickery muttered, “Stupid cunt.”

Faith talked over him. “Anything you say or do may be used against you in a court of law.”

Will leaned over and threw up. Peas. Something white. Green beans. He couldn’t remember eating any of it.

"You have a right to consult with an attorney."

Will sniffed. The sensation almost made him vomit again.

"If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be appointed for you by the courts."

"Okay." Will held up his hand for silence. The sound of her voice was an ice pick in his brain. "I waive my rights."

Faith holstered her Glock, but kept the baton at the ready. She tossed Will her handcuffs. "Put those on."

Vickery saw an opportunity. He tried to stand.

Faith flicked the baton, cracking it against Vickery's ankle. The sound was like a twig snapping.

"Bitch!" Vickery screamed in agony. "You fucking bitch!"

"Stand up." Faith grabbed Will's arm. She couldn't move him. "Come on." She leaned down to help. Her whisper in his ear felt like she was talking underwater. "Please."

From somewhere deep inside, Will summoned the strength to stand. He staggered like a colt taking its first steps. Faith wrapped her hand around his arm, pulled him toward the parking lot. He tripped over the curb again. Faith labored to keep him upright.

She coached, "Keep walking. Just keep walking."

Will tried to do as he was told. His feet were floppy, like the tendons had come undone. The ground looked strange. Everything was too large or too small. He was walking through a fun-house mirror. If not for Faith propping him up, he would've fallen flat on his face.

Paul Vickery wouldn't give up. "I got a witness puts him in the back room at Tipsie's tonight." He limped after them, keeping his distance. "Same place as the shooters who went after Lena."

Faith didn't answer. She pulled Will, urging him to go faster.

"Ask him where he went afterward," Vickery said. "Ask him where he was when my fucking team was being attacked."

Faith raised the baton in warning.

Vickery hung back. "I'll get him at the station."

"He's not going to the station." Faith leaned Will against a black Suburban. "I'm taking him to the field office. He's in state custody."

"You won't be able to hold him there."

Faith opened the back door. She kept her body turned toward Vickery as she tried to help Will into the seat. He was too heavy for her to manage. In the end, all Will could do was fall in.

“You’ll have to process him,” Vickery warned. “You send him to county, you send him to Fulton, I’ll get at him somehow.”

Will’s wrists were still cuffed. He clenched his stomach muscles so he could straighten up in the seat. The pain was excruciating. He opened his mouth. He was going to be sick again.

“Stay back, Vickery. I mean it.” Faith closed the door. She used the remote to lock it. The baton stayed out as she walked around the front of the Suburban.

“You’re dead, Black!” Vickery punched the door. He banged his fists against the glass. “You hear me? I will fuck you up!”

Will closed his eyes. Everything was spinning. The car kept shaking. Vickery was putting his shoulder into it, like he thought he could roll a five-thousand-pound vehicle.

“Back the fuck up!” Faith yelled. She was at the front of the car. She said something else, but Will’s hearing was going in and out. He heard Vickery call her every name a man could use against a woman. Faith cussed him right back, giving as good as she got.

The driver’s-side door opened.

Faith yelled, “Bet on it, cocksucker.” She slammed the door shut. The sound was like a cannon. The engine turned over. The car jerked as she put it in gear. The wheels squealed against pavement.

Will leaned forward. He rested his head on his knees. His hands were clasped together, trapped between his chest and legs. Spit and blood dripped from his open mouth. He waited for Faith to say something. To yell at him. To ask him what the hell he’d been doing.

She rolled down the windows a few inches. Will felt the cold night air swirl around him. He closed his eyes. Breathed through his mouth. The light grew softer. The tires hummed against the road.

Faith kept driving. She didn’t say a word. Didn’t even turn around.

Will’s breathing started to even out. Eventually, the nausea passed. Unfortunately, so did the numbness. His body came alive with pain. His nose felt broken. His eyelids throbbed. His lip was split. His neck felt as if it had been scraped with a razor, and his head pounded along with the beating of his heart.

Faith accelerated. They were on the highway. Will could tell

from the steady, low grind of the engine. He didn't know how much time passed before she finally slowed for a turn. The sound inside the Suburban changed from a gentle hum to a fragmented crunch. The brakes squeaked as Faith slowed to a stop. She put the gear in park. The emergency brake clicked when she pushed down the pedal.

Faith opened the door. Will heard her walk around the car.

He pushed himself up. He had to move slowly. He winced at the pain in his head. His throat felt raw. He couldn't get the taste of blood out of his mouth.

The back door opened. Faith still didn't speak. She turned on the dome light. Will blinked, squinting. The handcuffs came off. Will rubbed his wrists, trying to get the circulation to come back. Faith opened the first aid kit from under the seat. She pulled out a roll of cotton squares, various packets, antibiotic ointment, Band-Aids. Will heard cars on either side of them. Faith had parked in a restricted area that cut across the highway median. Trees surrounded them. Broken beer bottles and used condoms littered the ground.

She said, "Look at me."

Will turned his head toward her. He closed his eyes. Packets were ripped open. Alcohol wipes. Disinfectant. He kept his eyes shut as Faith tended his scrapes and cuts. She was efficient if not gentle. Will was grateful. Sara had doctored him before. She always touched him so softly. She caressed him, kissed the places she said needed extra help to heal.

Faith wiped underneath his eyes with a tissue.

Will parted his lips to help get more air in his lungs. He wanted to thank her, to acknowledge how much her silence meant to him. Faith had always been a bull in the china shop of his life. Will was too broken now to tell her what had happened with Sara tonight.

Faith scrubbed at the blood around his nose. She said, "Eric Haigh is dead."

"I know." Will could barely speak. He tried to clear what felt like a wad of cotton trapped in his esophagus.

Faith said, "We found the body an hour ago."

"His front yard," Will whispered. "I helped Tony Dell put him there."

Faith's hand stopped.

Will opened his eyes. "I watched him kill him. Tony Dell kill Eric." Will coughed. The cotton had turned into razors. "It was at Tipsie's. Hunting knife. Dell wears it in his boot. Wore it." Will tried to swallow, but his throat refused. "We threw the knife in the river. I don't know which one. Concrete bridge. No houses around."

"We'll find it."

"You need to find Tony."

"He's gone. His house is empty. His car's still in the impound lot." Faith tore open a packet of antibiotic. "He used his ATM card to clean out his bank account." She squeezed some ointment onto a Q-tip. "We've got a BOLO on him."

Will still couldn't swallow. There was only an empty clicking noise. "Three men were there. Rednecks. Big guys. Fat." Will couldn't remember whether or not he'd told her where this had happened. "At Tipsie's. That's where Tony killed Eric Haigh."

She dabbed the Q-tip to his forehead. "I'll put somebody on the club."

"They were in the back room. Dell took me there to meet them. I didn't know until we were inside that that's what he wanted."

Faith squirted more ointment onto the Q-tip.

"They knew my Bill Black cover. All of it. They were watching me. Not when I went back to Atlanta—they couldn't follow me on my bike—but they knew about the hotel, my habits." Will felt in his pocket for his phone. He looked down at the shattered glass.

Sara had thrown her phone against the wall. Will had watched it break into pieces. He had never seen her throw anything like that before.

Faith asked, "Will?"

His phone was in his hand. The glass was shattered. Will slid it back into his pocket. "One of them was called Junior." He finally managed to swallow. The pain nearly made him pass out. "He had a gun to my chest. Pearl-handle Smith and Wesson. The knife had a pearl handle. The redneck's, not Tony's. We threw that off a bridge."

Faith ringed the Q-tip underneath Will's eye. He remembered the redneck cutting him; the first cut of the night.

He said, "My clothes are in a trash bag in my locker. I had to change, take a shower. Tony was in the ER. He cut his hand when he stabbed Haigh. They had to stitch it up." He felt the need to

add, "I don't know how many stitches."

Faith said, "His wife found him."

"Tony has a wife?"

"Eric Haigh. His wife found his body outside the house. There was a lot of confusion at first. She didn't recognize him."

Will remembered, "They told us to put him on the front lawn. The order came from Big Whitey." He saw the question in her eyes. "On the phone. I didn't meet him. The redneck took the call, then he told Dell where to dump the body, that the order came straight from Big Whitey."

"We'll see if we can trace the call to the club."

"It was a cell, probably a burner."

"We'll check it anyway." Faith tossed the Q-tip into the first aid box. The cotton was soaked red. She told Will, "Haigh'd been missing for two days. His wife didn't say because he'd been acting weird since the raid. She knew Internal Affairs was involved. She didn't want to get him into trouble."

"The raid," Will repeated. Faith had talked about it earlier, but Will couldn't recall the conversation. "They tortured him."

"I know."

"The redneck told Dell ..." He lost his train of thought. "What did I say?"

"The redneck told Dell?" She tried, "We were talking about Eric Haigh."

The prompt didn't help. "He said he'd be in touch with me. That he had a job for me."

"What time were you at the club?"

"Time?" The question didn't make sense. "What time?"

Will took his phone out of his pocket. The glass was shattered. Still, the screen came on when he pressed the button. He told Faith, "It's 1:31 a.m."

Faith tilted his head back up so she could look at him. "Should I take you to the hospital? A different hospital, I mean."

Will shook his head. He wasn't going to any hospital.

"I think you have a concussion."

"Why?"

"Paul Vickery kicked you in the head."

"When?" Will asked, but that wasn't the right question. He knew Vickery had kicked him. "I mean, why was Paul at the hospital?"

"Someone took a shot at him." Faith made herself more clear. "Paul Vickery was at the hospital because someone tried to kill him tonight."

"I'm sorry I keep forgetting things."

"It's all right." Faith spoke more slowly than necessary. "Vickery was at home. A gunshot was fired through a front window at his house. That's why he had the bandage on his arm."

Will couldn't remember seeing a bandage. "Is he okay?"

"Okay enough to attack you." She frowned. "He fights like a woman. You've got scratches on your neck." Faith turned his head. "Did he bite you?"

Will looked away. Paul Vickery hadn't made those marks. Sara had scratched him. She'd kicked him and bitten him and Will hadn't stopped because everything she did only made him want to fuck her harder.

Faith gave up on the Q-tip. She smeared antibiotic onto her finger and rubbed it on Will's face. "They went after DeShawn Franklin, too. He was jumped outside a movie theater tonight. His girlfriend started screaming. She called 911."

"They took him to the hospital?"

"Will, look at me." She made sure she had his attention. "Someone went after Franklin and Vickery on the same night that Eric Haigh's body was dumped on his front lawn."

Will already knew these details, but the way she put them together so succinctly finally made them click. "It was coordinated."

"Right. Someone was sending a message." She peeled open a Band-Aid.

"That's what the redneck said—there's no use sending a message unless everybody can read it."

"Well, if you ever see him again, tell him the message was received loud and clear. Turn that way."

Will turned his head. Faith stuck the Band-Aid on his neck to cover the scratches.

He asked, "Is that why you were at the hospital? Because they were all attacked?"

"I was looking for you."

"Because of DeShawn Franklin." Will shook his head. That was wrong. "You went to the hospital because of Eric Haigh. You saw him and you thought they had done the same thing to me."

"I thought he was you," Faith said. "His own wife didn't recognize him. I went to the hospital thinking I was going to have to identify your body."

"I'm sorry."

"Thank God Sara wasn't answering her phone." She indicated for him to look up again. The scratches were too wide for just one Band-Aid. "It was a real party after that. Paul Vickery and DeShawn Franklin were wheeled in right as I was coming up from the morgue. I was talking on the phone to Amanda."

"Did you have to tell them Haigh was dead?"

"Yes," Faith answered, her voice straining. "But then they saw Tony Dell getting his hand sewn up and decided to take it out on him." She didn't make Will ask. "It took six cops to get them off the guy."

"Why'd they go after him?"

"I guess because Dell's car was parked outside Lena's house the night they were attacked. I'm sure whoever Vickery's witness is who saw you at the club also saw Tony. It's not a leap to think you both had something to do with Haigh's murder."

It wasn't a leap because it was right. "What's Tony saying?"

"Who knows?" Faith sounded exasperated. "I told you five seconds ago that it took six cops to peel DeShawn and Vickery off Tony Dell. By the time anybody thought to look, Dell was gone. We turned the hospital upside down, but he managed to get away."

"He probably had ten escape routes already planned." Will remembered something. He took out his wallet. Cayla Martin's handwritten note was still in the photo sleeve. "This is Tony's stepsister. Check her house."

Faith took the note with some skepticism. "Dell didn't have any siblings on his background check."

"It was only a few years," Will said. "He's in love with her."

Her look said she was considering the hospital again.

"I know it sounds weird, but it's true. She's a nurse at the hospital."

"I'll send a car."

Will coughed. He looked at his palm, expecting to find blood. "Vickery called me a cop killer."

Faith shook her head like she didn't understand it, either. "Maybe he saw you leaving Eric Haigh's house?" She answered

herself. "No, if he saw you leaving Haigh's, he would've killed you in the street. Do you remember seeing Vickery tonight? Or any of them?"

Will considered the question. He could feel it roll around in his brain like a marble that wouldn't settle. Faith said, "I'm going to call Sara."

"Don't."

"She has a right to—"

"No." Will grabbed her arm. He let go just as quickly. "She knows everything."

Faith examined his face. He wondered what she saw. The bruises wouldn't show for a few hours. The side of Will's head probably had a print from Paul Vickery's shoe. The bridge of his nose would be red. His split lip would show blood. The scratch mark. The bite mark. What would she make of those?

She said, "We need to get to the field office."

Will wanted to go back to Atlanta. He had to get his dog from Sara's apartment. His toothbrush, the clothes he'd left in the drawers she'd cleared out for him. She shouldn't have to see any reminders of Will. It was the least he could do.

"It's over," he told Faith. "With Sara. It's over."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." Will had never been so sure of anything in his life.

Faith closed the first aid kit. She clicked the plastic lock. "Well, that's her loss."

"She has good reason."

"No, she doesn't," Faith insisted. "No matter what you did, Sara's not the woman I thought she was if she can't forgive you."

Will held his tongue. She would find out the truth soon enough.

Faith said, "Get in the front seat. We're going to be late."

"For what?"

"Branson." Faith's tone made Will think maybe she'd said this before. "I saw her at the hospital. She's ready to talk."

"Why now?"

"Somebody tried to take out two of her detectives—three if you count Lena. Eric Haigh was tortured and stabbed to death. Jared Long was almost murdered. Hell yes, she's going to talk to us. She's getting her files. We're supposed to meet at the field office." Faith looked at her watch. "Ten minutes ago."

"What files?"

“The ones from the shooting gallery.” Faith motioned for Will to move. “Denise Branson has been lying to us all along. She’s finally going to show us her files from the raid.”

Will stared into the bathroom mirror at the GBI field office, assessing his damaged face. Life had left him a wound expert. He knew the difference between a cut that scarred into a thin white line and a cut that left nothing but a faint memory. By his estimation, the only lasting reminder of the night would come from the redneck’s knife. The tiny slice below Will’s eye probably should’ve had at least one stitch. But that had to be done at a hospital, and Will was never going to another hospital ever again.

At least the nausea had passed. His head was aching at a lower frequency. The trembling had stopped, which he took as a good sign that he wasn’t having a stroke or a seizure. Swallowing was still an issue. He found this out the hard way when Faith made him drink two bottles of Coke. Then she’d stood over him while he choked down a pack of cheese crackers. Will had gotten irritated at her for bossing him around, which probably meant that whatever she was doing was working.

He looked at his neck, lightly touching the reddish bruises that were starting to come up. If Will had one talent, it was surviving. He’d made it through the night. The redneck hadn’t done too much damage. Tony Dell hadn’t killed him, though he was obviously capable. Paul Vickery had gotten in many, many good blows, but Faith had probably cracked his ankle, which was a nasty enough payback.

So, Will had survived. He had a right to feel good about that.

But then there was Sara.

When Will was a kid, he’d imagined all the slings and arrows thrown his way were easily portable. He didn’t have to keep them inside. He could shove them all into boxes. After a while, there were a lot of boxes. There was nowhere to put them. They floated over his bed at the children’s home. They followed him to school. They chased after him like bullies when he ran down the street.

As Will got older, storage became an issue. Or maybe the metaphor evolved alongside him. The floating boxes turned into pieces of paper. The papers went into files. The files were put in filing cabinets. The cabinets were locked so that he never had to

see them again.

When Sara came into his life, Will forgot about the file room. He forgot about the endless pieces of paper. The rusted cabinet locks that wouldn't turn sometimes.

That was over now.

Standing in the bathroom, Will put Sara Linton into a file and closed the drawer.

"Will?" Faith knocked lightly at the door. "Are you okay?"

He turned on the faucet to let her know he was alive. The water was icy cold. He wanted to splash some onto his face, but the liquid would probably roll right off. Faith had used so much antibiotic ointment that his skin glistened.

Will opened the door. Faith was standing there with a bottle of water in each hand.

His voice sounded like an old man's. "Scared I'd die on the toilet?"

"That's not funny."

"It can happen," he croaked. "I read about it in the paper."

She handed him the water. "You weren't sick again?"

"No." He regretted the loss of her previous silence, but he wasn't cruel enough to tell her. "I'm fine. Thank you."

"Drink all of that water." She led him down the hall. "I sent a cruiser for a knock-check on Cayla Martin's house. Took them forever to find the place. It's not on MapQuest, Google, anything."

Will nodded. He would've never found the road without Tony's help.

"Anyway, the point is they eventually found it. Martin was home. She said Tony Dell could go to hell for all she cared. And then she asked if there was a reward for helping to find him."

Will nodded again. That sounded like Cayla Martin.

"The cruiser's gonna swing by a few more times before they go off shift to make sure Dell doesn't show up. Meanwhile, I caught up Amanda on everything that happened tonight. We're trying to Skype her into the conference room, but there are some technical difficulties."

Will assumed the problems weren't on this end.

"Lonnie Gray is here. The Macon chief of police."

"Amanda called him?"

"Denise Branson did. My hat's off to her for manning up to the

boss. They're outside talking while we try to get the feed up. And by talking, I mean Denise is mostly listening to him screaming. Gray's so far up her ass he's probably in her gallbladder by now."

Will took a sip of water. "She lose her job?"

"If she's lucky, that's all she'll lose. Gray had no idea Branson was lying to us. She could be looking at obstruction charges or worse." Faith glanced over her shoulder. "I haven't told Gray what Vickery did to you yet."

Will shook his head. "Don't. I'll settle it with Vickery."

"You'll have to beat Amanda to it. She's ready to scalp him."

Will kept shaking his head. "I wish you hadn't told her."

"Yeah, well, I wish I hadn't lost my virginity during a midnight screening of *Die Hard*. Get over it." Faith pushed open the door.

The conference room was eerily similar to just about every other conference room at every other GBI field office in the state. Fake oak paneling covered the walls. A long table split the center of the room. Worn pleather office chairs were crammed so tight that two large men couldn't comfortably sit by each other. A small plasma television was on top of a rolling metal cart. Wires hung down to the various electronics on the shelf below. The screen showed what was obviously Amanda's personal Skype photo. The image had to be from the 1980s. She was dressed for tennis. A wooden racket rested on her shoulder. A Jane Fonda headband poofed out her hair. She was smiling, which was probably the most disconcerting part.

Amanda's voice squawked from the speaker on the table. "Can you see me waving my hand?"

"No, ma'am." Agent Nick Shelton, head of the field station, didn't touch the laptop in front of him. Instead, he jammed his fingers into his eyes as he shook his head. "I'm trying everything I can. Are you sure it's not on your end?"

"Yes, I'm sure," Amanda snapped. "I can't see anything but the GBI logo. There's no video at all."

Nick shook his head at Faith. He held out his hand to Will.

"Agent Trent."

"Is Will there?" Amanda asked. "I can't see a thing."

Will tried to make his voice as strong as he could. "Yes, ma'am."

"Why are you whispering?"

Faith said, "Because he was nearly strangled to death."

Amanda showed her usual concern. "Sit close to the speaker, then. I don't want to have to ask you to repeat yourself every two minutes."

"Yes, ma'am."

"I'm going to have a word with that idiot who set up my computer," Amanda complained. "He's been out here three times, and it stops working the minute he leaves."

Faith couldn't help herself. "You know you can catch more flies with honey."

"Yes, Faith, thank you. That's exactly what I need is more flies."

Will slumped into a chair as the two women exchanged more helpful suggestions. The table was set up for a formal meeting. Five bottles of water were in front of five chairs. Notepads and pens were laid out beside them. Will had been at a lot of briefings where a lot of cops lost their jobs, but he felt sorry about this one. Denise Branson had made a career-ending mistake, but she'd probably done it for reasons she felt were right.

It was just a matter of time before Lena Adams did the same.

Will looked at the digital clock on the wall: 3:01 in the morning. He should be exhausted. Maybe the caffeine in the Cokes had sparked him up. Or maybe his body had finally accepted the fact that he was going to live.

He stared at the water bottles Faith had shoved into his hands. One was about a quarter empty. Will's mouth was bone-dry, but just thinking about taking another drink made his throat hurt. He felt like he was drowning in the ocean.

The door opened. Nick stood up. "Ma'am, Chief Gray and Major Branson have entered the room."

Denise Branson was no longer in her shiny uniform. She wore jeans and a loose-fitting blouse. Her previously erect posture was gone. There was something beaten down about her. The leather briefcase was the only indication that she was the same woman they'd talked with in Atlanta yesterday morning.

For his part, Lonnie Gray was decked out in full regalia. His gold epaulets glimmered in the overhead light. He carried his hat under his arm. He was older, but had the look of a guy who started his day with a hundred push-ups before the sun came up. He also looked furious as hell. His mouth was a barely visible white line under his mustache. His forehead was furrowed like a

plowed field.

They all shook hands. Will stayed in his chair, hoping they would understand.

“Chief Gray,” Amanda said. “I’m sorry for the technical difficulties. I’m doing the Skype program from my home.”

Will didn’t know which was worse, the photo of Amanda playing tennis or the thought of her talking to them in her nightgown.

“That’s fine.” Lonnie Gray sat across from Will. He did a double take. So did Denise Branson. She slowly sank into the chair beside her chief, lips parted in surprise.

Will guessed he was going to have to get used to people staring at him for a while.

Nick said, “Ma’am, we’re all seated.”

“Thank you,” Amanda said. “Lonnie, my condolences on your son. I hadn’t heard that he passed away.”

“Thank you.” Gray obviously didn’t want to talk about his personal life. He quickly got down to business. “Mandy, I want to apologize to you, your agents, and your agency for the actions of one rogue officer. Rest assured, my house will be put in order.” He shot Branson a look. “Starting now.”

“I appreciate that, Lonnie.” Amanda didn’t sound like she appreciated it at all. “Major Branson, I need to inform you that because you are officially under investigation, this conversation is being recorded. Anything you say may be used against you. You’re entitled to an attorney—”

“I don’t need an attorney,” Branson said, though they all knew she did. “Give me the form.”

Nick was prepared. He pushed a sheet of paper over to Branson so she could officially acknowledge that she’d been Mirandized.

Branson didn’t read the form. She’d probably seen it thousands of times. She clicked the pen and signed her name on the line before pushing the paper back toward Nick.

Lonnie Gray gave her a nod to begin.

Branson didn’t start immediately—not because she was playing games again, but because she probably knew this was the last briefing she would ever give.

Finally, she took a deep breath and jumped in. “Approximately three and a half weeks ago, Detective Adams came to me about a suspected shooting gallery off Redding Street. I authorized her to

investigate. She monitored the house for a few days and determined the intelligence was good.” Branson paused. She started playing with the ballpoint pen, balancing it between two fingers. “During the course of surveillance, Detective Adams realized that the shooting gallery was being run by a man named Sidney Waller.”

Gray took over. “Waller’s an extremely violent, high-level drug runner. When I came in two years ago, my number one priority was capturing and prosecuting him. Even with the full force of the department behind it, we were never able to make any charges stick.”

Will thought it was pretty decent of the man to acknowledge his failure.

Branson seemed to appreciate it, too. She nodded at him before continuing. “We knew we could shut down the shooting gallery pretty quickly, but with Sid Waller involved, we saw an opportunity. I spoke with Detective Adams and decided that we should expand the operation with the goal of capturing and convicting Waller.”

Gray provided, “This was where I came in. We got the DA on our side, formed an intra-agency task force. There were a lot of moving pieces. Denise and I had to coordinate together.”

Will saw Branson flinch when he used her first name rather than her rank. Still, she said, “We were ten days into the operation when we realized that catching Waller was unlikely. We couldn’t turn anyone. People were terrified of him. The junkies went to ground. No one would wear a wire. It was looking like we would have to go into the house and settle on rounding up whomever we could find. We could time it so Waller was there, but that wasn’t much of a consolation.”

Amanda said, “Because you couldn’t prove that Waller was in charge, he’d bond out with the rest of the junkies.” She sounded impatient. “But obviously, something changed?”

Branson said, “Detective Adams was contacted by a confidential informant. He was in lockup for selling pills to Mercer students. Not on campus, but at one of the coffee shops.”

The distinction was important. Sale or distribution of illegal substances inside a school zone jacked up the prison time exponentially.

Amanda asked, “This was one of Adams’s usual CIs?”

“No, she’d never met him before. He was locked up less than two hours, and he asked for her by name.” Branson added, “Adams has a reputation with the junkies around town. This wasn’t necessarily a red flag.”

Amanda’s brain was working faster than Will’s. “The snitch was Tony Dell?”

Branson hesitated. “Yes, ma’am. He told her that he would trade Sid Waller for immunity off the drug deal.”

Will glanced at Faith. At least now they knew why Lena had sent Will the email. She didn’t want Dell to skate.

Amanda told Branson, “You got Waller on tape, which gave you probable cause for an arrest warrant?”

“Yes,” Branson confirmed. “We commenced the raid four days later. The snitch said a big shipment was coming in. Detective Adams and her team breached the house. They found this.” She nodded to Nick.

He tapped some keys on the laptop and Amanda’s tennis shot was replaced by a crime scene photo.

Will stared at the screen. Two dead men. Hispanic. Shirtless. They were sitting on a tattered old couch. Their throats were slit open.

Nick asked Amanda, “Can you see it, ma’am?”

“Yes.”

Branson said, “The one on the right is Elian Ramirez, an Oxy freak who was at the wrong place at the wrong time. The guy on the left is Diego Nuñez. He was Waller’s right-hand man. Professional thug. He spent his twenties inside for manslaughter coupled with time-plus for bad behavior.”

Branson nodded for the next photo, and Nick slid over the laptop so she could do it herself.

Branson narrated the next picture, which showed a man with the top of his skull chopped off. “Thomas Holland. He’s new to the scene, got hooked on crack his senior year. We don’t know why he was there except to get high. He was taken out with an ax.” A picture of Holland’s scalp flashed up, then his face from another angle. He was young, probably seventeen. Blond hair, piercing blue eyes. Except for the missing part of his head, he could’ve been on a poster for a Disney movie.

Branson flashed through some more innocuous photos, showing stills of the bedrooms, the bathroom, the dining room. Will had

been inside shooting galleries before. The scene was familiar: crack pipes and needles scattered on the floor, mattresses in every room. He never understood where the mattresses came from, or why someone who was shooting poison into their veins required a comfortable place to pass out.

“Here.” Branson stopped on a photo. It showed an open basement door. There were metal braces on each side. A two-by-four was on the floor.

She said, “The basement. This is where Sid Waller was hiding.”

Will wondered if his head was still messed up. If someone locked you in a basement, you weren’t hiding. You were trapped.

Branson said, “Two detectives breached the basement. Mitch Cabello and Keith McVale.”

Faith stiffened. They both recognized the detectives’ names. McVale had taken leave from his job and Cabello had been admitted to the hospital the day of the raid.

Branson said, “Detectives Adams and Vickery stayed in the kitchen. Cabello and McVale called the all-clear on the basement. They relayed to Detective Adams that they’d found a large amount of money. We believe it was shortly after this that Sid Waller came out from his hiding place.”

She pulled up the next photo, which showed a hanging piece of wall paneling with a dark, wet hole behind it that someone had dug into the earth. The photo was not great, but Will could tell the hole was deep enough to hide a grown man.

“Waller knocked out Cabello with a strike to the head. He then took McVale hostage—quietly. Shortly after, Detective Adams went downstairs to help secure the money. She walked into the hostage situation. She drew on Sid Waller, who had a gun to McVale’s head. There was a standoff. Rather than being taken in by Detective Adams, Waller shot himself in the head.”

Will silently replayed her words, which were wholly unexpected. He managed, “Sid Waller shot himself?”

“All three detectives told exactly the same story.” She held up her hands, stopping the obvious question. “The crime scene techs support every word of their statements. The autopsy confirmed the wound was self-inflicted. The tox screen showed there were enough pills in Waller to make a Buddhist monk go postal. At no point do the facts diverge. Everything says Waller took his own life.”

Amanda wanted a second opinion. "Lonnie?"

Gray stirred in his chair. "Our snitch recorded Waller referring to a breakdown in supply. One of his trucks was rolled by some Cubans down in Miami. I made a call to some contacts I still have down in Florida. Waller was on the verge of a war with the Cuban cartel."

Branson said, "Sid knew he wouldn't last more than a day in prison. Better to eat a bullet than take a shiv from some Cuban in the yard."

Amanda moved them along. "Where does Big Whitey fit into all of this?"

Gray looked at Branson. He seemed sad, like one of his children had disappointed him.

She told them, "I was working the case off-book. Chief Gray told me not to pursue it, even on my own time, but I was obsessed with tracking Big Whitey down."

Amanda asked, "This is connected to Waller?"

"Tangentially," Branson conceded.

"Is there a reason you're not taking us down that tangent?"

Branson reached into her briefcase again. She took out a file that was several inches thick. Then she took out another one. Then another one. She stacked them on the table.

Faith wasn't shy. She grabbed the whole pile and slid it toward her.

Branson said, "Big Whitey came onto my radar eighteen months ago. I like statistics. I like to run the numbers, track the crimes, see where we need to move people around to stop the bad guys." She paused. Will could tell she had just realized she wasn't going to get to do this anymore.

"Anyway," Branson said, "it's what you said yesterday, the same thing that happened in Savannah and Hilton Head. It felt like there was a larger, organizing factor. Our usual lowlifes were stepping up. There's a law firm here they all use, ambulance chasers, sloppy and cheap. Suddenly, they merged with a white-shoe firm out of Florida."

"Vanhorn and Gresham." Faith looked up from the report she was reading. "The shooter who went after Jared Long is represented by the firm."

"Correct," Branson said. "We started seeing low-level cons like Fred Zachary walking on solid charges because of these guys. I

started talking to folks, meeting with my detectives, and figured out there was a new player in town.”

Faith said, “Big Whitey.”

“Correct,” Branson repeated. “Whitey started out banking legit through a series of pain management clinics. It’s the usual deal. They were using junkies to cash the scripts. Rednecks, mostly. They control the meth trade, so it was natural for Whitey to tap into an existing market.”

Gray felt the need to explain himself. “I wasn’t persuaded Big Whitey existed. There were some sketchy details from Florida, but no name, no description, no affiliation. He was a ghost.” Gray shrugged. “And we had a lot going on at the time. There was a rash of heroin overdoses at one of our private schools. Young women from good homes. Not the type we were used to seeing in that situation.”

“Rich white girls,” Faith supplied, skipping the political correctness. “They die or just end up at the hospital?”

Branson said, “Three died. Six went to the ER, then got carted off to white-girl prison.” She meant rehab. “They were from some of our better-known families. There was a lot of heat to make arrests. Like I said, Whitey was running pills through rednecks. Most of our non-pharmaceutical dealers were black and Hispanic. It’s easy to spot who’s working for whom.”

Faith put it more succinctly. “So, the white people freaked out and demanded justice. You arrested a bunch of blacks and Hispanics.” She used sarcasm to make her point. “I’m sure that went over well.”

Gray was obviously uncomfortable with Faith’s directness, or maybe he was more conscious that the conversation was being recorded. “We arrested the dealers who were known to sell heroin. My department is not in the business of racial profiling and never will be.”

Will assumed from Gray’s tone that he’d faced these accusations before. Atlanta had enough political scandals of its own to fill the local news, but Will had a vague recollection of seeing some reports about the mayhem down in Macon. Lonnie Gray must’ve gone to work every day wondering if he was going to keep his job.

Branson spoke reluctantly. “Because of the clampdown, we crippled Whitey’s competition in the streets. We created a racial

firestorm that split apart the city and made all the politicians start screaming for blood.”

Gray admitted, “That’s when I shut down Denise’s investigation. We had too much going on to waste resources on a man we weren’t even sure existed.”

“This—” Will tried to clear the squeak from his voice. “This was Big Whitey’s endgame? To take over the heroin trade?”

Branson answered, “He took over everything. Remember, chess, not checkers. He comes into town and makes friends, pays up the food chain to guys like Sid Waller so that everybody stays happy. Whitey has operating capital. He opens up some pain clinics, gets his regulars, puts the junkies on his payroll so they start dealing. Then he spreads out his business to the malls, into the suburbs. He gets the kids with money hooked, then when they want something more, he moves them on to heroin.” She shook her head, though he could tell part of her was impressed. “Once his business model’s up and running, he starts taking out the competition.”

Amanda asked, “You know this is a pattern how?”

“Because I drove to Savannah and talked to some retired detectives who were too scared to tell me this over the phone.”

Gray’s clenched fists indicated he was just hearing this. He shot Branson a withering look.

Will couldn’t let go of something. He asked, “Chief Gray, you didn’t think Whitey existed?”

Gray reluctantly turned his attention away from Branson. “We’re not used to this level of sophistication in our criminal underworld. Mandy, you know I’ve worked all over the state, but this is more like something you’d see out of Miami or New York.”

There was a big fish/little pond logic to Whitey taking on the smaller cities. He’d also managed to pick two areas in Georgia where the population was predominantly African American. It was as if he was franchising his business model.

Will asked Branson, “Major, why were you so sure Whitey existed?”

“May I?” Branson was talking to Faith. She wanted one of her file folders back.

“Help yourself.” Faith pushed the stack back across the table.

Branson flipped through one of the files until she found a photograph. She put it on the table. The young girl in the picture

was pretty and blonde, posing for the camera in that seductive way that teenage girls don't know is dangerous.

Branson said, "Marie Sorensen. Sixteen years old. She worked at a cheese shop in River Crossing, one of our upscale malls. Lots of bored suburban kids hang out there. Sorensen's by far the prettiest. She managed to catch Big Whitey's eye."

Nick told Amanda, "I'll scan it in for you."

"Don't bother." Amanda guessed, "Big Whitey got Sorensen hooked on heroin?"

"He got her into his car." Branson took out another photo, this one showing Sorensen looking ten years older and twenty pounds lighter. Both eyes were bruised. There were open sores on her face. Patches of hair were missing from her head.

Branson said, "Another one of Big Whitey's patterns, but this one he does himself because he enjoys it." She put the pictures side by side on the table. "He tells them that he works for a modeling agency. They buy it because they've been told they're beautiful all their lives. He gets them to the car, forces them into the trunk, then drives them to a hotel on the coast—Tybee, Fort King George, Jekyll. He rapes them. His friends rape them. He shoots them up with heroin. He tricks them out."

Branson paused. She looked away from the photos.

"Sorensen was defiant at first. He put her in a dog crate to teach her a lesson. Took about a week to break her, then he put her up for sale on the Internet. One-sixty for the lunchtime special, two-fifty for an hour. Four hundred for two hours. She does ten, fifteen clients a day. Her habit runs a couple hundred dollars. Not a bad business model. Do the math."

Faith stared straight ahead. She couldn't look at the photos, either. Will wondered if she was thinking about her daughter.

Will asked, "What happened to her?"

Branson said, "Sorensen got old real quick. That's the problem with these young girls. They don't stay young for long. After two months, she was moved to the next stop on the circuit. That's what these guys do—they move them around, never let them get settled in one place."

She paused again. The pain was obviously still fresh. "Eventually, the girls get sent out to California, where they're tricked out on the streets. Sorensen ended up in LA. She managed to call her mom a few times, tell her what happened. Mom hired

a private detective to try to find her.”

Faith asked, “She didn’t file a report in Macon? The girl was sixteen years old.”

Branson’s face told the story. This was the ball she had dropped. This was why she was so obsessed with the case. “We filed a missing persons report when she disappeared. When the mom told me about the phone calls, I reached out to LA. They told me it was a lost cause. They’ve got so many girls streaming into the city that they had to close the Hollywood bus station.”

Faith smoothed her lips together like she was putting on lipstick.

Branson slid out another photo. Will recognized the tiny ruler beside Marie Sorensen’s head as the kind that medical examiners used during autopsies.

She said, “The private dick in LA tracked down an address. The police searched the apartment three times before they found her. She was crammed into a suitcase underneath the bed. Still alive.” Branson let out a slow breath. “Still alive.”

She looked down at the autopsy photo. No one pushed her to go on.

Branson took another deep breath.

“Mom got the first plane out to California. Marie’s in the hospital for three weeks. They patch her back together, get some weight on her, take her down off the heroin, only they can’t heal her brain. Two weeks after mom gets her home, she sneaks out and kills herself. Heroin. Cops found her behind the church. She was six months to the day from walking out of that mall with Big Whitey.”

They were all silent after that. Will looked at the three photographs. Branson hadn’t exaggerated. Sorensen was beautiful. He could imagine the girl would believe a modeling agency was interested. The autopsy photo was a sharp contrast, a dark reminder that the only person who would want her now was her grieving mother.

Finally, Amanda asked, “You talked to Sorensen when she returned to Macon?”

“Yes.” Branson looked down at her hands. “He never gave her a name. She was told from the start to call him Big Whitey. She didn’t know his real identity, couldn’t give us any actionable intelligence. She was blindfolded most of the time, and when she

wasn't being sold, she was locked in a closet or a suitcase. The description she gave was spotty—dark hair, dark eyes. No distinguishing features.”

Faith asked, “Do you think she was lying?”

“Yes,” Branson admitted. “She was terrified of him. Couldn't sleep in her own bed. She stayed in the closet the whole time she was home, back to the wall, waiting for him to come get her.”

“She was abducted at the mall,” Faith said. “What about CCTV?”

“The cameras were out. We don't know if he had someone from security on the payroll or if he was just lucky.” Branson added, “He's always been lucky.”

Faith asked, “No one saw anything at the mall or in the parking lot? No customers or friends?”

“No. And there was nothing on her cell phone or email, so he obviously made her keep it on the down low.” Branson added, “That's what he's good at, not being seen.”

Amanda finally spoke, and Will realized she hadn't been silent out of respect. She was livid. “I'm curious, Ms. Branson, as to why you've got a sex-trafficking case in your town and the Georgia Bureau of Investigation doesn't know anything about it.”

Branson's cheeks darkened with a blush. “You're right. This is all on me. I was ashamed that I couldn't do anything to save her, and I was angry that I was told not to pursue Big Whitey.” She turned to Chief Gray. “I should've told you, Lonnie. I was hellbent on proving you wrong. Instead of running around behind your back, I should've gone to you for help.”

Gray wasn't kind. “You're goddamn right about that.”

“I'm sorry.”

“That's enough,” Gray said. “Tell them what you found in the house.”

“You mean the shooting gallery?” Faith sounded surprised. She'd obviously thought that part was over.

Will had a sinking feeling that he knew the answer, but he asked, “What was behind the panel?”

Branson turned back to the laptop computer. She tapped the screen awake, then advanced the next image.

The photo of a young boy appeared on screen. The picture was grainy, obviously taken with a cell phone. The boy's eyes were blackened slits. Like Marie Sorensen's, his face was emaciated.

His lips were dry. Sores caked his skin. It was his eyes that made Will finally turn away. He could not stand to see the hollow look in the boy's eyes.

Amanda broke the silence, asking, "Cause of death was dehydration? Malnourishment?"

Branson seemed surprised. "No, he's alive."

Will felt truly shocked for the first time since the meeting had started.

Branson said, "We have no idea who he is. He can talk, but he won't."

Faith looked as if she wanted to grab Branson across the table. "He hasn't said anything for a week?"

Branson didn't answer. She'd been keeping this all to herself for so long that she'd lost perspective. Talking it out had obviously revealed her catastrophic errors.

Faith said, "I haven't seen anything about him on the news."

"I entered it into the FBI databases, but I kept Macon out of it." Branson glanced at Chief Gray. The man's hands were gripped so tightly together he looked as if he was trying to break the bones. "If the local stations picked up on the story, then Whitey would know the boy was still alive. The only thing we know for sure about this guy is he murders anybody who gets in his way. He'd kill that boy just as sure as I'm sitting here."

Faith asked, "Which hospital is he in?"

"He's been under close medical supervision." Branson didn't offer any further explanation. She told her chief, "Chances are he was abducted in another state. Wherever he's from, the local police force got the notice. For what it's worth."

Will knew that everyone in the room had gotten the notice. There was no way to read them all. Nearly 800,000 children were reported missing each year, which translated into more than two thousand notices a day.

Branson said, "The boy doesn't have any identifying marks. We don't know what region he's from. We don't know when he was taken. We've been combing through all the stranger abduction reports, but—" Branson seemed to realize how thin her excuses sounded. Her voice was weak when she said, "He's the only living witness who can identify Big Whitey."

Faith demanded, "How do you know that if he's not talking?"

"Because of his reaction when I said Big Whitey's name."

Because he has ... distinguishing marks ... on his body that are the same as Marie Sorensen's."

"Wait a minute," Faith said. "Back up. Who else knows about this?"

"No more than I can count on my hand." Branson listed them. "Detective Adams stayed downstairs while I cleared everyone from the scene. Only two paramedics were allowed in the basement—girls I've known since high school. Both of them have been taking turns watching the boy around the clock. We couldn't take him to the hospital. He's being kept at an undisclosed location. Dr. Thomas is treating him. I've known Dean since I was a child. There's one other officer who guards him when I can't. Only the people I trust with my life know where that kid is."

Will looked at Lonnie Gray, easily judging from the man's expression that he'd learned about this cabal just a few moments before the rest of them. His face was bright red. His mustache looked like a piece of chalk over his mouth.

Gray demanded, "And who exactly is this other officer who's watching the boy now?"

"She's with the sheriff's department. She's a good friend." Branson wouldn't look at Gray. Her cheeks darkened again. Will guessed the deputy was more than a friend. "I trust her."

"More than you trust me, apparently."

"I'm sorry, sir. I knew if you found out, you'd have an obligation to report this to the state. Other people in the department would find out. We wouldn't be able to keep him safe. Big Whitey has too much reach. The boy would be dead in a matter of hours."

"That again." Gray addressed the speaker on the table, telling Amanda, "Denise theorizes that Big Whitey has a mole on my force."

Will thought about the file on the redneck's desk. They had Bill Black's police record. They had his military details. It wasn't so much of a stretch to think Whitey had a cop or two working for his side. If the pattern held, he had more than a few.

Faith analyzed the situation differently. She told Branson, "You think someone tipped off Big Whitey about the raid."

She shrugged, but said, "The raid team breaches the house and finds three dead guys. Sid Waller's locked in the basement with an abducted boy. It practically had a bow tied on it."

Gray turned on Branson, demanding, "Who do you think is the mole? Vickery and Franklin were nearly killed tonight. Adams was attacked. Eric Haigh was tortured before he was murdered." He added, "Why do you think that is, Denise? Why do you think they tortured him?" He answered his own question. "They're looking for the boy. If they had someone on the inside, they wouldn't have to torture cops for information."

Branson looked down at the table. The room went silent.

Will thought about Lena Adams in the ICU. She had told Will that he would eventually find out she was doing the right thing. She had said the words as if they would redeem all the ills that came before. Had she thought that saving the boy would make up for losing her baby? Or was it simply a matter of Lena's eternal conviction that everything she did was for the greater good?

Will asked, "Does Lena know where the boy is?"

"I sure as hell don't," Gray interrupted. Will tried again, asking, "Does she?"

Branson shook her head. "Lena has no idea. I let her believe the state was already involved, that we had to be quiet about what happened to keep him safe. I doubt she even told Jared."

Gray realized, "She lied to Internal Affairs. None of this was mentioned during any of her interviews." He sounded disgusted. "Jesus Christ, Denise. You forced her to lie on record."

Branson defended, "Lena was protecting the boy. She knew what Big Whitey would do if he found out there was a witness."

"And I assume you let her believe I was okay with this?" Gray waved away any response Branson might come up with. "For the love of God. I can't believe I trusted you."

Faith said, "Obviously someone figured out the boy was alive. Why else attack Lena in the middle of the night? Why else go after the rest of the team that was there during the raid?" She told Branson, "Thanks for wasting my fucking time and nearly getting my partner killed."

Amanda took over. "Where is this boy now?"

Gray turned to his former confidant, making a show of waiting for an answer.

Branson equivocated. She told Amanda, "I'd rather not say on an open line, but I'll take your people to him as soon as this is over."

Surprisingly, Amanda didn't argue. "Denise, tell your

paramedics to get ready for transport. We'll keep it quiet, but we have to move that boy to Atlanta."

Branson's inner cop took over. "Logistics might take a while. We'll need to get an ambulance. My paramedics are working alternating shifts. Dr. Thomas will need to get him ready."

Amanda moved a split second ahead of Will. "Sara Linton's still down there, right?"

Faith looked at Will. She answered, "Right."

Amanda said, "Will, do whatever it takes to get Sara in that ambulance to Atlanta. If there really is a leak down there, we need to use our own people as much as we can."

His mouth went dry. He couldn't swallow again.

Amanda took his silence for agreement. "We still have an active manhunt for Tony Dell. Even if the boy won't talk, we might be able to flip Dell. Again. Will, what time does your shift start?"

Will had forgotten about Bill Black's hospital job. "Eight."

"Don't go in early. Maintain your cover. You're a con. Dell is on the move. There's a heavy police presence. It would make sense for you to start asking questions."

He said, "There's a nurse I've been working. Dell's stepsister. She knows I was sent up for assault. I think if I work it right, I can scare her into talking."

"Terrorize her if that's what it takes." Amanda seemed ready to get started. "Lonnie, I'll be in touch."

"Thank you," Gray said. "I appreciate your—"

"Sir." Nick was apologetic. "She already terminated the connection."

Chief Gray didn't bother with formalities. He turned on Branson like a raging lion. "You have some nerve, lady. Make me come here in the middle of the night like I'm some goddamn schoolboy being called to the principal's office. Make me look like a fool in front of one of the most respected peace officers in the state. And I gather you'll still refuse to tell me the boy's location?" He waited for her to answer. When it was clear she wouldn't, he mumbled, "You worthless piece of shit. It sickens me to think you ever wore the uniform."

Tears came into Branson's eyes as she tried, "Sir, with all due respect—"

"You don't know the meaning of the word." Gray snatched his

hat off the table. "Human Resources will be in touch. Don't try to reach out to me or any of my officers. Don't try to plead your case. Don't even say my name. As far as I'm concerned, your involvement with me and my department is over." He stormed out of the room.

Branson's throat worked. She looked down, pressing her palms flat to the table like she needed a moment to collect herself.

Faith didn't give her the time. "You're gay?"

Will was surprised by the bluntness of the question. Branson seemed ashamed. She looked away, her head turned to the wall.

Faith said, "Jared Long got a call from you on his cell phone a few minutes before he was attacked."

Branson seemed to understand. She wiped the tears from her eyes. "You thought I was two-timing with him."

"Why else would you be calling Lena's husband in the middle of the night?"

"I was worried about her. Something wasn't right."

"Because of the raid?"

"No, before that. She was just—" Branson tried to find the right words. "We're friends. That's *all* we are. But something's been wrong with Lena for a while. She was happy, pumped about taking down Waller, and then when it all came together, she just got sad. She wouldn't talk to me about it. I thought maybe Jared could tell me what was going on."

Will guessed that Lena hadn't told Denise Branson about the baby.

Faith quickly moved on. "Where are you keeping the boy?"

Branson took a deep breath. She held it for a while. Will could see the turmoil in her face. Every second of her life for the last eight days had been devoted to keeping the boy safe. She'd risked alienating her friends, losing her job, pissing off her chief. No cop ever wanted to hand over a case, especially one that ripped at their heart.

"Okay," Branson finally said. "We're keeping him at my girlfriend's farm."

"The sheriff's deputy?"

"Yes. She works two counties over. We've been together about a year. Nobody knows about us."

"Good," Faith said. "How far away is the farm?"

"Not far, but it's gonna take some time to put this together. We

don't make phone calls. As you clearly know, all calls can be traced, even blocked ones. I didn't want any of their numbers showing up on my line. We check in on a message board for gay first responders." Branson looked at her watch. "Dr. Thomas comes in at six before he goes to work. My ex is already there—one of the paramedics. Her girlfriend will come at six to relieve her. My deputy is spelling me. I was supposed to take the night shift, but then the shit hit the fan."

Faith checked her own watch. "So, everyone will be there in a little over two hours?"

"Unless they read the message boards at four in the morning." She asked Nick, "Can I use your laptop?"

Nick offered, "The computer in my office is more private." He scooped up the Big Whitey files, telling Faith, "I'll get started on these."

Branson followed him to the door, but she didn't leave. "I'm sorry for wasting y'all's time. I always try to be tough as I need to be, never tougher than I have to be."

Will nodded, but Faith wouldn't give an inch. She waited for Branson to leave, then blew out a puff of air.

Will said, "What do you think?"

"I think Tony Dell's closer to Big Whitey than we thought." He nodded, though they both knew that's not what he was asking about.

"Whoever this Big Whitey is, he's a freaking genius." Faith couldn't keep the admiration out of her voice. "He played them like a fiddle."

"The two men in the house." Will coughed a few times before he could continue. "I could see Tony slitting their throats, then going after the third guy with an ax. He's a killer. He likes using his hands. He takes out the three of them, puts the brace on the basement door so Sid Waller's trapped, then he walks away."

"He was feeding Lena intel. He knew when the raid was going to happen." Faith waited out another coughing fit. "You still think Tony's not Big Whitey?"

Will gagged down some water. "I don't know what to think anymore. He's more like the point at the edge of somebody else's sword." Will coughed again. "And I know he's got that weird thing with his sister. Stepsister. But I can't see him with little boys. He couldn't stand to be in the same room with his own

nephew.”

“You never know what people get up to,” Faith said. “Do you think the stepsister knows anything?”

Will shrugged to save his voice. He’d have to find a way to get Cayla Martin to talk. There was no other option.

Faith stared at the grainy cell phone photo on the screen. “Poor little lamb. He can’t be more than seven.”

Will didn’t want to look at the screen, but once he did, he couldn’t take his eyes off the boy. It didn’t seem possible he was still alive. How had he survived living in that dank, dark hole? And what had been done to him while he was there?

“I’ll call Sara.” Faith took out her cell phone and dialed the number.

Will opened his mouth to tell her there was no point. Nothing came out. He couldn’t speak, but not because of his sore throat. It occurred to him that the boy was not talking because he had nothing to say.

His expression in the photo told the story. The boy would never be the same again. He would never sleep as deeply or play with the same abandon. Chasing a ball, flying a kite, helping his mother set the table—none of this would ever be done without constantly checking for danger. The boy did not want to go back to his parents. They wouldn’t recognize him. They would take one look and ask who was this damaged creature and what had he done with their real son. It was all captured in the grainy photo on the screen—the fear, the loneliness, the overwhelming shame.

Marie Sorensen had the same look. She had been stolen. She had been abused. She had been thrown away. Even when she got home, she never felt safe. She had made the only choice that was truly her own.

Will couldn’t blame her.

There wasn’t a box in the world that was big enough to contain those horrors. Everything she’d survived had made her want to die. Who could fault the boy for thinking the same thing?

“Sara’s not answering.” Faith ended the call. “Do you think she’s at the hospital?”

He didn’t answer.

Sara was finished with Will. That much was obvious. But somehow, for the brief time they were together, she had managed

to change him. She had tamed his beasts. She had made him feel safe. She had made him feel whole. Sara hadn't completely shuttered the file room, but she had made it seem further away—like someone else's memory, someone else's life.

Will had to tell her this, had to explain why she was so desperately needed.

“I'll find her,” he told Faith.

If anyone could coax the boy into talking, it was Sara Linton.

13.

“Sara?”

Sara turned over in bed, trying to get away from the noise. She hadn’t fallen asleep last night so much as collapsed from exhaustion.

“Sara?” Nell said. “Sara?”

Sara woke slowly, rousing from a deep, dreamless sleep. She put her hand over her eyes. “What time is it?”

“Just after four-thirty.”

Sara dropped her hand. She looked up at Nell. They were in the hotel room. After what happened with Will last night, Sara didn’t have it in her to drive back to Atlanta. “Is Jared okay?”

Nell gave an odd smile. “Possum just called. He says they’re going to wake him up. I was about to leave for the hospital.”

Sara forced herself to sit up. She hurt in all the wrong places.

“I’ll go with you.”

“You need to get the door. There’s a man who wants to talk to you.”

Sara finally managed to put together the conversation. There was only one man in Macon right now who would want to talk to her. She wasn’t sure she wanted to talk to him. Still, she brushed her fingers through her hair as she went to the door.

And then her jaw dropped when she saw Will.

For just a moment, Sara found herself thinking that she was responsible for the damage to his face.

Then she realized that he’d been beaten.

“What happened?” She reached up to him, but there was nowhere Sara could touch Will that wasn’t injured. Even the blood vessels in his eyes were broken. “Did someone choke you?”

He swallowed. The pain made him cringe. His voice was hoarse. “Amanda sent me.”

Sara could hardly understand him. “Come in.”

Will didn’t move. She grabbed his arm, pulling him into the room.

"Nell, this is a friend of mine." Sara let herself believe she was holding back details because Will was undercover. "He lives in Atlanta."

"Nice to meet you." Nell dug her hand into her purse, but her eyes were on Sara's hand, which was still wrapped around Will's arm.

Sara let go.

Nell said, "It's good, Sara. I'm happy for you." She held up her keycard. "I'll be at the hospital."

She nodded at Will before she left. The door closed automatically, slamming hard against the metal jamb.

Sara knew it would be pointless to go after her. She asked Will, "What happened?"

He put his fingers to his larynx as if he could force up the volume. "We've got about an hour."

She stared, disbelieving. "What?"

"I know you don't want me here." He coughed, the effort from talking obviously too much. "Amanda asked me to—" He coughed again. And again. His face started turning red.

"Sit down." Sara was still angry, but she couldn't let him pass out in front of her. She found a tiny bottle of Tennessee whiskey in the minibar. "Drink half of this."

Will sat down, but he wouldn't take the bottle. He hated alcohol.

"You won't get drunk," Sara told him. He still wouldn't take it.

She stuck the bottle in his face. "Think of it as medicine. It'll numb your throat."

Will reluctantly took the whiskey. He opened the cap. Instead of drinking the alcohol, he sniffed it. He scowled at the smell. He looked at the label even though Sara knew he couldn't read the cursive script.

"Will, drink the goddamn whiskey."

Her tone was sharper than she intended, but it worked.

He managed to swallow a mouthful before he gagged.

"Christ!" He heaved a cough from deep inside his chest. His eyes watered. He shook his head like a dog.

Sara crossed her arms to stop herself from soothing him. She'd been too worn out last night to think beyond closing her eyes, but now it all came rushing back. Every ounce of concern she felt kept getting overwhelmed by anger.

Will coughed a few more times. He screwed the cap back on the bottle and threw it into the trashcan.

Sara asked, "Are we going to talk about what happened?"

He blinked to clear his eyes. "Amanda—"

"Sweetheart, if you say her name one more time, one of us is going to have to leave. And it won't be me."

His jaw set.

Sara wasn't going to give in. "I mean it, Will. You come in here with your face all banged up. That cut should be stitched. You've got blood in your ear. You probably need an MRI. And I'm just supposed to pretend none of this exists, the same way I pretend you didn't have a childhood and you don't have scars all over your body and—" She couldn't go on. The list was endless. "Talk to me, Will. I can handle the strong, but I can't take the silent anymore."

Predictably, he did the exact opposite. He crossed his ankle over his leg. She saw the bottom of his boot. The Cat's Paw logo was on the heel.

Sara had to close her eyes for a moment so she didn't lose control. She counted to ten, then twenty, before she could look at him again. "Will, your not talking to me about things is what got us into this mess in the first place."

He swallowed. The alcohol had worked. He didn't flinch this time. "I'm sorry."

Sara felt like a schoolmarm, but she couldn't stop herself from asking, "Sorry for what?"

He picked at the stitching on his boot. "When I chased you. When I—" He stopped. "What I did when I caught you."

Sara blushed at the memory.

He said, "I was out of control."

She couldn't let him take all the blame. "We were both out of control."

"I hurt you."

"I'm not Amish, Will. I've had rough sex before."

His startled look told her he thought it was something else.

"I didn't tell you to stop." Sara couldn't understand how he could be so wrong about something so obvious. "I was never afraid of you. I was furious. I wanted to hurt you. But I wasn't afraid."

His eyes glistened. She couldn't tell if it was from the whiskey

anymore.

“Will, I was mad at you—I’m still mad—because you lied to me. Not just once, but repeatedly. Obviously, something happened to you last night, too. We took it out on each other. It’s what adults do sometimes. But you need to know that you can’t just fuck me silly and make everything better.”

He was still upset. His voice was filled with self-recrimination. “I never wanted to be that way with you.”

“Baby—” The word came out of her mouth so naturally. Sara could see the effect it had on him, and she understood that as bad as things were for her last night, they’d gotten so much worse for Will after he left.

Sara sat down on the edge of the bed. “Please, just talk to me.”

He didn’t look at her. He leaned forward, elbows on his knees. She could see his jaw clenching and unclenching. A dark red mark crisscrossed the side of his forehead. There was a waffle print to the pattern, as if someone had kicked him.

He said, “I came here for somebody else.”

“Who?”

Will gripped his hands together. He stared at the floor. When he finally spoke, his voice was so soft that she could barely hear him. “I feel like I’m disappearing.”

Of all the things he could’ve said, this was the least expected. Sara didn’t know how to respond.

Will obviously didn’t expect her to. His jaw worked again. She could tell every fiber of his being wanted to stop. Still, he said, “All my life, I’ve been invisible. At school. At the home. At work. I do my job. I go home. I get up the next morning and I do it all over again.” He gripped his hands tighter. Seconds passed before he managed to continue. “You changed that. You made me want to get up in the morning. You made me want to come home to you.” He finally met her gaze. “You’re the first person in my life who’s ever really seen me.”

Sara still couldn’t speak, but this time it was because she was too overwhelmed. The sound of his desolation broke her in two.

“I can’t go back to that.” His voice was gruff. “I can’t.”

Sara couldn’t let him. Her anger slipped away like sand through her fingers. She gently cradled her hand to his face. She knew this man. She knew his heart. Will hadn’t hurt her on purpose. He’d been stupid and stubborn, but not malicious. And

Sara couldn't be the woman Lena Adams thought she was. She couldn't demand perfection. She couldn't set her standards so high that no one could meet them.

She had already lost the first love of her life. She couldn't lose the second one.

"Okay." She rested her hand on the nape of his neck. "We'll be okay."

His eyes scanned her face, looking for any sign of equivocation. "Do you mean that?"

She nodded.

He nodded, too, as if he still needed to convince himself. "I'm sorry I hurt you. I was wrong."

"Please, don't do it again." Sara closed the distance between them. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders. "I'm your girlfriend. This isn't just about keeping things from me. It's about trusting me. I may not understand, or agree, but you have to trust me enough to tell me the truth."

"You're right." He held her close to his chest. His fingers stroked through her hair. She felt his lips press against the top of her head. "I need you to promise me something."

She pulled back so that she could see him. "Okay."

"Promise me we're never going to break up again."

She started to laugh, but there was a sincerity to his tone that stopped her.

Will said, "Actually, I'll promise. I'll never leave you." He sounded more certain than she had ever heard him. "You can tell me to go, but I won't. I'll sleep in my car outside your house. I'll follow you to work. To the gym. If you go out to dinner, I'll be at the next table. If you go to a movie, I'll be in the row behind you."

Sara felt her brow furrow. "You're going to stalk me?"

He shrugged his shoulder, as if this was all a done deal. "I love you."

She finally laughed. "Well, that's a really shitty way to say it."

"I love you."

Her response came as naturally as taking a breath before jumping into the deep end of the water. "I love you, too."

He leaned in but didn't kiss her. Despite his forceful words, he waited for permission. Sara touched her lips to his as softly as she could. The kiss was chaste, but it was enough.

He said, "We're okay."

She nodded. "We're okay."

He held her hand in both of his. He kissed her fingers. Then he turned her wrist and looked at her watch. "We need to go."

"Where?"

He stood abruptly. "I'll tell you about it on the way. Lena found something."

Sara guessed, "A winning lottery ticket?"

"No." He helped her up from the bed. "She found a little boy."

Sara pulled her BMW into an open garage bay. There were two other cars inside the metal structure, which was several yards from a sprawling, single-story house. They were on a horse farm. She could see a few mares and a colt out by a red barn. The sun was just cracking the horizon. The horses silently chewed some grass as they watched the garage door close.

Sara recognized the black Suburban parked beside them as a G-ride, or a government-issued SUV. She assumed either Faith or Amanda was here. The sheriff's cruiser in the far bay probably belonged to the owner of the farm. Keeping horses was as costly as it was risky. Normally, amateur farmers had to seek out more steady employment. Sara had been thrown from a horse twice in her life. She imagined owning a horse farm was only marginally less dangerous than being a sheriff's deputy.

Will got out of the car. He opened the back door and retrieved her medical bag from the back seat. He didn't hand Sara the bag. He carried it for her.

"This way," Will said, heading toward a side door.

Sara followed him as he picked his way past various small machinery taking up the last bay in the four-bay garage. She took Will's hand to steady herself as she stepped over a tractor attachment that looked like a gigantic yard rake. He held on longer than necessary. She stroked his fingers with her thumb, wishing she could erase the past twenty-four hours and start all over again. Or maybe not. In so many strange ways, she felt closer to Will than ever before.

Faith opened the door before Will could. She avoided looking at Sara. "Find it okay?"

Sara said, "The GPS led us straight here."

“Good.” She reached into her purse and pulled out a handful of Jolly Ranchers candy. “The boy’s still asleep. We didn’t want to wake him until we had to. Denise and her girlfriend are in the house with one of the paramedics. The doctor read the message board, so he knows not to come.”

“Sounds good.” Will took the candy and shoved it into his pocket. “I’ve got around two hours before I’m due at the hospital.

What’s the plan?”

Sara felt her stomach lurch at the thought of him going back undercover, but she kept her thoughts to herself.

Faith said, “The other paramedic is on her way with the bus. I was about to head over to dispatch. I want to be sitting on the supervisor so no one panics when they go off-radio. We don’t know how far this thing reaches. I’ll stay there until I get the word that the boy’s in Atlanta.”

Will asked, “Who’s going to follow the ambulance? Sara’s not going without backup.”

“Denise will be behind them the whole way. She’ll have her piece and her shotgun. Amanda thinks a larger escort team would alert Big Whitey.”

Will held out his phone to Sara. “Use this to check in with Faith every half hour.”

Sara tried not to bristle at being ordered around. “I’ve got my hospital BlackBerry.”

“The 689 number?” She nodded, and he pocketed his phone. “I’m serious. These people don’t mind collateral damage. You need to call Faith every half hour until you’re safe at the hospital.”

Sara wasn’t sure this was necessary, but Will didn’t give her a chance to disagree. He headed toward the house. She saw him take one of the candies out of his pocket. Instead of peeling away the wrapper, he bit it off with his teeth.

Again, Sara followed Will. He was back in top form—back in charge. Even in that awful maintenance uniform, he seemed like his old self. She watched him walk, the easy, athletic gait, the muscular line of his broad shoulders. Her big, tough cop. If Sara was trim, at least she was the kind of trim who didn’t settle.

Faith walked beside Sara. She was silent as they trudged across the yard. The tension crackled between them like static electricity.

Sara said, "You are a fantastic liar."

Faith grinned. "I really am."

Sara couldn't stop herself from smiling back.

Faith asked, "Did Will fill you in?"

"He told me everything."

Faith raised an eyebrow.

"Everything that's happened in Macon," Sara amended. Will had started talking the minute they'd left the hotel room. She'd never heard him speak for such an extended period of time. He'd told her about Lena's emailed tip, the rednecks, the boy found in the basement and Denise Branson's part in protecting him. The only detail Sara could've done without was the fact that Will had been riding a motorcycle, but even her shocked gasp did not stop him from talking. She'd actually slowed the car at one point, relishing his sudden candor, wishing he would extend it to the rest of his life. His childhood. His family. His bad marriage.

There weren't enough miles in the road.

Faith said, "Remember when you told me a while ago that you had to be on Will's side?"

Sara remembered the conversation well. Faith had asked her for details about Will's background. Sara hadn't felt right about sharing what little she knew. "I get it. You need to be on his side, too."

Faith smiled, obviously relieved.

Sara asked, "Did the doctor give you any treatment information?"

"The first few days, he gave the boy fluids, a round of antibiotics, but that was it. He's mostly been dropping by to give him a sense of routine and make sure nothing new pops up."

"That probably helped more than anything else. Kids always need structure."

"He's still in survival mode. Denise thinks his food might've been drugged while they held him. He won't drink Coke, but he'll drink bottled water. He tears everything apart like he's looking for a pill. He'll eat a bite, then wait to see if it makes him sick or sleepy, then he'll eat another bite. They've tried feeding him stuff that isn't easily tampered with, like fruit roll-ups and deli meats. He still breaks it apart before he eats it."

Sara nodded because there was nothing to say. She felt overwhelmed by the knowledge of the terrible things that

happened to children. Faith must've been feeling the same. She was quiet until they reached the house.

The door opened and a petite African American woman came out. She was dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, but she had a gun on her hip and looked capable of using it. Her toned arms indicated she was no stranger to farm work. She spoke in a surprisingly soft voice. "Are you the doctor?"

"Yes," Sara told her.

The woman rested her hand on the butt of her gun as she stepped aside, letting them enter the house.

The kitchen was warm and cheerful. Obviously, the owner wasn't into decorating, but she'd managed to create a welcoming space with lots of soft wood tones. Sara guessed Denise Branson was the woman sitting at the table. She had the look of someone who'd lost everything that mattered. She slumped at the table. A mug of tea was in front of her. Rather than drink it, she aimlessly stirred the tea bag around by the string.

Faith said, "Denise?"

Denise looked up, managing a strained smile. "Dr. Linton?"

"Sara." She offered her hand to the woman. "I hear you've been taking good care of my patient."

Denise gave a wary look, as if she wondered whether or not Sara was making a cruel joke.

Faith covered the awkward moment. She opened the kitchen door. "I'm going to head over to dispatch. Just call me when you're ready. Will, keep your phone on you at all times."

He nodded before she left. Sara didn't like the look that passed between them.

The deputy locked the deadbolt with a key that she put in her pocket. "I'm Lila, by the way. Jasmine's in the back with the boy. You're Will?"

"Yes," Will answered. He put Sara's medical bag on the counter and shook Lila's hand.

The deputy had to crane her neck to look up at him. "I already said this to your partner, but thank you for doing this. We've been going it alone for a while."

"You're not alone anymore," Will told her. And then his eyes lit up when he noticed the box of Pop-Tarts by the stove. "Do you mind?"

She retrieved the box for him. "Help yourself."

Will swallowed the candy in his mouth. He coughed several times, but that didn't stop him from ripping open the packet.

Lila told Sara, "The boy's still asleep. I haven't fed him yet. I was going to make crepes. He wouldn't eat the pancakes yesterday. I think they were too thick."

Sara asked, "Do you eat with him, or just serve him?"

Lila was at the open refrigerator. She seemed disappointed in herself. "Damn. If he sees us eating the food, he knows it's safe." She shook her head as she took out a carton of eggs and a jug of milk. "I just served him a tray the same as his captors probably did."

Sara tried to take away some of the guilt. "You guys have been here all along. It's easy for me to come in with a fresh eye."

Lila said, "He won't leave the room. I put a television in there for him. He keeps the sound off, reads the captions. Denise got him some books, but he won't touch them. They can read at that age, right?"

"Yes," Sara answered. "He's probably used to having to read aloud, though."

"He read to his mom," Denise said, more to herself.

Will had finished one packet of Pop-Tarts. He opened another. "Did you try video games?"

Lila's face fell again. "Video games." She asked Denise, "Why didn't we think of that?" She scraped a pat of butter into the frying pan. "I should've taken my brother's Xbox. He's too old to play it, anyway."

Denise said, "We should've left him to the experts all along."

"You kept him safe," Sara said. "That's all that matters."

Denise stared down at her tea again. Lila started cracking eggs into a bowl.

Sara wondered what would become of these women. Denise Branson was looking at disciplinary actions, possibly criminal charges, but her fate rested with Lonnie Gray. From what Sara knew about the man, he was fair, but he also believed in swift justice. She hoped that Lila was safe. Unless someone told the sheriff, the deputy's part in this enterprise would remain anonymous.

"He's awake." Sara guessed from the paramedic's uniform that the woman in the doorway was Jasmine. Like her friends, she was petite, but there was something about her that indicated she

wasn't going to be messed with. Faith had the same bearing. Sara guessed that knowing you could take down a two-hundred-pound ex-marine like Paul Vickery with a steel baton engendered a certain amount of confidence.

Sara said, "I'd like to go ahead and see him now."

Lila moved the skillet off the burner. "We'll go with you."

"Maybe not all of you." Sara chose her words carefully. "You've been so good to him. You've taken care of him. Denise, you literally rescued him." She paused. "He might feel that you won't like him anymore if he tells you what happened."

Again, Lila was quick to find fault with her own actions.

"We've been reinforcing his silence by walking on eggshells."

Sara corrected, "You provided a safe environment for him to heal."

Lila turned back to her cooking. She didn't seem mollified.

Sara told Will, "You come, too."

They all seemed to recoil at the idea.

Sara said, "I know it seems counterintuitive, but sometimes victims feel safer with men around. They think that brute strength can protect them."

Lila acknowledged, "I've had rape victims ask for a male detective. Sometimes, not always."

Will seemed more hesitant than any of them. "Are you sure?"

Sara advised, "Just sit down when you get in the room. Let him get used to you first. Seven-year-olds are highly adaptable. They're also extremely inquisitive. He'll want to know details about what's going on, what's happening next."

"We didn't tell him anything," Lila said. "We just kept saying he was safe."

Jasmine offered, "That's what he needed, Lila. You heard the doctor. He needed to feel safe and we made him safe." She looked at Will. "I don't know about you, though. I'm sorry, but he's just a little boy, and the people who hurt him looked a hell of a lot like you."

Sara didn't want to force it, but she said, "I'd really like him in the room. I think it would help."

The tension seemed to ramp up. Lila was the first one to break the silence. "She's been right about the other stuff. I say we give it a shot. If the boy freaks out, then Will can always leave, right?"

Will readily agreed. "Right."

Denise and Jasmine exchanged a look. Sara could tell they were used to acting by consensus.

Lila said, "Dee, if something ain't working, then you stop doing it and try something else."

Denise said, "The boy's already broken."

Lila pointed at her with the spatula. "Maybe it's time we let the professionals help put him back together."

Denise cupped her hands around her mug. She looked at the dark tea. Finally, she said, "All right. But the minute he even starts to look upset, you have to promise to leave."

"I promise," Will said, though he still seemed to be the most reluctant person in the room.

Denise stood up from the table. "I'll be right outside the door so he knows I'm there."

"Thank you." Sara retrieved her medical bag from the counter.

Denise preceded them down the hallway. Sara could tell the woman wanted to stop this, to push both Will and Sara out of the house and do what she'd been doing from the moment she'd rescued the boy from that dark basement. They had been protecting the child for more than a week. They had tended him, fed him, looked over him like guardian angels. Letting a six-foot-three man waltz into the room seemed like the last thing the boy needed.

At first, it looked as if the boy agreed. His eyes went wide when he saw Will. He shot up in bed, his back pressed against the headboard.

Denise gently soothed, "It's okay, baby. These people are friends of ours. They're here to help you."

The boy pulled up the sheet around his chest. They had dressed him in Spider-Man pajamas and put matching linens on the bed. There were toys on every available surface—Matchbox cars, a giant Transformer, enough Legos to build a small town. Picture books were stacked on the dresser. Nothing looked as if it had been touched. Someone had obviously gone to the local children's store and asked the clerk exactly what to buy for a seven-year-old boy, but this particular seven-year-old wasn't interested.

"Good morning." Sara entered the room, keeping her tone as even as possible. She'd always made it a practice to never talk down to children. "I'm Dr. Linton. This is Agent Trent. He's a police officer, but he works for the state, which is why they call

him an agent instead of a detective.” She indicated for Will to enter the room. “Dr. Thomas isn’t going to be here this morning. He told me to say hello to you. I’m going to look after you if that’s okay.”

The boy didn’t move, but he didn’t protest, either.

Sara did a quick visual exam. Dr. Thomas had done a good job. For all intents and purposes, the boy looked like any healthy seven-year-old. His color was good. His weight appeared to be on the low-normal side. There were no indications of dehydration or neglect. The wounds on his face were healing well. Except for his fearful, cowering demeanor, she would never have guessed that the boy had been abducted.

Sara motioned Will toward the chair in the corner. “Agent Trent’s been in a fight with some very bad men. That’s why his face is bruised. You can see the red marks on his neck. They’re going to heal in a few weeks. Have you ever been bruised before?”

The boy stared at Will. He gripped the sheets up around his neck.

Sara continued, “In about two days, Agent Trent’s bruises will look dark purple or maybe even black.” She opened her medical bag. “Around ten days from now, they’ll start to turn green, then they’ll turn brown, then after about two and a half weeks, they’ll just disappear.” She asked the boy, “You’ve been bruised before, right?”

He still didn’t answer, but he looked at Sara now instead of Will.

“I’m going to put my fingers on your wrist, okay?” The boy didn’t flinch when Sara took his pulse. By seven years, he’d probably been to a doctor’s office dozens of times. He was used to the routine of examination.

Sara asked, “Do you know what causes a bruise?”

The boy didn’t respond, but she could tell he was listening.

“It’s blood trapped underneath the skin. That’s kind of gross, isn’t it?”

He stared at Sara.

“Well, I think it’s gross, and I’m a doctor.”

The boy’s gaze went back to Will, but he was studying him now rather than staring.

Sara pulled out her stethoscope. It was an old one she kept as a

spare. Her parents had bought it for her when she first entered medical school. Sara held the chestpiece to her mouth and warmed it with her breath. The boy didn't need to be told what to do. He leaned forward in the bed so Sara could listen to his lungs.

She pulled up the back of his shirt. There were burns on his skin. Sara pretended to ignore them.

"Deep breath," she said, then listened longer than necessary. Dr. Thomas had treated the burns, but left them uncovered to prevent infection. There would be scars—scars similar to the ones Sara had seen on Will.

"Wow," she finally said. "Your lungs are very strong." The boy leaned back so she could listen to his heart. He gripped the sheets at his waist now, but his head kept turning in a triangle pattern. He looked at Denise, who stood in the doorway, then back at Will, then up at Sara. He was constantly checking his surroundings. His fingers worked the hem of the sheets as if he wanted to be ready at any minute to hide under the covers.

Sara told the boy, "You know you're in the state of Georgia, right? That's right above Florida."

The boy didn't answer, though there was something in his expression that told Sara that she was telling him things he already knew.

Sara said, "In a few minutes, we're going to ride in an ambulance like you did before. Only this time, we're taking you to Atlanta." She paused. He was paying close attention now. "The trip will take about an hour and a half. When we get there, you'll be at a hospital. I'll be with you the entire time."

The boy looked at Denise.

She told him, "Jasmine and Vivica will drive you. I'll be in the car behind the ambulance. Lila will come up later to check on you." She smiled as if they both shared a secret. "I told you we're not going anywhere."

Sara guessed Vivica was the other paramedic. She told the boy, "We won't have the siren on because this isn't an emergency. You're not sick. You're probably just tired and very scared. And you're not talking, so I need to look inside your mouth and make sure nothing's stopping you. Okay?"

The boy's eyes snapped back to Sara. He knew she wouldn't find a medical explanation for his silence.

“Just give me one second.” Sara dug around in her bag the same way Nell did when she wanted to look busy. “I don’t have a tongue depressor,” she lied. She turned to Denise. “Do you have any Popsicles?”

Denise obviously didn’t understand. “Popsicles?”

“I can use the wooden stick for a tongue depressor. Maybe there’s some in the freezer?” She stared her meaning into Denise. “Could you go look?”

Denise obviously didn’t want to. Still, she told the boy, “I’ll be in the kitchen. Okay?”

The boy didn’t nod, but there was some sort of unspoken language between him and Denise. She understood that his permission to leave was granted.

Sara rummaged around in her bag again. She said, “I like Denise a lot. Don’t you, Agent Trent?”

Will had to clear his throat before he could answer. “Yes. They’re all very good people.”

She told the boy, “Agent Trent sounds funny because his throat is sore.”

The boy looked at Will again, probably taking in the bruises ringing his neck.

She said, “Agent Trent doesn’t like to brag, but he knows some good jokes. Don’t you?”

Will looked stunned, then slightly panicked.

She tried not to use the same tone as she had with the boy. “Why don’t you tell him a joke?”

Will seemed at a loss for words. He was always telling her silly jokes. She had no idea why he couldn’t think of any now.

Sara prompted. “How about SpongeBob? Didn’t he get into some trouble lately?”

Will took a candy out of his pocket. He fumbled with the wrapper. Sara was about to let him off the hook when he said, “Butterflies taste with their feet.”

The boy just stared at him. Sara did, too. She had no idea what he was talking about.

Will popped the candy into his mouth. “Butterflies don’t have mouths that can chew or bite, but they’ve got these straw things that they use to suck nectar. That’s how they eat.” He cleared his throat. “But how do they know what to eat? They land on leaves and things with their feet, and that’s how they taste whether or

not it's good. Their taste buds are in their feet."

The boy's eyes narrowed. He was skeptical, but intrigued.

Will could obviously tell this, too. He pulled his chair a few inches closer to the bed. "Did you know that most turtles can breathe through their butts?"

The boy shot an excited look at Sara, probably because Will had said "butt."

"It's true." Will pulled his chair closer. "They've got these little air sacs in their butts. So they keep their heads down under water and just stick up their butts when they need to breathe."

The boy had stopped gripping the sheet around him. He stared at Will with open curiosity.

Will said, "Actually, I just heard there was some kind of battle going on in the forest." He cleared his throat again. She hoped he didn't get cut off by another coughing fit. He said, "Insects versus the animals. Did you hear about this?"

The boy still would not answer, but he was leaning slightly forward.

Sara said, "I think I read about it in the newspaper."

"I'm sure you did. It's been all over the news." Will asked the boy, "Did you see it on television?"

There was an almost imperceptible movement from the boy as he shook his head.

Will told him, "They finally decided to have it out. The animals and the insects. They scheduled a football game. The winner gets to be the king of the forest forever and a day. And I mean forever, plus an extra full day." Will leaned his elbows on his knees. He asked the boy, "Are you sure you didn't hear about this game? It was huge."

This time, the headshake was more apparent.

"It was an epic game," Will said. "I mean, unforgettable. For years, the insects and the animals will be telling their kids about it."

The boy leaned forward even more, waiting.

"The first two quarters, it was no contest. The animals were pounding the insects. I mean, obviously, they've got physical superiority." Will feigned throwing a football. "One after the other, touchdown, touchdown, touchdown. The animals dominated the field. The insects couldn't do anything to stop them. Then halftime comes." Will held up his hands as if to stop

everything. “The insects were crying like babies in the locker room. They were going to lose this thing. They knew it. They could feel it in their exoskeletons. Humiliation for the rest of their lives. But they still go back out onto the field. They can’t just walk away, right? Not after all these years. They may be invertebrates, but they’re not quitters. Am I right?”

The boy nodded. He was hanging on Will’s every word.

“So, they start the third quarter, and suddenly, the caterpillar walks onto the field. He’s strutting his stuff. He takes up the wide receiver position—and I mean really wide. You can imagine the turning radius on this thing. So, the cricket snaps the ball, and suddenly, *whoosh*”—Will swooped his hands through the air —“the caterpillar takes off. He’s hogging the ball, running up and down the field like crazy. Touchdown after touchdown. I mean, the caterpillar is on fire. He doesn’t just win the game. He runs up the score. At the end, it’s animals 34, insects 212.”

The boy’s lips parted at the very thought.

“The insects are ecstatic,” Will continued. “They all run out onto the field. They lift the caterpillar up in the air. They’re carrying him around. They can’t believe it. They’re king of the forest forever and a day. And then somebody says to the caterpillar, ‘We could’ve won this thing before halftime, man. Where were you all that time?’ ” Will paused for effect. “And the caterpillar says, ‘Puttin’ on my shoes!’ ”

The boy sucked in a shocked breath, then exploded with laughter. His mouth opened. He doubled over. His tiny fists were clenched from the effort. He looked at Sara, as if to ask, *Can you believe that?* Sara didn’t have to pretend to laugh along with him. The boy’s unrestrained joy was the sweetest thing she’d heard in a long while.

He fell over onto his side. The sheets were a forgotten memory. For a brief moment, he was just a kid again.

Then, like a curtain being drawn, the laughter died out and the memories came crushing in. Slowly, the boy pushed himself back up against the headboard. He tucked the sheets tightly around his waist.

Will pulled a handful of Jolly Ranchers out of his pocket. “You want one?”

The boy chose a watermelon-flavored candy. With careful dexterity, he peeled away the wrapper. Sara held out her hand for

the trash. The boy's lips puckered as he sucked on the candy. Something was different. She knew that his guard was still up, but there was daylight between the cracks now.

"You know," Will began, "the man who did this to my face will be in a lot of trouble when they catch him." He crossed his ankle over his knee, casual. "He'll end up in prison for the rest of his life. Maybe Denise or Lila will arrest him. Or maybe somebody else. There are a lot of cops out there who are good people. They make sure that the bad guys get locked up so they can't hurt anybody else."

The boy rolled the candy around in his mouth. Sara could hear it click against his teeth.

Will said, "People who do bad things always get caught. Did you know that?"

The boy seemed to consider the question. Finally, he shook his head.

"You don't know it or you don't think it's true?" Will asked. The boy shook his head again, then stopped. Instead of talking, he held up two fingers.

Will said, "You don't think that's true?" The boy nodded.

Will told him, "I know you're a smart little boy, but you're wrong about that. This is what I do for a job. I chase down bad people and I lock them up."

The boy looked down at the sheet. He picked at the stitching again.

"I arrested some really bad guys a few months ago. They told this little boy that his mommy and daddy would get hurt if he talked to the police."

The boy looked up, shocked.

"The bad guys were lying," Will said. "They were just trying to scare the little boy. His mommy and daddy were safe all the time. And when he told me what happened, I arrested the bad guys and brought the little boy home." Will leaned forward again. "Do you understand what I'm saying?"

The boy seemed to understand, but he didn't acknowledge it.

Will said, "The sooner you tell me what happened, the sooner I can get you back to your family. And trust me, they want you back so badly. You are all they can think about. No matter what the bad men did to you, they just want you back so they can take care of you and make sure you're safe."

The boy looked down at the sheet again. Tears slid down his cheeks.

Will said, "It's okay to talk to me, buddy. Whatever happened to you, it wasn't your fault. You're just a kid. And your mommy and daddy love you so much. They want you back home. That's all they care about. No matter what the bad men did to you, they will always, always love you."

The boy kept his head down. His mouth moved. He had to think about how to turn sounds into words again. "What about Benjamin?"

Will glanced up at Sara.

She asked, "Is that your brother?"

The boy nodded.

Will said, "I'm sure he wants you back, too. Even if you fought with him or didn't get along, none of that matters. Benjamin wants you back home with him."

The boy finally looked up at Will. "He's not home," he whispered. "He was in the basement, too."

Sara felt her heart stop. She was too paralyzed to speak. Another boy, a brother, still out there suffering horrible cruelties. Or, worse, not still out there, but lying somewhere in a shallow grave.

Will was obviously considering the same possibilities. He visibly struggled to keep his calm. "Benjamin was in the basement with you?"

The boy nodded his head. "The bad man took him away." Will's cool started to slip. His voice cracked. "Can you tell me your name?"

The boy didn't answer.

Will said, "I met a little boy last night, and he knew the name of his school. Do you know the name of yours?"

The boy still did not answer. He was getting scared again, worried that he'd said too much. He slid down the bed, pulled the sheets up over his head.

Will opened his mouth to say more, but nothing came out. He didn't want to give up, but he didn't know how to keep going, either.

Sara rested her hand on the boy's arm. He was shaking. They could hear his cries through the bedcovers. She told him, "It's okay, sweetheart. You don't have to say anything else for now."

You were very brave to tell Agent Trent what you did. And you're still safe. Nothing bad is going to happen to you."

Denise Branson cleared her throat. She was standing in the doorway.

Sara told the boy, "We're going to leave you alone for now, but we're all here if you need us." Sara stood up. She motioned for Will to follow her. "I'll be in the kitchen, okay? You don't have to talk anymore until you're ready."

Sara left the room, though she felt like part of her heart stayed with the boy. His brother had been taken, too. Why hadn't they found him at the house? Where had he been taken?

Sara told Will, "I'll try again in a few minutes."

Will pulled out his phone. The glass was shattered, but the phone seemed to be working. Sara assumed he was calling Faith, but then he said, "This is Agent William Trent. I need a national alert issued immediately on the authority of Deputy Director Amanda Wagner. Two missing brothers, both disappeared on the same day, possibly more than a week ago. No name on the first kid, but he's around seven years old, has dark hair and brown eyes. The second kid is called Benjamin."

Sara told him, "Or Ben. Or Benji."

Will's expression showed absolute shock. He almost dropped the phone. "What did you just say?"

She knew that he wasn't good with nicknames. "Benjamin is sometimes shortened to Ben or Benji."

"Benji?" Will braced his hand against the wall. He seemed stunned.

She asked, "What is it?"

"Give me your keys."

14.

Will pushed the needle on the BMW's speedometer past one hundred as he sped away from Lila's farm. She lived only a few miles from the interstate. He barely slowed for the turn. The tires skipped across the road, but the BMW stayed upright. Will cut off a lane of cars as he merged onto the interstate. He was going fast, but it didn't feel fast enough. He shot past the exit for Macon General. The engine screamed as he gunned it harder.

He was coming up on the exit that led to Cayla Martin's house when his phone finally rang. Will drove one-handed as he answered, "Did they get him?"

Faith said, "They can't find Cayla Martin's street."

Will cursed under his breath. "What about the cops who knocked on her door last night?"

"They're both off-duty. Neither is answering their phones. They're probably asleep."

"Send somebody to wake them up."

"Don't you think I did?"

Will tried to tamp down his frustration. "They have to find the house, Faith. Tell them to send out a helicopter."

"The state highway is thirty miles through that zip code, Will. We've called the road crews. We've called the park service and waste management and the post office and the middle school. We've got three cruisers out there already. They're trying."

"It's a dirt road. There's a trailer park and—"

"We'll find it."

"Tell them to look for me. I just passed Macon General. I'm taking exit twelve now."

The phone was muffled as Faith relayed the information. She came back on the line. "Cayla Martin was seen at the hospital half an hour ago. She was picking up her paycheck. Her car is still in the parking lot, but we can't find her."

"Did they check the employee entrance? She goes out there to smoke."

"Hold on." Again, Faith put her hand over the phone to talk to the dispatcher. "They're checking now."

"Did you find an Amber Alert on two missing brothers?"

"We've got nothing."

"That's impossible," Will argued. "Two brothers went missing on the same day. Why didn't we hear about it?"

"Maybe the police thought it was a parent abduction?" Faith pointed out the obvious: "Something like that wouldn't make it on the news cycle unless there were bodies." She asked Will, "Are you sure the boy wasn't making it up? Kids that age lie about everything. Maybe the other kid was a cousin or friend, or—"

"He wasn't lying," Will said. "And you don't believe in coincidences. Benjamin's not a common name around here."

"You're right," Faith admitted. "Amanda's talking to the Mounties." The Canadian federal police. "Their news doesn't trickle down much unless you're in a border state. She thought maybe the boys came from up there."

"What about the French-speaking parts?" Will asked. "The Mounties don't serve those areas."

"Did either of the boys sound French?"

"Maybe they're bilingual. I don't know, Faith. Just tell her to call everybody."

Faith said, "I'm sending her a text right now."

Will was silent, waiting for her to type it out. His head was spinning. He didn't know how this had happened. Benjamin had been right there in front of him. He'd practically begged Will to help him. He'd said he'd been taken a month ago. Will had thought the kid meant taken away from his mother by the police, not abducted by a sadist.

Big Whitey.

Will knew what had happened to Marie Sorensen. He'd seen the cigarette burns on the boy's back this morning. Denise Branson had rescued him from the basement. What happened to the boys who weren't rescued? What despicable things were being done to Benjamin right now?

"Okay," Faith said. "I sent Amanda the text. We got a no on Cayla in front of the employee entrance to the hospital. She's not on the roof or in the stairwells, either. How far are you from the house?"

Will slammed on the brakes. The car shook. He jerked the gear

back into reverse. He'd almost missed the turnoff. "The road's at a steep angle from the main highway, roughly ten miles from the interstate." He silently berated himself for not resetting the odometer when he got off the interstate. "There are a lot of overhanging trees. There's a yard sign where the turn is." He recognized the logo. "It's for the trailer park. It's got palm trees on it."

"I'll let the cruiser know."

Will laid on the gas as he sped down the dirt road. Red dust curled up behind him. The screen on Sara's dashboard flashed black. There was no map in the GPS system for the dirt road. Will muttered another curse at his own stupidity. The screen had been in front of him the whole time.

He told Faith, "Track my phone. Maybe the roads will show up on the military GPS."

"I'm on it," Faith said. "Call me when you get there."

Will ended the call and tossed his phone onto the seat. Then he thought better of it and jammed the phone into his back pocket. As long as the trip to Cayla's had felt the night before, the trip this morning seemed unending. The road spread out ahead of him. It felt like half an hour passed before he saw the trailer park. Kids were out playing in the yard. Will slowed, looking at their faces, checking for Benjamin. They all stared back. Some of them headed home. They'd probably been taught to run if a strange man ever looked at them twice.

The steering wheel jerked as the BMW hit a large pothole. Will fought the turn, overcorrecting. He straightened the tires just in time for another loud bump as the wheels finally hit solid pavement. He was in the subdivision now. The empty lots and unfinished building sites were even more desolate in the light of day. Fortunately, Will could easily see the cluster of completed houses. He skidded to a stop in front of Cayla's driveway. There was no car there. He jumped out of the BMW. He checked the windows to the garage. Empty.

Will dialed Faith's number as he ran up the front walk. He said, "I'm here. There's no car. The house looks empty."

"The cops from last night are on their way. They've got two more cruisers with them. I know you don't have your gun. Wait for backup."

"I'm not waiting." Will ended the call. He stepped back from

the front door, then kicked it open. "Benjamin?" he called. His voice echoed through the house. "Benjamin?"

Will opened the coat closet. He checked the back wall to make sure there wasn't a hidden panel. Next, he went into the garage. The space was unfinished, just the structural studs. There were no hiding places.

The kitchen looked the same as the night before. Will's cleaned plate was still on the table. The pots and pans were still on the stove. Tony Dell's beer cans were stacked on the counter.

"Benjamin?" Will called. He took the stairs two at a time. He stopped outside the bathroom, but didn't go in. There was a surface bolt on one of the bedroom doors. A heavy-duty combination lock held it closed.

"Benjamin?" Will banged on the door. "It's Mr. Black from last night. I'm a police officer. I'm here to help you." The lock was secured with bolts, not screws. There was no way for Will to pry it loose. "Benjamin, I need you to stand back. I'm going to break open the door."

Will waited a few seconds, then raised his foot and kicked the door. The lock rattled against the wood. He kicked again. The wood around the jamb started to splinter. He raised his foot and kicked it again. Then again. Finally, by sheer repetition, he was able to break apart the wood. The door popped back on its hinges. The knob stuck in the sheetrock.

Benjamin was chained to the floor. He was sitting in the corner, his back to the wall. He was obviously terrified.

"It's okay," Will told him. "I'm a police officer. I'm here to help you."

Benjamin didn't respond. Will quickly took in the situation. A pair of handcuffs linked the boy's ankle to the chain. The end was attached to an eyehook screwed into the floor. Someone had doused it with Liquid Nails to keep the boy from backing out the screw. Probably Tony. It seemed like the kind of half-ass job he'd do. Tony should've thought about the fact that Benjamin wouldn't have anywhere to use the toilet. The wood had softened from urine. Will easily wrenched the hook out of the floor.

Then he heard a car door slam shut.

Will ran to the front window. Paul Vickery got out of a white Honda. He had a gun in his hand.

"Shit," Will muttered. He should've known Vickery was

involved in this.

Will took out his iPhone. He asked Benjamin, "Do you know how to send a text message?"

Benjamin nodded, his eyes still wide with terror.

"You're going to send a text to my partner." Will swiped the screen. He selected the right app, then dialed Faith's number before handing the phone to Benjamin. "Type in your name. Tell her that you're hiding in Cayla's house. Tell her to hurry." Will scooped up Benjamin in his arms as he left the room. There was an attic hatch in the hall. Will had seen it when he stood at the top of the stairs. He held Benjamin up. The boy didn't have to be told what to do. He pushed open the hatch and climbed into the attic.

Will told him, "Don't make any noise. If they find you, don't go anywhere without that phone. Do you understand? It's got a tracker in it. We can find you if you keep the phone. Put it in your pocket. Don't lose it."

Benjamin pulled up the chain around his ankle. The hatch fell into place just as the front door slammed open.

Will barreled down the stairs at a full run. Paul Vickery had attacked him two times before, but each time, the man had surprise on his side. This time, Will had the upper hand. He also knew that crooked as Vickery was, he was a trained police officer. He'd do exactly what Will had done. Check the closet. Check the garage. Check the kitchen.

Vickery was coming out of the kitchen when Will launched himself off the stairs. Vickery's mouth opened. He didn't have time to scream. Will tackled him to the floor like a pile driver. Vickery's gun skittered out of his hand. Will slammed his fist straight into the man's face. As awful as the situation was, Will couldn't help but feel the sweet victory of payback as Vickery's nose exploded like a blown tire.

Will reared back for another go, but Vickery didn't move. Like most bullies, he had a glass jaw. One hit and he was unconscious. Will sat back on his heels feeling supremely disappointed.

"Damn, Bud," Cayla Martin said. She was standing at the busted-open front door. She had a Taser gun pointed at Will's chest.

The M26-C carried a compressed-nitrogen air cartridge that shot two tiny barbed probes up to fifteen feet away. The probes

were attached to insulated conducting wires. The wires were attached to eight double-A batteries that delivered up to fifty thousand volts of electricity. Enough juice to cause complete neuromuscular incapacitation.

Will lunged for Vickery's gun, but he wasn't fast enough to outrun the nitrogen charge. The probes dug into the back of his neck.

He was unconscious before he hit the floor.

15.

FIVE DAYS BEFORE THE RAID

Lena laid back on the table at Dr. Benedict's office. Her head was elevated, but her legs dangled uncomfortably over the end. She tried to keep the paper gown from riding up. It was no use. She was quickly learning that you had to choose between being pregnant and being modest. This was the first of many compromises Lena saw in her future. She already had the sensation of her body being taken over. She was peeing more. Sleeping more. Hell, she was even breathing more. The weird part was that instead of feeling invaded, Lena felt happier than she'd ever been in her life.

"You decent?" Jared peered around the door. He saw Lena and gave a low whistle as he walked over to the table. "Babe, I'm seeing some bedroom opportunities here."

She rolled her eyes, even though she felt a strange thrill when he talked like this. And he was talking like this a lot lately.

She asked, "What'd you say to get out of work?"

"Told them I needed some personal time. They think I'm having an affair."

She slapped his arm. "That's not funny."

He laughed good-naturedly as he looked around the room. "What is all this crap?"

"Got me," Lena said, though she recognized the ultrasound machine. Just looking at it made her nervous. She didn't know what she would do if something was wrong. No heartbeat. The baby's brain growing outside of its head. Horror stories were all over the Internet. She'd turned off the computer last night and thrown up in the hall bathroom.

Jared pulled out one of the stirrups. "You think they sell these tables at Costco?"

“Can you not be disgusting?” She slid the stirrup back in with her heel. “It’s bad enough I’m gonna be poked and prodded for the next eight months.”

“Seven and a half.” He picked up the plastic model of a uterus. The pieces fell apart in his hands. “Shit, the baby went under the table.”

Lena watched him get down on his hands and knees to retrieve the plastic fetus. His ass was in the air. His uniform pants stretched in a not unpleasant way. They worked out at the gym together almost every morning. Sometimes, Lena watched him doing squats while she ran on the treadmill.

“Found it.” Jared stood up, holding the fetus like a toothpick between his thumb and forefinger. “You okay? Your face is red.”

Lena put her hand to her cheek. She changed the subject. “I saw this pregnant woman at the store yesterday. The checkout lady patted her stomach like she was a dog. Then she said, ‘Good job, Mom,’ like it takes a special skill to get knocked up.”

Jared grinned. “You think people are gonna pat my crotch and tell me good job?”

“Not unless they want my Glock up their ass.”

He laughed, putting the plastic baby in the uterus, snapping the pieces back together. “You know my mom’s gonna wanna be here when it happens.”

Lena didn’t want to talk about that. Today was supposed to be happy.

“I’m just warning you,” Jared said. “And telling you that I want her here.”

“Do I have a choice?”

“Your skeevy uncle will probably come, too.”

“At least Hank will have the decency to stay in a motel and leave the next day.”

Jared couldn’t argue with that. Hank had visited a few times since they got married. He was very mindful of outstaying his welcome.

She said, “It’s bad luck to talk about any of this now.” Lena couldn’t help adding, “Like painting the nursery. And looking at cribs. We need to wait another couple of weeks.”

He put the uterus back on the counter with a thud.

She tried, “Besides, if you’re going to work around the house, you should finish the kitchen.”

"It'll be finished before the baby comes."

"It'd better be." Lena felt a fight brewing. She pulled back, not wanting the day ruined. All week, Jared had been talking about seeing the baby for the first time. She couldn't mess this up for him.

Lena asked, "You're never late. What kept you?"

"They put in the marker for Lonnie's son this morning. Some of us rode by to pay our respects."

"That's nice." Lena felt a swell of sympathy for the chief. His son had died after a long illness. Lonnie wouldn't let him go, even when it was clear that nothing could be done to save him. In the end, they'd hooked him up to every machine in the ICU.

Jared said, "Something bad like that happens to me, promise me you'll pull the plug."

"I'll pull it right now."

"I mean it," he said. "Don't let me hang around like that. Peeing in a bag. People touching me like I'm a baby." He asked Lena, "What's the point of touching somebody who's in a coma? What if they don't want you to? They can't stop you. They're just trapped there. That's some creepy shit." He shuddered. "And don't let my mama dress me up in pajamas. You know she'd get crazy like that."

Lena felt her lip start to tremble.

He stared at her, confused. "Are you crying?"

"Yes, I'm crying, you dipshit." She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "Why would you talk about dying in the hospital when I'm carrying your fucking baby?"

"Jesus," he muttered. He pulled a tissue out of the box on the counter. There was only one left. He handed it to Lena. "Don't be crying like that when the doctor comes in. He's gonna think I hit you or something."

Lena blew her nose. "Talk about something else."

He easily found a different subject. "How's the raid going?"

Jared had tipped her off about a shooting gallery on Redding Street. He was following the case like a gambler who'd placed a large bet.

She told him, "It's going to shit, is how it's going." She used the dirty tissue to wipe her eyes. "I need more Kleenex."

He opened the door and called, "Nurse? Can we get some more Kleenex?" He waited in the open doorway, asking Lena, "You get

anybody to flip on Sid?”

“What do you think?” She wiped her nose again. “Denise is about to have a stroke. She’s convinced this is our way into Big Whitey.”

Jared rolled his eyes. He liked Denise, but girls like Marie Sorensen ran off all the time. Using Big Whitey as the bogeyman took some of the blame off her shoulders.

Lena felt the need to take up for her friend. “He could exist. Denise found his name on a wire out of Florida.”

Jared shook his head with the sort of disregard that made her want to smack him. “I’m with Lonnie on this one. It’s a dead end.”

“Sid Waller is the key,” Lena insisted, though she had come to accept lately that Waller was still going to be walking around free when her kid graduated from high school. “Once he’s locked up, he’ll start singing.”

“Mean ol’ Big Whitey will kill Waller before he lets that happen. Right?”

Lena narrowed her eyes at Jared. He was giving her shit again.

He said, “Trust me, as soon as Sid Waller’s dead, Chief Gray is gonna get out of the Big Whitey business. It’s just too dangerous for him right now. And we both know he lost his edge when his son died.”

“Right,” Lena said, her tone matching his. “Lonnie Gray is going to back down for the first time in his life.”

The nurse handed Jared a fresh box of tissues. He told her, “Thank you,” then pivoted back to Lena. “Maybe Lonnie is really Big Whitey. Did you ever think about that?” The door clicked shut. He grinned at Lena. “How crazy would that be? Chief Gray is secretly a dope-swingin’ kiddie pimp.”

“Stop talking out of your ass.” Lena grabbed some tissues and blew her nose as loudly as she could. She hated that his stupid idea actually made a weird kind of sense. Gray had started out in Florida. Over the years, he’d either worked or consulted in several towns up and down the coast, including Savannah. All the mayhem they were seeing in Macon had coincided with Gray coming on board. If Denise was right and there was a mole in the department, then it had to be a mole who knew everything. What better cover was there than being the chief of police?

And what bigger idiot was there than a woman who believed

every harebrain theory that came out of her husband's mouth? Less than five minutes ago, Jared was saying Big Whitey didn't even exist. Last week he claimed he'd heard from a guy that Fort Knox had been robbed of all the country's gold. Why on earth was she listening to him now?

Lena shook her head, hoping to God she was suffering from pregnancy hormones and not losing her mind.

He asked, "Why are you shaking your head?"

She didn't answer, knowing there was no point. "I'm stressed about the raid crapping out. Denise and I are both putting our asses on the line over this, and you know Lonnie doesn't forgive or forget."

Jared moderated his tone. "Lookit, something will come up." He waited for her to blow her nose again. "Something always comes up. You're a good cop, babe. You're smart and driven and you never give up. You'll make it happen."

Lena couldn't help it. There was something about the way he looked at her that made her want to cry again. She slipped her hand into his. Jared's arm tensed, but he didn't pull away. He wasn't used to affection. His mother was a cold fish. Lena had never once seen Nell touch any of them. Of course, Lena wasn't the clingy type, either. She couldn't explain why touching Jared was the only thing that soothed her nerves lately. This wasn't the kind of thing she could ask Dr. Benedict about. She'd tried to look it up on the Internet, but most of the pregnant women online seemed to hate their husbands. And there were only a limited number of phrases you could Google on pregnancy before you were inundated with some seriously disgusting porn.

Jared asked, "You okay?"

She chewed her lip, silently willing herself not to start crying again.

He turned sheepish. "You know I love you, right?"

"Yeah," she managed. "Tell me that when I look like I should be swimming in a tank at SeaWorld."

"Babe, as long as you keep getting big in other places, I'm fine."

Lena rolled her eyes. Then she jerked her hand away when the door opened.

Dr. Benedict walked over to the sink to wash his hands. He told Lena, "I'm sorry I kept you waiting."

Jared winked at Lena. This was the first thing the man said every time he entered the room. They joked that his wife probably heard the same thing when they were in bed.

“Lie back for me.” Benedict pulled out the extension on the table.

Lena laid her head on the pillow and straightened her legs. She looked up at Jared. He put his hand on her forehead. The move was clumsy—more like he was checking her for a fever—but she didn’t complain.

Benedict turned on the ultrasound machine. Unceremoniously, he lifted the paper gown. Lena saw what she’d been denying all week. Her underwear was tight. Pretty soon, it would be rolling under her stomach like a rubber band. She looked up at Jared, expecting a joke. He wasn’t laughing. He was watching the monitor, even though nothing was on the screen yet.

Benedict shook the bottle of gel over Lena’s stomach. “A little cold,” he said, sounding just as practiced as usual. He squeezed the bottle. Nothing came out. He told Lena, “Just a moment,” then rolled his chair over to the door. He called into the hallway, “Could you bring me some more gel?”

He rolled his chair back to the table. His cold hands touched Lena’s stomach as he felt around for things he didn’t bother to articulate. She wondered again if she should’ve gone to a female doctor. Then again, her regular doctor was a woman and she had the bedside manner of a dingo.

The door opened again. Lena was glad her feet weren’t up in the stirrups. The hall was filled with people.

“Here you go.” The nurse was the same one who’d brought the tissues. She handed the doctor a new bottle of gel. “I got this off the warmer?”

Lena didn’t know which was more annoying—the way the woman raised her voice at the end of the sentence or the fact that no one had warmed the first bottle.

Benedict didn’t seem to notice the difference. He shook the bottle and repeated, “A little cold.”

Lena looked up at Jared as the warm fluid hit her skin. He winked at her again. She felt the ultrasound probe press against her belly. The fat rolled around in a way she wasn’t ready to acknowledge. Instead, Lena watched the monitor, the shifting white and black folds.

This was really the stupidest thing she'd ever done. Lena understood why the doctor had to see the image, but there was no reason for Jared to watch her insides get pushed around. There was a pregnant secretary at the station who framed every ultrasound photo she got. Lena couldn't walk through the office without tracking the progress of the weird little alien blob. It seemed like nothing was private anymore.

Benedict's eyebrows were furrowed. He stared at the screen as he pressed the probe harder.

Lena asked the words she'd been dreading. "Is something wrong?"

Benedict didn't answer, which made it ten times worse.

The nurse said, "Listen." She turned one of the dials on the machine. A slow *wah-wah* sound came out of the speakers, like something you'd hear in a submarine movie.

Lena thought she'd missed whatever she was supposed to listen for, then the rapid thump-thump-thump of a heartbeat filled the room.

Jared gasped. "Is that the—" He looked down at Lena. "It's the heartbeat." He pressed his hand to her chest, felt for her heart.

"It's different."

He was right. Lena's heart was beating its usual slow rhythm, while the baby's heart sounded like the wings of a hummingbird fluttering against a windowpane.

The nurse said, "See your baby?"

Lena looked at the monitor. Nestled inside the folds was a little black dot. Dr. Benedict moved his hand around, and the dot turned into a bean. Lena could see the heart flashing.

"Holy shit," Jared whispered. "Holy shit."

Lena heard herself thinking the same words in her head. How had they done this? How had they created something so perfect? She couldn't take her eyes off the little bean. The round edges, the curve in the center that was going to be a stomach. Soon, the bean would sprout real arms and legs, and a head with sweet little eyes and a crescent-shaped mouth.

But for now, he was just a tiny, fluttering little bean.

Her bean.

Lena had never seen anything so beautiful in her life.

Dr. Benedict said, "Everything looks good. You're six weeks along. Come back next week around this same time." He tapped

some buttons on the ultrasound machine. A printer whirled to life. Benedict stood up. He went to the sink to wash his hands. "I'll make sure you get a disc with the ultrasound. The picture should be ready in a few minutes."

Jared leaned down, looking Lena in the eyes. "This is it, babe. You and me and the beginning of everything."

Lena's brain told her the words were melodramatic, but her heart—her heart took in the tears in his eyes, the silly grin on his face, the touch of his hand as his fingers laced through hers, and started to crumble.

He told her, "Nothing's ever gonna be the same again. One day, we're gonna both be sitting in our diapers at the old folks' home and talking about how this is the moment that changed everything."

Lena put her hand to his cheek. Her thumb traced his lips before she gently pushed him away. She wasn't going to start crying again in front of strangers.

Jared understood. He winked at her, joking with Benedict, "Thanks, Doc. Good job."

"You're welcome." Benedict obviously wasn't fond of getting off routine. He studied the nurse as he dried his hands. "You're filling in for Margery, right?"

"Yes, Doctor." The woman smiled warmly as she started wiping the gel off Lena's belly. "I've worked in your office before? I'm Cayla Martin?"

16.

FRIDAY

Will's brain burned in his skull. His muscles were still vibrating from the Taser. At least his body wasn't tensed up like a fist anymore. His hands and feet were no longer clenched into balls. His knees and elbows could straighten. Despite all that progress, sitting up felt like an impossible task. He lay with his back on the floor. Overhead, he heard Cayla Martin walking back and forth across one of the bedrooms. At least he assumed it was Cayla. Paul Vickery was bound and gagged beside him. Whoever was upstairs was walking in high heels.

Detective work.

The throbbing pain in his head had to be from something more than the Taser. Will had been Tasered before. Amanda had said it was an accident, but the way she cackled made him think otherwise. Will tentatively moved his head. There was a tender spot at the back. He blinked, wondering how many times his vision had gone wonky over the last twenty-four hours. He couldn't dwell on that. Actually, he couldn't dwell on anything because his mind yet again could not hold on to one thought.

Benjamin.

That was the one word that would not slip away. Benjamin was in the attic. He still had the chain around his ankle. Will had told the boy to text Faith. Where the hell was she? She'd told Will the cruisers were on the way.

Will had to get out of here. He had to find the police before Cayla disappeared. Paul Vickery was out cold, and not just because Will had hit him. There was a deep gash on the side of the man's scalp. He needed medical attention. Obviously, despite Will's assumptions, Vickery wasn't working with the bad guys after all. Whether this was a recent development or not was less

clear.

Will tried to sit up. The muscles would not respond. He could only flop over onto his side. That was when he saw his wrists. They were tied together with twine. The knots were tight. The twine cut into his skin. Will tried to move his legs. His ankles were tied together, too. At least now he knew why he couldn't feel his toes.

Will struggled to sit up. His feet slipped. His hands couldn't find purchase. Finally, he angled himself up to sitting. He only had to close his eyes a few seconds before the nausea passed. Then he opened his eyes and felt sick all over again.

There was a man sitting on the couch. He had a Glock pointed at Will's head.

Will had never met Detective DeShawn Franklin in person, but he recognized the man from the photograph on Faith's cell phone. He was built like a linebacker, with broad shoulders and legs the size of fallen trees. He took up two cushion spaces on Cayla's sofa. The gun in his hand looked like a toy, though Will knew the police-issued Glock was a man-stopper.

Will checked on Paul Vickery again. He was still tied up. Hogtied, really. Which didn't explain why DeShawn Franklin was pointing his gun at Will.

Franklin lowered the Glock, resting the weapon on his knee. "Paul was coming here to save you."

Will didn't give him the satisfaction of hearing the string of curses that came into his mouth. He asked, "My partner sent him?"

"Your partner sent anybody who was listening on the scanner." DeShawn smiled. "Thanks for taking Paul out before I got here. Beat-downs aside, he's not a dirty cop. Woulda been hard explaining to him why I had to tie y'all up."

Will didn't acknowledge the comment. He had to assume the GPS tracker on his phone wasn't working. Faith knew he was at Cayla's house. She would send the cruisers. It was only a matter of time before twenty cops busted down the door.

Franklin seemed to read Will's mind. He took away his options one by one. "I told the cops me and Paul would secure the house. Last we saw, you were headed toward the woods on foot. They're setting up a perimeter on the other side of the highway." He told Will, "The whole damn force is out there looking for you, son."

Will rubbed his face with his hands. His fingers felt cold, probably because the twine around his wrists was cutting off the circulation. "You're working with Cayla?"

"I'm doing a favor for an old friend."

Will got the feeling he wasn't happy about it. "Where's the boy?"

"You tell me. He's not in the house. He's not in your BMW." He smiled again, showing his teeth. "That's a nice ride. State must pay a hell of a lot more than Macon PD."

Will asked, "You're Big Whitey?"

He laughed, genuinely amused. "I'm Big Blackie, motherfucker. You colorblind?"

Will didn't know what he was supposed to say. "Who's Big Whitey?"

Franklin didn't answer immediately. He looked down at the Glock, twisting it back and forth against his knee. "I was friends with his son. Chuck and me grew up together. We both graduated from the academy at the same time. Both moved around together. He got his lieutenant bars before me, but that's how it goes sometimes."

Will shook his head, trying to break a memory loose. "Eight, maybe nine months ago, we were out running. Chuck's leg snaps like a twig. No reason, just snaps."

Will had heard about this kind of thing before. He guessed, "Leukemia?"

"Now you're putting it together."

"Not really," Will admitted.

"Chuck was supposed to take over the family business. With him gone, who knows?"

"Chuck," Will echoed. The name was so familiar.

"I thought you state boys were smarter than this."

Will said, "I've had a bad couple of days."

"I hear you, brother. Doesn't look like it's gonna get much better."

Will heard something heavy drop on the floor upstairs. It was similar to the sound of a clue dropping into his lap. He told Franklin, "Cayla Martin told me she drove up the Tamiami Trail with a guy named Chuck."

Franklin smiled. "Maybe you're not so stupid after all."

Will realized there was a wall behind him. He slid over so he

could lean back against it. The rest did him good. He said, "Chief Gray's son died recently." Will remembered something Faith had told him yesterday morning. "You were handpicked by Gray to follow him to Macon when he took over the force."

Franklin waited.

Will made a calculated guess. "Chief Gray is Big Whitey."

Franklin didn't acknowledge the revelation, but he told Will, "Lonnie was working in Jacksonville, but he lived in Folkston. Me, my baby sister, and my mama were up by the Funnel. Not many black kids around there, but Lonnie didn't bat an eye when he found me sitting at his dinner table."

"You should be glad he didn't kidnap and rape you."

The gun went up. Franklin pointed the muzzle at Will's head again.

Will said, "You didn't know Lonnie was into kids, did you?"

Franklin glared at him for a beat. Finally, he lowered the gun back to his knee. "He raised me more than my own daddy ever did." Disgust showed on his face. "Never heard Lonnie say anything about kids. Never saw him looking at them, talking to them, nothing. I guess as good as Lonnie was at fooling strangers about one thing, he was really good at fooling his friends about the other."

Will asked, "How'd it feel when you found out?"

Franklin let his silence answer the question.

Will said, "Being a badass drug dealer and a murderer is one thing. Raping kids is a whole other category." He could tell Franklin agreed with him. "It crosses the line, doesn't it? You put a cap in a junkie's ass, that's pretty much what he signed up for, but children are innocent. They didn't sign up for anything."

"I told you I didn't know."

"Denise Branson knew."

"You think anybody listens to that stupid dyke?"

Will didn't point out that the stupid dyke had been right all along.

"Lonnie was a God to me. To all of us. I had no idea he was ..." Franklin couldn't even say the words. "I'm glad Chuck didn't live to find out. It would've killed him all over again."

"How did you find out?"

"The house," Franklin said. He meant the shooting gallery. "I sent my guy in before the raid to take out Waller and his crew."

Will guessed Franklin's guy was Tony Dell. There wasn't another player in this thing who was so adept at killing.

Will asked, "What did your guy find?"

"What we expected. Three of them were in the front room watching TV. No problem, my guy takes them out quiet. He goes down into the basement looking for Waller and finds these two little kids instead." Franklin shook his head, and Will could see his turmoil was real. "One of the boys was already dead. Just laid there, my guy said."

Will thought of the boy back at Lila's farm. Playing dead had saved him from countless more miseries.

Franklin continued, "The second kid was barely breathing. My guy brought him here for Cayla to look after."

Will wondered if he knew how Cayla had looked after him. "The kid identified Big Whitey?" Franklin nodded, and Will tried not to think about Benjamin feeling safe because Franklin had a badge. "Your guy said Waller wasn't in the basement?"

"Right. Only, he's leaving out the back with the kid when he hears Waller bust in through the front." Franklin shrugged. "Waller runs down into the basement to check on his stash. My guy braces the door, traps him down there, and walks away."

"Why did you want to take out Waller's team before the raid?"

Franklin was obviously reluctant, but he answered, "I was worried about Lena getting hurt."

Will must've looked as dubious as he felt.

"I'm not an animal, man. I got two nieces. I helped raise up my sister after my daddy died." Franklin said, "I knew Lee was pregnant. Cayla fills in at a lot of the doctors' offices. She heard Jared telling Lena that he thought Lonnie was Big Whitey."

Will replayed the words in his head, making sure he understood them. "Was Cayla eavesdropping?"

"Nope. Jared was standing in the open doorway. Half of the office heard him call out Lonnie."

"And Cayla thought he was being serious, just tossing off that theory at the doctor's office in front of everybody?"

"That's what Cayla said."

"What did you think?"

"That he was bullshitting." Franklin shrugged. "Jared's a talker. All those bike boys are. They think they can run with the big dogs, but they don't know jack."

Will had to take another moment to process the information. If what DeShawn said was true, then Lena was right. She hadn't been the one to bring all of this down on them. Jared Long had. "Did Lena believe Jared?"

"I don't think so. At least Lee never said anything to me or the guys," DeShawn admitted. "But she's smart when she latches onto something. Jared puts a thought into her head, maybe she starts paying attention to things she didn't notice before. I had to keep her busy. She was all over the Waller thing. I knew she'd jump at the chance to take him out."

Will felt everything finally coming together. "So, Cayla tells you about the conversation at the doctor's office. You reach out to a pill pusher named Tony Dell. Tony gets arrested. He flips on Waller two hours later and gives Lena the evidence she needs to go into the shooting gallery."

"I know you think I'm stone cold, but I was trying to protect her." Franklin explained, "Lena busts Waller, she's covered up in paperwork for the next six months. I figured that'd run out the clock while she's pregnant, then maybe once she has the kid, she decides she wants to be a mommy and doesn't come back to the job."

Will wondered if there was a single man in Lena Adams's life who'd ever avoided taking risks for her. "Lena lost the baby."

"I know." Franklin seemed regretful. "Cayla called her, tried to get her to take some time off. She wouldn't listen. That girl never listens to nobody."

Will couldn't argue with that. "What about Jared?"

"What about him? He's writing tickets and sweeping broken windshield glass off the road. He can't start an investigation."

"Lonnie Gray wouldn't leave that loose end," Will guessed. He'd seen with his own eyes what a hard-ass the man could be. "You didn't tell him about the conversation at the doctor's office, right? Cayla did. And Gray was a lot more convinced than you were."

Franklin didn't answer, but they both knew that Cayla was that malicious. Franklin put a nicer spin on it, saying, "Cay dated Chuck for six years. Stuck by him when he was dying. She got close to Lonnie at the end. She cares about him."

Will bet she did. Cayla gravitated toward drama the way the tides gravitated toward the moon. "That's why you're here, as a

favor to an old friend.”

“I can’t let her get locked up. I owe it to Chuck.”

Will knew there was a code, even among criminals, but he had a hard time thinking Cayla Martin was worthy. He said, “Lonnie sent the rednecks after Lena and Jared.”

Franklin nodded.

“He had them torture Eric Haigh to death.”

Franklin’s expression darkened. “Threw him out like a piece of trash.”

“Lonnie’s trying to clean house,” Will said. “You were attacked outside the theater last night. Somebody took a shot at Vickery. Tony Dell’s still out there. Big Whitey’s not going to stop until you’re all dead.”

“Lonnie’s not gonna touch me. He was looking for the little boys. He knew somebody found them in the basement. Both kids saw his face, knew who he was. I ain’t saying it’s right, just that it’s something that could come back on him.”

“Would that be a bad thing, letting all this come back on Lonnie? Stopping him from hurting more kids?”

Franklin shrugged, but he was obviously talking for a reason.

Will said, “You didn’t know about the kids until the raid.”

“And?”

“And you put the hit on Sid Waller and his team before you knew about the kids.” Will guessed the Big Whitey business model was being franchised after all.

Franklin said, “Things changed after Chuck died. Me and Lonnie weren’t so close. I thought it was the grief at first, but then I figured it was something else.”

“Waller and Lonnie were both pedophiles. They weren’t doing it for money. The only time Lonnie ever took a risk was when he was grooming a new kid.”

“You’re right,” Franklin said. “Only, I found out after Waller was dead that they were doing it together.”

“Stalking kids together?”

“Doing everything together.” DeShawn looked like he wanted to spit the bad taste out of his mouth. “Lonnie said it was the most fun he ever had.”

Will gathered the two men had had several lengthy conversations, none of which had been good for DeShawn Franklin. He said, “It started to fall apart before the raid. You

knew something was wrong. You saw that Lonnie and Waller were getting close. You were worried Lonnie would pass on the business to Waller.”

Franklin snorted a laugh. “I wasn’t worried about it happening. I already knew it was going down. Lonnie told me before the raid. Before Cayla heard Jared. Before any of that shit started, he sat me down and told me it looked like Waller had a better handle on things. Wanted me to be a second to that redneck bastard. Pitched it like he was doing me a favor.” Franklin gave a bitter laugh. “I guess he didn’t love me like a son after all.”

Cayla Martin asked, “Who loved you?” She tromped down the stairs carrying a large suitcase. She’d packed it too full. She couldn’t hold on. The case bumped down the stairs and didn’t stop until it hit the front door.

Cayla didn’t seem to mind. She walked down the rest of the stairs, picking her way carefully on high heels. She was dressed up, or at least it seemed that way to Will. Her tight leather miniskirt looked brand-new and the matching silk blouse was cut so low that it showed the pink bow on her bra.

Franklin told her, “Wait in the car.”

“Nuh-uh.” She took a pack of cigarettes out of her purse. “I gotta say, Bud, you really fucked me over lettin’ Benji go like that.”

Will looked at Franklin, but the man didn’t offer an opinion.

She said, “I had a family in Germany ready to pay thirty grand for him.”

“Family?” Will didn’t know if she was deluded or naïve.

“Good thing I got that goddamn plane ticket now.” She put a cigarette in her mouth but didn’t light it. “Except for Shawn picking me up at the hospital, my happy ass would probably be in jail. Ain’t that right, hon?”

Franklin didn’t answer. He just sat on the sofa looking like he didn’t think he’d ever manage to get up. Part of him still had to be a cop. He’d tried to protect Lena. Paul Vickery had been tied up, not murdered. Franklin had done his best to keep Tony Dell’s name out of the story. And then there was the immutable fact that Will was still breathing.

DeShawn Franklin was finished with all of this. Maybe it was the kids. Maybe it was Lonnie Gray’s betrayal. Either way, he was done.

“Shit, Shawn.” Cayla seemed to sense his faltering resolve. She walked over to Franklin, teetering on her high heels. “You know you gotta do this.”

Franklin reached into his pocket. He pulled out his car keys. “Just leave it in the lot.”

“Oh, hell no.” Cayla’s head started shaking back and forth. “No, sir.”

Franklin said, “You’re leaving town. Whatever I end up doing is on me. It’s got nothing to do with you. I owe it to Chuck to make sure your name stays out of it.”

“She-it, you can’t do anything, Shawn, and I ain’t eatin’ Wiener schnitzel for the rest of my damn life.” Cayla flicked the lighter and touched the flame to her cigarette. “Come on. Just finish it. We ain’t got time for your conscience to work itself out.”

“I’m not going to—”

Cayla grabbed the Glock and shot Paul Vickery four times.

The gunfire reverberated in the small room. The air shook with the noise. Vickery’s body jerked violently as the bullets hit his back.

Will’s hands flew up in front of his face. His knees pulled in like some part of his brain thought he could roll himself into a ball and stop the bullets. He waited for Cayla to turn the gun on him. And waited.

Nothing happened.

Will peered up, expecting to find the Glock staring back at him.

Instead, he saw that Franklin had grabbed the gun away. He was breathing hard, though there obviously hadn’t been a struggle. “Fuck, Cayla!” he screamed. “What the fuck was that!” Franklin knelt down beside Vickery. He pressed his fingers to the man’s neck. “You killed him!”

“You’re welcome, motherfucker.” Cayla’s cigarette bobbed in her mouth. “I heard you upstairs, Shawn. You told them every damn thing that’s been going on. No wonder Lonnie didn’t wanna hand you over the business.”

“Shut up!” Franklin pointed the Glock at Cayla. “Just shut the fuck up!”

The cigarette dropped out of her mouth. “Get that gun outta my face.”

“I said shut up!” Franklin pressed the gun to Cayla’s chest. “I told you to let me handle this. I told you to just shut the fuck up

for once in your miserable life and let me do what I know how to do.”

Cayla asked, “What’re you gonna do, Shawn? Turn state’s evidence? Go to the cops and tell them you’re sorry?”

“Stop talking.”

“You gonna shoot me in the chest, Shawn? That what you promised Chuck you was gonna do? Murder me?” Her words were strong, but she took a step back. “You know we gotta get rid of him or he’ll go straight to the cops.”

“He won’t go to the cops!” Franklin screamed. “He’s a con. He’s on parole!”

Will stared down at the floor so he didn’t give himself away. He had no idea why Franklin had maintained his cover.

And he would never find out.

Tony Dell pushed open the saloon doors to the kitchen. Will couldn’t guess how long he’d been standing there. He’d obviously heard enough.

Tony took three steps across the room and jammed his knife into Franklin’s neck.

Franklin’s mouth opened. He dropped the gun. He put one hand to his throat, tried to steady the handle of the knife with the other.

And then Tony pulled out the blade.

Blood shot out of the wound like a water pistol.

Franklin went down on one knee. He gasped for air. Will could hear his breath wheezing through the open slit in his neck.

Cayla said, “Jesus, Tony, finish it.”

Tony didn’t want to. He was soaking in the spectacle of Franklin’s death. The blood pouring out of his neck. The way his fingers quivered as he reached out for help. Franklin finally lost his balance. His whole body shifted, his knee slipping out from under him. His shoulder hit the floor. Blood pooled around his head. His fingers kept trembling. A pungent odor filled the air. His big chest rose for one last breath that he would never let go.

And then it was over.

“Damn,” Tony whispered. “I think he shit himself.”

Cayla slapped Tony on the back of the head. “How many times do I have to call you? I swear to God, I thought Shawn was gonna arrest me outside the hospital. I told you he wasn’t right with this.”

"You wanna stop your yapping and thank me for risking my neck to get here?" Tony wiped the knife blade on his jeans before shoving it into his boot. "They's twenty squad cars set up on the other side of the highway. I had to take the back way."

"Well, poor you." Cayla picked up her still-burning cigarette from the floor. She grabbed Franklin's Glock and tossed it into the kitchen. "Take care of Bud and bring my suitcase. If we gotta go the back roads, I'm gonna be late for my flight."

Tony said, "Shit, you don't gotta get there four hours ahead. That's for them, not you."

"You ever been on an international flight before?" she demanded. Tony's expression gave him away. "Just be quick, and don't forget to bring my suitcase." She opened the door, but didn't leave. She walked over to Will and jammed her fingers into his front pocket. He kept his body as still as he could. She pulled out the keys to Sara's BMW. "Might as well drive there in style."

Tony slapped her ass. "Hell yeah, baby."

Cayla gave Will a nasty look. Her voice went from her usual high-pitched singsong to a witch's snarl. "Make it hurt, baby. This asshole cost me thirty grand."

She slammed the door behind her.

In the silence, Will heard a clicking sound. He realized it was the breath stuttering in and out of his mouth.

Tony shook his head. "That gal is a piece of work, lemme tell ya."

Will said nothing. Twice now, he'd seen what Tony Dell was capable of. Watching Eric Haigh get stabbed, all Will could think was that he never wanted to go out that way. Now that he'd seen the alternative, he wasn't so sure.

Tony breathed out a heavy sigh. "Get up, Bud. I ain't gonna kill you on the floor."

Will struggled to get on his knees. Finally, Tony grabbed his arm and yanked him up. Will tried to pull away, but it was no use. His hands and feet were tied. He was trapped. He was going to die in this house, on this floor, beside Paul Vickery and DeShawn Franklin.

The only thing that brought him any peace was knowing that Benjamin was safe in the attic. He had Will's phone. They would trace him. They would take Benjamin to his brother. Both boys would be home soon.

But Sara would have nothing. Will was still legally married to Angie Polaski. The courts wouldn't care that Will hadn't seen her in months, that he'd hired a divorce lawyer to track her down. His wife had all claim to him—not just his body, but his memories. Angie had grown up with Will. By virtue of proximity, she knew more about him than anyone else on earth. She was his Pandora's box that only opened when it was time to mete out pain.

Sara had Will's dog, his toothbrush, and whatever clothes he'd left in her apartment.

"Welp." Tony slid the knife out of his boot. "Might as well get this over with." He held it up for Will to see. He'd obviously picked up the trick from the redneck. And as it had before, the trick worked. Will felt his gut clench.

Tony smiled at the effect. "You scared, Bud?"

Will tried to summon Bill Black. He couldn't let himself die a coward. "Go ahead and do it, man. Don't drag it out."

Tony had always been contrary. He lowered the knife. "I guess you pissed somebody off real good." He indicated Will's face. "Got two black eyes, broke nose. I know Junior didn't do that to you."

Will swallowed. His throat was still hurting. He thought about the whiskey Sara had forced him to drink. She was right. It had made him feel better. Everything she did made him feel so much better.

Tony asked, "Who tore into you, Bud?"

Will knew Tony wanted an answer. This wasn't part of the killing game. "The cop. He caught up with me last night. Sucker punched me." He looked at Paul Vickery. "Guess he won't do it again."

Tony laughed. "Thass a good'un, Bud. I guess he won't." He used the knife to clean under his fingernails. The blade dug into the skin under his thumb. Instead of flinching, Tony watched the blood bead up. "Where'd you get that fancy car?"

Sara's BMW. Her registration was in the glove compartment. "Stole it off a woman in the cafeteria."

"That right?"

"She left her keys on the table. I went out into the parking lot and pressed the button until I found it."

"That's a good trick. I'll have to keep that in mind." Tony

hefted the knife in his hand, then started flipping it end over end. "I was wonderin' about somethin', Bud." He glanced over his shoulder as if he wanted to make sure they were alone. "I ain't queer or nothin', but I seen you done some grooming." He explained, "Back at the club, when Denny made you pull your shorts down?"

Will shook his head. "What?"

"Seems to me, a man don't groom hisself like that unless he's doin' it for a woman. Am I right?"

Will swallowed again. He couldn't accept that he was going to die talking about his genitals.

Tony kept flipping the knife. "Cayla talked me into shavin' my balls once. They itched so bad I near 'bout scratched 'em off." He shrugged. "I guess it's better what you did?"

Will couldn't tell if he was asking a question or making an observation.

Tony caught the knife by the handle. He smiled, like he'd just figured something out. "You're still sweet on that lady up in Tennessee, ain't ya?"

Will tried to summon up a Bill Black answer, but then he remembered that this was exactly the kind of death a man like Bill Black would face. "Yes," Will said. "I'm in love with her. That's where I was heading—up to Tennessee. I don't want my kid growing up without his daddy."

"That's what I thought," Tony said. "You was just trying to make her jealous, wasn't you? Going out with Cayla like that."

Will nodded. "Yes."

"You came here to tell Cayla that, right? That nothin' was gonna happen?"

"I know she's your girl, Tony." Will grasped for an excuse to explain why he was here. "I heard at the hospital they were looking for her. I came here to tell her that she might wanna lay low for a while. I was looking out for her in case you couldn't."

Tony's jaw twisted to the side as he considered the excuse. Finally, he decided, "You're a real gentleman, Bud, lookin' out for her like that. I always knew you was good." He paused. "What's this about you leaving town?"

Will tried not to flinch as he swallowed. "I was heading up to Tennessee right after I checked on Cayla for you. There's nothing in Macon for me."

"That right?" Tony asked. "You was gonna skip out on your parole?"

"Heat's too much around here. Too many dead cops. Just a matter of time before the pigs try to pin it all on me."

"You could always turn."

"I don't snitch on my friends. And I won't—" Will cut himself off before he started begging. Tony liked to hear people beg. "I wanna see my kid grow up. No reason for me to ever come back here again."

"That's real sweet, Bud. I bet you woulda made a good daddy."

"It's all I ever wanted," Will lied. There were too many bad things that could happen to children for Will to ever want one of his own. Still, he told Tony, "My daddy ran out on me when I was a kid. I don't want to do that to mine."

Tony studied him carefully. He finally said, "My daddy ran out on me, too."

Every muscle in Will's throat strained to keep the conversation going, to create some fictional fairy tale about the woman in Tennessee, their wonderful lives together.

But Will knew it was too late. Tony was done listening. He was trying to make a decision. Will could tell by the way his eyes scanned back and forth as if he could read Will's mind.

Finally, Tony sheathed his knife back in his boot. "Be careful on them mountain roads."

Will felt his lips part. Just like that, the good ol' boy Tony was back.

"I hear Tennessee's real pretty." Tony walked toward the door, then he remembered Cayla's suitcase. He had to grab the handle with both hands. "Shit, she's got just about every damn thing in the house packed in here."

Will didn't speak.

Tony said, "I like you, Bud. It's a shame I ain't never gonna see you again." He gave Will a hard look. "Right?" Will nodded furiously. "Right."

Tony dragged Cayla's suitcase out the front door. He didn't bother closing it behind him.

Will felt his body sway as he listened to the suitcase scrape against the porch. It banged against the concrete steps, then scratched down the driveway.

They couldn't work Sara's keyfob. The panic alarm went off,

but they managed to stop the piercing siren before it got too loud. A door opened and closed, then another one. A few seconds later, a door opened and closed again.

The engine turned over. The tires screeched as Tony stepped on the gas.

Slowly, Will's body adjusted to the fact that he wasn't going to be stabbed to death. He had to lean on his hands and drag his knees behind him in order to get to the front door. He saw the brake lights on Sara's BMW glow as Tony roared out of the subdivision.

Will sat back on his heels. He closed his eyes and just breathed. His heart was pounding so hard that he could almost feel it tapping against his ribs.

Benjamin.

The boy was still in the attic.

Will didn't want to call for him in case Tony changed his mind. Besides, Will's hands and feet were bound. He couldn't exactly run up the stairs and catch the kid when he jumped down through the hatch.

And there were two dead bodies down here. Benjamin had seen enough bad things to last him a lifetime.

Paul Vickery was lying on his side. The gouge in his head had stopped bleeding. His wrists were bright red where the twine cut into his flesh.

Will pressed his hands to the floor and dragged his knees, thinking he was moving like a caterpillar. It was hard to believe that he'd told the boy that football joke just a few hours ago. He was probably at Grady Hospital by now. So was Sara. She was safe. That was all that ever really mattered.

Will stopped beside Vickery's body. He checked the man's pockets for his cell phone. He found a wallet, a set of car keys, and a handful of change, but no phone. Will patted Vickery's chest. There was something hard underneath his shirt.

Vickery groaned, and Will jerked back like a snake had tried to strike.

"'Uck." Vickery pulled down the gag. He cursed a few more times as he loosened his collar. Will could see the black Kevlar vest underneath his shirt. "What the hell happened?"

"You got shot." Will checked Vickery's back. Four flattened bullets were lodged in the vest.

“By you?” Vickery asked.

“No.” Will sat back on his knees again. “I saw you on the road talking to Tony Dell last night.”

Vickery blinked, like he couldn’t understand. “No, you didn’t.”

“White Honda. You were pulled up by Tony’s truck.”

“Do you know how many white Hondas there are on the road?” Vickery tried to roll over onto his back. “Why didn’t you tell me you were a cop?”

“I was too busy getting the shit kicked out of me.”

Vickery chuckled, like it was a fond memory. And then he looked at DeShawn Franklin and his face fell. “I trusted that bastard with my life.”

Will didn’t say he was probably right to. “Where’s your phone?”

“Front pocket.” Vickery tried to reach down, but the twine stopped him.

Will knew the pocket was empty, anyway.

Reluctantly, he crawled over to Franklin’s body. The blood had stopped pumping along with his heart. The wound in his neck had slowed to a dribble. Will tried not to shudder as he searched the body. His wrists being practically glued together didn’t make the task easy. An eternity passed before he found the phone in Franklin’s shirt pocket.

Will backed away from the dead man before he even looked at the phone. By necessity, he held it in both hands. His thumb swiped the screen. Instead of a keypad, a microphone icon flashed up. The red button below it was flashing. There was a clock counting off the seconds, and below that, a flat line like on a heart monitor.

The line bobbed up and down when Will told Vickery, “I think he recorded us.”

Vickery shook his head, but didn’t answer.

Twelve minutes, twenty-three seconds. That’s how long the recorder had been running. Franklin must’ve started it when Will woke up from his Taser fugue.

Vickery said, “You gonna call somebody or what?”

Will pressed the red button. The timer stopped. He wasn’t familiar with the phone’s operating system, but they were all pretty much the same. He touched his thumb to the icon of a house. He touched the symbol with a telephone receiver. The

keypad rolled up. Will dialed Faith's number. He rested his hand on his face as he waited for the connection to go through.

She answered on the first ring. "Franklin, what is it?"

"It's me," Will told her. "I'm at Cayla's house."

"Will?" Faith's voice trilled up. "We've got sixty cops combing the woods for you. We can't pinpoint your phone."

"You need to put an APB on Sara's car. Tony Dell and Cayla Martin stole it. They're headed toward the Atlanta airport, taking the back roads. International terminal. She's going to Germany."

Faith didn't bother to cover the phone as she shouted orders to her team. As soon as she finished, she asked Will, "What about Benjamin?"

"He's safe." Will looked at Paul Vickery. He still didn't trust the man. "What about the other thing?"

"They're at Grady. Sara called over an hour ago. They're both fine."

Will felt relief flood his senses.

Faith said, "The boy started talking in the ambulance. His name is Aaron Winsor. Amanda was right. His parents live in Newfoundland. They were going through a bad custody battle. The father was on a fishing trip. The mom thought he'd abducted the boys. The police were about to arrest him." Faith seemed to realize she was talking too fast. She slowed down her words. "The parents are on their way to Atlanta right now. Jesus, Will. You had me scared to death."

"Hold on." Will couldn't stay on his knees any longer. He didn't want to sit down, so he pushed himself up against the wall. Vickery's eyes tracked his every movement. They both heard sirens in the distance.

Will asked, "How far out are the cruisers?"

Faith said, "Five minutes, tops. Call Sara."

"She's probably busy."

"Don't be an idiot."

Will heard a click as she hung up the phone. He glanced at Paul Vickery. The man was still on his back, his elbows and knees bent at an uncomfortable angle.

Vickery asked, "You gonna help me here? This hurts like a bitch."

"It certainly looks painful." Will felt some give in the twine that was digging into his ankles. After a few unsuccessful shuffles, he

hopped toward the kitchen.

"Where're you going?" Vickery shouted. "Come back here!"

Will didn't stop until the saloon doors flapped behind him. He leaned against the counter to catch his breath. And also to catch himself, because hopping around was harder than it looked.

DeShawn Franklin's phone had gone back to screensaver mode. The picture showed two little girls dressed in Mickey Mouse ears. Will didn't want to think about someone telling the man's nieces what had happened. He swiped the screen and dialed Sara's number.

She was used to getting strange calls on her hospital phone. Still, her tone was strained when she answered, "Dr. Linton."

Will said, "I'm okay," in a voice that sounded exactly the opposite.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah." Now that he had her on the line, Will felt it all start to catch up to him. Sara had literally saved him by the short hairs.

"Will?"

"Everything's fine." He made his voice stronger. "I'm just a little tied up at the moment." He stopped himself from laughing at his own joke, mostly because he was pretty sure Sara wouldn't find it that funny. "I don't know about your car, though."

"Sweetheart, do you think I give a damn about my car?"

Will hoped she still felt the same when she turned on the news and saw her BMW being tracked up I-75. "Are you at the hospital?"

"I'm at home. Denise gave me a lift while Amanda interviewed the boy. She's going back to Grady to stay with Aaron until his parents are there. Did Faith tell you?"

"Yes." Will closed his eyes. He liked thinking about Sara being safe at home. "What are you doing?"

"Lying on the couch. I was going to take a shower, but I feel like I've been run over by a truck. I'm too sore to move."

Will thought about the night before. "Sore from me?"

"A little," she allowed. "When do you think you'll be back in Atlanta?"

"I'm driving back tonight." Will decided at that moment that he would quit his job if that was the only way to make it happen. "I'll call you when I'm ten minutes out." He covered the bottom part of the phone with his hand, an easy task considering there

was no daylight between his wrists. Still, he lowered his voice, telling Sara, "I want you to fill the bathtub when I call."

She sounded surprised, but said, "Okay."

"When I get there, I want you to get in the tub with me."

Her "Okay" was very different this time.

"Then we're going to talk."

Her voice changed again. "Just talk?"

"I'm going to answer every question you ask me."

"Every question?" she repeated. "The water will go cold."

"We'll keep it warm," he told her. "I mean it, Sara. No more secrets." Will looked out the kitchen window. He saw a police cruiser kicking up dust in the distance. His resolve started to slip. Will felt like he was stepping out onto a tightrope. His hands were so slick he could barely hold the phone.

Still, he managed to say the one thing he should've told her in the first place. "I trust you."

Sara didn't speak, but he could hear her breath through the phone.

Will felt his throat start to tighten. He should probably hang up. He wanted to hang up. But he asked, "What do you think? Does that sound good?"

"Baby." She sighed out the word. "I think that sounds like the perfect way to start the rest of our lives."

17.

MACON, GEORGIA

FIVE DAYS LATER

Lena sat across the table from yet another Internal Affairs investigator. Brock Patterson's black-and-white ensemble reminded her of the woman who'd investigated her the week before. Lena wondered whether there was a departmental dress code or if they all secretly worked night shifts at Olive Garden. If their pay was commensurate with Lena's, it wasn't a stretch.

"Detective Adams?" Patterson said. He'd obviously asked a question. Lena had stopped paying attention when she'd figured out the repetitive code to his interrogation. Every twenty minutes, he reset, asking the same questions he'd asked before, but using different inflections, different phrasing.

When did you find the boy?

You found the boy when?

Where was the boy when you found him?

The boy. Aaron Winsler. He was safe now, but they were all too terrified to say his name on the record.

If Lena was being honest, she never wanted to think about the boy again. Not out of spite, but out of self-preservation. She'd spent four days rehashing every horrible detail of the shooting gallery—the dead bodies, the cold fear that sat in the pit of her belly when she stared down Sid Waller. And then the worst part, the part that she'd left out during the first investigation—finding the boy.

Lena still had nightmares about pulling back that panel in the basement, seeing those two terrified eyes staring back at her.

Aaron's pupils had been black as coal, set in a field of reddish white. He hadn't said a word when Lena lifted him out of the hole. He'd felt so light. Like a blanket. Lena had cradled him in her arms, cooing to him. She'd never had a maternal bone in her body, but with Aaron, it came naturally. She stroked his hair. Kissed her lips to his dry forehead. Her hand on his back felt the rapid thump-thump-thump of his heart, and she thought of her little bean, forever captured on that ultrasound file she kept on her computer at the office.

"Detective Adams?" Patterson said. "Could you please focus?"

"Can't you just look back at your notes and write down what I told you the first time?"

"The first time you were interviewed or the first time you told the truth?"

Point taken.

Lena sat back in her chair. It was uncomfortable by design. The room was cold, painted cinder blocks with scuff marks around the vinyl baseboard. She stared at the mirror behind Patterson, wondering who was watching. Her last run-in with the rat squad had taken place in the conference room. Lena guessed with Lonnie Gray sitting in jail, the whole force was being treated differently.

There was a half-empty bottle of Coke on the table. Lena took a long sip before putting it back down. "Tell me why this happened."

Patterson's mouth turned down. He looked like the living embodiment of a frowny-faced emoticon.

Lena said, "No one will tell me why Jared and I were attacked. Was it because of the boy? Did they think I knew where he was?"

Predictably, Patterson wouldn't yield. "It's my job to ask the questions."

"Is it really my job to answer them?" Lena asked. She was sick of not knowing. It was all she could think about. What had she done to bring this down on them? What stupid mistake had she made? What asshole had she pissed off?

She told Patterson, "My husband was almost killed. I was attacked in my home. Don't you think I deserve to know why?"

"My colleague is investigating the attack. As you know, you and I are here on a different matter." Patterson had the poker face of a banker denying a loan. "Your cooperation would go a

long way toward—”

“Toward what?” she interrupted. “I wasn’t involved in any of this. I did what my commanding officer told me to do.”

“You lied under oath.”

“Did I?” Lena smiled. She’d been too careful for that. The first investigator hadn’t asked about the boy. As far as Lena knew, there was no law that said you had to volunteer information.

Patterson sat back in his chair, obviously trying to mimic her relaxed demeanor. “We’re both on the same side, Detective Adams.” He tried to sound reasonable, though they both knew he had skin in this game. He’d be looking at a big promotion if he could weed out a few more bad cops, and the man had made it clear from the beginning that he didn’t trust Lena. “We just want to make sure the case against Mr. Gray holds. It seems to me we share the same goal here.”

“Mr. Gray,” Lena echoed. No one was calling him Chief anymore. No one was laying claim to him at all. “My goal is to get back to my husband. He’s better, by the way. Thanks for your concern.”

Patterson tucked his chin into his chest. He did this whenever Lena pushed back, a physical manifestation of hitting a brick wall. He let out a short puff of air, then stacked together some papers on the table. “I’ll be just a minute.” He stood up. “Feel free to take a bathroom break if you need one.”

Lena gave him a salute as he left the room. He was obviously going to confer with whoever was behind the one-way mirror. She guessed it was Amanda Wagner. The deputy director would count arresting Lonnie Gray as a feather in her cap, though the truth was that Will Trent deserved the credit. He was the one who’d risked his life.

He was also the one who’d kept Lena from killing a man.

While Lena was no stranger to having blood on her hands, taking on the two rednecks who’d broken into her house had been different. If she thought about it too long, the bloodlust came back. She could feel it boiling up into the back of her throat. Her muscles tensed. Her hands clenched. Even standing in the ICU over Jared’s bed, Lena had struggled with the impulse to go one floor down and finish the job on the monster who’d wanted to kill her husband.

Not that he’d succeeded.

By some miracle, the doctor said that Jared was going to make a full recovery. He was looking at a few months of physical therapy, but his otherwise good health and youth had been on his side. Of course, now the same two things were working against him. Jared had been home less than thirty-six hours and he was already going stir-crazy—staying up too much, moving around too much, getting in her business too much.

She was tempted to send him to his mother's. Lena didn't hate the woman as much now, maybe because Darnell Long was the only reason Lena had a functioning kitchen. Fortunately, Jared's mother seemed to understand that their truce was only as strong as the miles between them. She had already made one trip back to Alabama. If Lena was lucky, Nell wouldn't return to Macon until the trial.

Not that Lena thought there would be a trial. Just this morning, Fred Zachary, the second shooter, had taken a deal in exchange for giving up the rednecks at Tipsie's. The rednecks weren't talking, but it was probably just a matter of time before they decided to play ball.

That left Tony Dell, and Mr. Snitch had made it clear he didn't want a deal. He admitted to being on the street the night Jared was shot. He admitted to stabbing Eric and DeShawn to death. He corroborated everything DeShawn had told Will Trent about Big Whitey and Sid Waller. Basically, he'd thrown everybody under the bus, including himself. It wouldn't be long before someone decided Dell should stop talking. Lena figured he was planning his own suicide. The fact was that Tony Dell had nothing to lose.

The Atlanta police had caught up with Dell and Cayla Martin outside the international terminal at Atlanta's Hartsfield-Jackson Airport. Dell was obviously a psychopath, but he was also a survivor. He'd known the gig was up. He'd raised his hands and gotten out of the car.

Cayla Martin wouldn't go so easy. She'd jumped behind the wheel and tried to outrun the police. Unfortunately, she'd run in the wrong direction. Lena wondered what was going through the nurse's mind when she saw the shuttle bus speeding straight toward her. According to the accident report, there were about two seconds between the time Martin tried to turn the wheel and the head-on collision. Lena knew what it felt like when you thought you were about to die. Two seconds was an eternity.

Martin wasn't wearing a seatbelt. Probably another second passed as she flew headfirst into the shuttle bus and snapped her neck on one of the seatbacks.

Lena couldn't help but think that the sweetest part of that story was not Martin's brutal death, but the fact that Sara Linton's sixty-five-thousand-dollar BMW had been turned into the world's most expensive Rubik's Cube.

Laughter tickled Lena's throat as she pushed herself up from the chair. She started pacing the room, forcing herself not to count off the steps because she already knew the space was twelve feet across by ten feet deep. She looked up at the camera. She smiled, though she felt the snarl in her teeth. She wanted to get through the pile of paperwork on her desk. She wanted to check on Jared. She wanted to go home and do the things that made her feel like a normal person: clean the house top to bottom, do the laundry, tend to her garden in the front yard. Winter was just around the corner. Lena should probably pull out the petunias, but she didn't have it in her to let anything die just now.

She'd been to too many funerals lately.

DeShawn Franklin's body had been unceremoniously cremated at a facility outside of Macon. Other than the mortician, Lena was the only person in attendance. His sister didn't want her children there. His ex-wife wouldn't speak his name and his current wife wouldn't show her face in public. Jared hadn't wanted Lena to go, but he didn't try to stop her, either. She had made a lot of mistakes in her life. She figured DeShawn had tried to do right at the end. He'd turned on that recorder on his phone. Lena didn't know everything that the recording had captured—nobody at the station did—but apparently, DeShawn had given Will Trent enough evidence to bring down Big Whitey's organization. That detail alone earned DeShawn one pair of clear eyes watching him go to his maker.

Eric Haigh's interment had been markedly different. The state had cleared him just before the burial yesterday morning, so he'd been given a proper send-off with officers in dress uniforms and a full police escort. Lena guessed she wasn't the only cop there thinking that the last funeral they'd all attended was Chuck Gray's. Lonnie's son had died of leukemia three months ago. Lena had cried at Chuck's ceremony—not because she liked Chuck,

who was the kind of spoiled asshole you'd expect of the chief's son—but because she'd felt so bad for Lonnie Gray.

She imagined Lonnie was feeling very sorry for himself right now. He had an excellent law firm fighting the charges against him, but as smart as Lonnie was, he'd made one enormous mistake. Lena figured it was arrogance that had brought him down. Lonnie never considered the possibility that the GBI would seize his home computer. Even without the murders, kidnappings, and trafficking, the state had found enough child porn on the chief's hard drive to send him away for a hundred years.

Stupid, sick bastard.

Last month, Lena had run a 10K with Lonnie. They were raising money for leukemia research. Lonnie had thirty years on her, but he'd beaten her to the finish line. Lena relished the thought of his strong heart ticking away as he marked off prison time for the rest of his miserable life. She hoped some big, nasty con did to Lonnie Gray exactly what he'd done to Marie Sorensen and all those other poor kids. Lena hoped they did it to him every second of every day until Lonnie fell over from exhaustion. And then she hoped they picked him back up and started all over again.

Lena wanted to think Lonnie's imprisonment would help Marie Sorensen's mom and the Winsor family sleep better at night, but she knew from experience that some demons never went away.

The door opened again. Patterson stood with his hand on the knob. He didn't enter the room. He looked highly annoyed, which told her everything she needed to know.

Lena said, "I guess the rat didn't get his cheese."

She didn't wait for Patterson's response. She brushed past him, flashing her teeth the same as she had for the camera. Lena knew that she shouldn't push it, that she hadn't gotten away with anything, but anytime you left the rat squad with your badge intact was a reason to celebrate.

Lena felt her smile abruptly drop when she saw Denise Branson standing in the hallway. She had known that Denise was in the building, but Lena had prayed like hell that she would never have to see the woman again. Not that Lena had ever had a prayer answered before in her life.

Nor had she ever seen Denise Branson so obviously uncomfortable. It was hard to look at. She shuffled from one foot to another. She wouldn't look Lena in the eye. There was an air of

humiliation about her, as if she'd been beaten down so many times over the last four days that she'd forgotten what it was like to get back up.

Patterson said, "Ms. Branson?"

His tone had a snarky edge to it that Lena didn't like. If the man had kept silent, Lena probably would've never spoken to Denise again. As it was, she asked the woman, "You need a bathroom break?"

Denise was obviously surprised by the question. Still, she nodded, and they both headed toward the one place Brock Patterson couldn't follow them. Lena saw the disappointed look on his face as the door to the ladies' room closed.

Denise got right to the point. Her voice had the practiced tone of somebody who was used to apologizing. "I'm sorry. I've got no excuse for what I did to you."

Lena prompted, "But?"

"No buts." Denise seemed resolute. There was none of her usual self-assured swagger. "I misled you about the boy. I dragged you into this without your knowledge. I've got the rat squad looking at you when you didn't do anything wrong."

Lena asked the question. "Is that why they tried to kill me and Jared, because they thought I knew where the boy was?"

Denise shook her head, then shrugged. "I don't know, Lee. It doesn't make sense that they'd go after y'all instead of me."

Lena kept coming to the same conclusion. She was a dog chasing its tail. "Who else did you tell about the boy?"

"Friends. People I could trust."

"I thought I was a friend you could trust."

This time, Denise had an excuse. "I thought I was protecting you."

"That's a lie," Lena said. "You didn't trust anybody at work. Not me, not Lonnie. You knew something was wrong. You thought there was a mole, and you thought it could be anybody from the top down."

Denise let out a heavy sigh. She looked like she couldn't muster the strength to argue anymore.

Lena asked, "Did you suspect Lonnie was Big Whitey?"

"I don't know," she admitted. Lena could tell from her expression that this was the truth. "It seemed odd that Big Whitey was getting tipped off. I thought maybe it was one of Lonnie's

secretaries or somebody on your team.”

“Or me?”

Denise’s gaze settled somewhere behind Lena. “I didn’t think so, but the stakes were too high for that kind of risk.”

Lena studied Denise Branson, thinking not for the first time that she was looking at herself five years ago. The old Lena would’ve absolutely tried to go it alone. She didn’t trust anybody. She didn’t lean on anybody. She never asked for help. She thought there was only one person in the entire world who could do things the right way. Even today, all those tendencies were still there. Lena spent a good deal of her time battling her baser impulses. Sometimes she won. A lot of times she still lost. She consoled herself with the knowledge that at least she was trying.

Lena said, “I heard Lonnie was in the mayor’s office when they grabbed him. Took him straight out the front door of city hall so God and everybody could see him.”

Denise grinned, obviously familiar with the story. “That blonde chick’s the one who arrested him. Agent Mitchell. I bet she kept her foot up his ass the whole time.”

Lena didn’t doubt it. “If Lonnie was half the man he claimed to be, he’d find a way to kill himself, save the courts the trouble.”

“Give me a damn shiv, I’ll do it myself.”

“Get in line.” Lena blew out a long breath “I can’t waste anymore of my time on that bastard. How’re the boys doing?”

Denise’s face lit up with something that could only be described as pure joy. “They’re good, Lee. I put Aaron in his mama’s arms myself. He’s surrounded by family. He’s back with his brother. It’s gonna be tough, but they’ve all got each other.”

Again, Lena got the strange sensation of looking at herself. All those balls juggled in the air were worth it when you managed to keep them going. Watching them fly brought a bigger rush than any drug on the street. Of course, the high never lasted. No one could keep juggling that many balls for long. The first time one of them dropped, you wanted to die. The second time, you felt bad. The third and fourth times, you just found another ball to throw up into the air and moved on.

Lena had dropped so many balls in her lifetime that she’d lost count.

She told Denise, “I forgive you.”

Denise looked surprised, then wary. “Why?”

"I have no idea," Lena confessed. She was living proof that second chances worked, but she'd never been able to extend that courtesy to anyone else. Losing Jeffrey Tolliver had taught her a lot of things, but the possibility of losing Jared had floored her.

Denise asked, "You wanna think about it?"

"No." Lena offered the naked, unadorned truth. "DeShawn and Eric are dead. Lonnie turned out to be Satan. Paul's put in an application for the Atlanta PD. Jared almost died." Lena felt a lump in her throat. She left her little bean off the list, but the memory was still raw. "I guess I can't afford to lose anybody else."

Denise was still skeptical. "It's probably my fault you and Jared almost got killed. I could've gotten you fired. It's only through the grace of God that those assholes in IA believe your story."

"You think they believe me?" Lena laughed. "The only reason I'm not on the street or in a jail cell is they can't prove anything." She walked to the sink and turned on the faucet. The water was ice cold. Lena bent down and drank from the tap.

Denise said, "I've been a bad friend to you. I know that." Her voice went low. "And I know you've been going through some things. Before all this, I mean."

Lena turned off the faucet. Denise wasn't the only one with trust issues. It had never occurred to Lena to talk to anybody about losing the baby—not to Jared, not to Denise, not even to herself. Truthfully, it felt like too much of a failure, something she should be ashamed of.

And even if it didn't feel that way, Lena wasn't about to pour out her heart in the women's toilet at the police station.

She told Denise, "It's all right. It's something I had to go through on my own."

"I get that." Denise wasn't one to sit around gazing at her navel, either. "I'm here if you want to talk, though."

Lena looked down at her hand. It was resting on the sink instead of pressed to her empty belly. She wondered if that's how it happened—incrementally. The nurse from Dr. Benedict's office had been right about one thing: it didn't go away, but it got different.

Lena let out another long breath. She looked at the mirror over the sink, thinking she'd aged about twenty years since this all started. "Jared's been bugging the shit out of me. I could use an

excuse to get out of the house.”

Denise caught Lena’s gaze in the mirror. “Me, too.”

Lena waited.

Denise cleared her throat. She struggled to speak. “Her name’s Lila. We’ve been dating for a while.”

Lena didn’t push it. “How long is IA gonna keep you here?”

“Long as it takes.”

“Call me when you’re finished. We’ll go to Barney’s.”

Denise looked away. The beaten-down expression was back. Barney’s was a cop bar. She obviously didn’t want to be seen by the men she used to command.

“You know what?” Lena grabbed a handful of paper towels. “As far as I can tell, you were the only cop on this entire force who saw something was wrong with Lonnie. You saved that kidnapped boy’s life. You kept him hidden and safe. You made sure he got home to his family. You gave Marie Sorensen’s mother a face to the name. You took a vicious predator off the streets. You wrapped all of this up in a pretty bow for the state to untie.” She tossed the paper towels into the trash. “Am I right? You did all that?”

“That’s one way to phrase it.”

“As far as I’m concerned, that’s the only way to phrase it to any asshole who asks.”

Denise shook her head. She saw where this was going. “IA isn’t gonna see me as a hero, Lee. They’re gonna fire my ass as soon as it hits the chair.”

“Then you tell them you’ll go straight to whichever news station will take you. Hell, go to the nationals. Go up to Canada. Tell them what you did to save that boy, and then let the Macon PD explain why they fired you for it.” Lena laughed at the thought. “If they need somebody to corroborate your story, give them my number.”

Denise stared openly. “You are one crazy bitch. You know that?”

“Maybe.” Lena rested her hand on the door, but didn’t open it. “I’ve been exactly where you are right now too many times not to know how to dig out of it.”

“You really think that’s gonna work?”

“Never underestimate the modern police force’s aversion to bad publicity,” Lena said, thinking she should put that on a plaque by

her office door. "Don't let them hit your pension. That's what they'll go after first. Don't let them bust your rank to anything lower than detective." Lena smiled as she thought of something. "What do you think Paul's odds are getting onto the Atlanta PD?"

Denise smiled, too. "White male, ex-military? They'll roll out the red carpet."

"Either way, I'll need a new partner."

"Little salt and pepper?"

"More like *Chico and the Man*." Lena held open the door. Her smile dropped for the second time that day.

Will Trent was leaning against the wall. His face was a mess. Black and blue bruises were punctuated by dark red spots that were about the size of a grown man's knuckles.

Lena told Denise, "Call me about that beer."

"You got it." Denise didn't look at Will as she headed toward the interrogation room. Patterson was standing sentry in the doorway. He glared at Lena. She resisted the urge to stick out her tongue at him.

Will waited until Denise had shut the door. He told Lena, "I see Jared's out and about." She must've looked confused, because he said, "I just saw him go into the locker room."

Lena felt her jaw clench. She was going to kill Jared. After all her stupid husband had survived, she was going to strangle him with her bare hands.

Will nodded down the hall toward Denise. "She going to be okay?"

"What do you think?" Lena asked. She wasn't being belligerent. The state would have a lot of sway in Denise's case.

Will said, "I think the department has enough bad press without pissing off somebody like Denise Branson."

Lena wondered how much Will had heard standing out in the hallway. "She seems ready to take her medicine."

"In my experience, people like that don't generally stay down for the count." He stared his meaning into her. They both knew Lena had a habit of rising from the ashes.

"Right." Lena looked at her watch, though the only thing on her immediate agenda was to drag her idiot husband home by the collar. "I'll let you get back to work."

"I'm already finished. I was waiting to talk to you."

Lena felt dread flood through her body. "About what?"

“To tell you that you were right.”

She laughed, thinking this was some kind of joke. “Right about what?”

“The attack. IA wanted me to wait until you were cleared to tell you.”

Lena wasn’t laughing anymore. “Tell me what?”

“It wasn’t your fault. The reason those two men went to your house that night was because Jared said something at your doctor’s office.”

Lena couldn’t make sense of the words. It was like he was speaking Japanese.

Will explained, “Cayla Martin was filling in for one of the nurses at Dr. Benedict’s office while you were there. She overheard Jared talking about Big Whitey.”

Lena’s mouth didn’t just open in surprise. Her jaw practically grazed the floor. Cayla Martin. The name had sounded familiar when Lena first heard it three days ago, but she’d never in a million years put it together. “I thought she just worked at the hospital. That she was Tony Dell’s stepsister.”

“She did part-time work at Dr. Benedict’s office.” Will spoke carefully, like he was explaining it to a child. “Cayla overheard Jared telling you that Lonnie Gray was Big Whitey.”

“No.” Lena felt a dry laugh scratch her throat. The conversation sounded more and more like a really bad joke. “He wasn’t serious.”

“Cayla felt differently. She told DeShawn Franklin, who said it was probably nothing, and then she told Lonnie Gray, who put out a hit on you and your husband.”

None of this made sense. “How did she—”

“Cayla was dating Chuck Gray before he died of leukemia. She was close to Lonnie. Or, as close as two people like that can be.” Will put his hands in his pockets. “You want my personal theory, I think she was just one of those women who likes stirring things up.”

Lena felt her head shaking even as her brain tried to process the information. She remembered the doctor’s visit. She remembered Jared talking shit. And she remembered taking him seriously for just a brief moment before dismissing his theory like she dismissed every jackass theory that came out of his mouth.

All she could manage was, “I don’t believe you.”

"Why not?" Will asked. "It's the truth." There was no smile on his face, no indication that he was about to reveal the punch line. "It wasn't your fault. I wouldn't say it was Jared's fault, either. It's just something that happened."

Lena pressed her back against the wall. She'd been racking her brain trying to figure out where she'd gone wrong, what she'd done, and in the end, she was completely blameless. "I just assumed ..." Lena shook her head again. She was turning into a bobblehead doll. "I thought it was something to do with work."

"That's a reasonable assumption," Will agreed. "We all thought it was work-related. But it wasn't."

"We were ..." She let her voice trail off. Lena couldn't say the most startling part of all: On the street, you expected bad things to happen. They had been in her doctor's office. Lena had thought they were safe.

She told Will, "I don't even remember meeting her. I've seen her face all over the news and it never even crossed my mind." She felt a jolt from a distant memory. "I think she even called me on the phone."

Will said, "If it helps any, you've really annoyed my partner. She's spent her professional career saying there's no such thing as coincidence."

Lena kept shaking her head. She'd never believed in coincidences, either.

"So," Will said. "Any questions?"

Lena could only think of one. "Does Sara know it wasn't my fault?"

He hesitated, but told her, "Yes."

Lena didn't even try to fight the smile on her lips. "And she knows that you're down here telling me?"

"Yes."

"She didn't try to stop you?"

"I should head back to Atlanta." Will pushed away from the wall, obviously uneasy with the subject. "I'm glad everything worked out for you and Jared."

She couldn't let him leave. "Why didn't you just call me? Or email me?"

He gave her a knowing look. "You always come out better when we're off the record."

Lena didn't have to ask for clarification. Her memory flashed

up that night in the house when she'd held the hammer over her head. Jared was bleeding out on the floor. One man was already dead. Even now, the bruise on Lena's knee was still tender where she'd dropped her full weight onto Fred Zachary's spine. If she thought about it hard enough, she could hear the crack of bone echoing in her ears.

Georgia's Castle Doctrine law provided that any man or woman could use deadly force against an intruder so long as they believed their life was in danger.

Will Trent knew just as well as Lena that Fred Zachary had no longer been a threat.

He gave a slight bow, his only acknowledgment of the truth between them. "Until next time."

"There's not going to be a next time."

"Lena." He sounded almost wistful. "I really hope you're right."

Will kept his hands in his pockets as he walked away. Lena remembered the first time she'd met him. With his three-piece suits and mild manner, he was more like an undertaker than a cop. In Lena's quest to learn from her mistakes, Will Trent was up there with the big life lessons. That undertaker had almost sent her to prison.

And not without good reason.

Lena gave Will enough time to leave the building before she approached the interrogation room door. She listened carefully, but couldn't hear anything. Denise had a quiet voice and Brock Patterson had the dulcet tones of an ancient nun. Lena pressed her palm to the door as an act of silent solidarity. So many times, Lena had been on the other side of that door. So many times, she'd known in her heart that no one was waiting on the other side.

"Hey."

She spun around, surprised to find Jared behind her. The shock wore off quickly. "You dumbass. What are you doing up here? How did you—"

He kissed her in a sloppy way that was meant to shut her up.

Lena scowled as she pulled away. He was wearing blue sweatpants and a bright orange Auburn sweatshirt. His bandages were off. His hair stuck up like a duck's ass in the back. The scalp had Frankenstein stitches that had already been documented on several Facebook pages.

She asked, "How did you get here? You're not supposed to be driving."

"Estefan picked me up to come see the new Harleys."

"Estefan," she muttered. The two had half a brain between them. "You need to go home."

"So, take me home." He wrapped his arms around her waist.

"Jared."

"Take me home." He grabbed her ass to get her going. Lena slapped away his hand. Cameras covered almost every angle of the building. She imagined the front desk sergeant was pressing *record* at this very moment.

She said, "You should be at home asleep right now. You were in the hospital. You almost died."

"I'm not sleepy."

"Bullshit. You can barely keep your eyes open."

"I wish you couldn't keep your mouth open."

She gave him a sharp look, but she took the hint. Lena had spent enough time with Nell to know the kind of wife she didn't want to be. She was all for putting a man in his place, but Jared's father was so neutered he probably sat down on the toilet to pee.

Jared leaned on her as they made their way toward the front exit. "These bikes are gonna ride awesome, babe. There's push buttons on the bags, they've all got the 103 power pack ..."

Lena tuned him out. She let Will's revelation roll through her mind. Cayla Martin. Dr. Benedict's office. No matter how hard Lena tried, she still couldn't recall meeting the woman. She was just one of those faceless people who blended into the scenery.

Jared didn't remember her, either. At least he hadn't commented the one time he'd watched the news with Lena. Cayla Martin's face had come on-screen and he'd turned off the TV before the story could run.

Unlike Lena, Jared didn't seem interested in finding out why they'd been targeted. He was too focused on being happy that the shooters hadn't succeeded. More likely, he thought it was Lena's fault but didn't want her to feel bad about it.

Lena had no problem letting him live in blissful ignorance. Since Fred Zachary had made a plea deal, there would be no trial. There would be no testimony explaining why two men had been sent to kill Lena and Jared. There was no reason for Jared to ever find out that he'd been at the root of all this evil. As forgiving as

he was of others, he did not easily forgive himself. Lena was much more accustomed to living with guilt.

Not that she'd ever felt guilty for lying to her husband.

They finally reached the front lobby. Jared stopped walking. He put his hand to the wall to help keep his balance. They both knew they were in a camera blind spot. Every cop in the building knew how to stay off film.

Instead of doing something lewd, he told Lena, "You smell a little sweaty."

"Thanks a lot." She punched him in the shoulder.

He smiled sweetly. "Have your eyes always been brown?"

"Have you always been an idiot?"

He stopped smiling. The creases at the corners of his eyes didn't completely go away. "I want to try again."

Lena felt her face flush. He didn't have to tell her what he wanted to try again. "Do you think that's a good idea?"

"Hell no." He laughed. "That didn't stop us the first time."

Lena couldn't respond. She wasn't sure how she felt, whether or not she was ready. Last time had been an accident. To do it on purpose seemed like tempting fate.

"Lee." Jared took her hand. He'd been doing that a lot lately. Lena kept waiting to feel annoyed, but mostly, she found herself appreciating the solid feel of his hand, the tight grasp that told her he was going to be all right.

He said, "I want a baby with you. I want to make a life together. A family."

Just hearing the words made her want all of it, but Lena was too afraid to answer, too terrified to get her hopes up again.

Which is why she said, "Okay."

Jared grinned like a fool. "Really?"

"Yes." She said it again just to make sure. "Yes."

He kissed her, his mouth lingering longer than usual. His hand cradled her face. Jared looked into her eyes. His thumb traced where his lips had been. "And I want to rip out the kitchen because my dad did it wrong."

Lena's string of profanities was muffled by a trumpet of motorcycles pulling into the parking lot. She could see them lining up through the glass doors. Six Harley-Davidson police-issue bikes gleamed in the sunshine, courtesy of Sid Waller's stash of money in the basement of the shooting gallery.

“Hot damn!” Jared sounded like a frat boy at a pool party. He hobbled toward the parking lot, grabbing the back of a chair, the door handle, anything he could use to propel himself toward the bikes.

Lena shook her head as she took a key out of her pocket. Weapons weren’t allowed in areas where prisoners were kept, so there was a row of lockers by the front door. She slid her key into the correct lock. Lena had never been the type of woman to carry a purse. She had shoved her messenger bag into the tiny locker so many times that the canvas was worn where the metal edges scraped into the material. Out of habit, she did a quick inventory of the bag, making sure her Glock was inside, her wallet, her keys, her pens.

Almost as an afterthought, she checked the outside pocket for the postcard. There it was—stamped and ready to go. Lena had been carrying the postcard around with her for three days, putting it in her bag, sticking it in her pocket, tossing it onto the dresser. Now, she pulled out the card and looked at the photograph of downtown Macon. “Thank you for visiting the Heart of Georgia” was written across the top in a curly yellow script.

Lena flipped the card over. The address was the same one she’d written years ago on an envelope she’d mailed to Atlanta.

The letter.

Lena knew that she’d always placed too much value on Sara Linton’s opinion. For years, Lena had let the blame for Jeffrey’s death shadow her every move. She was so low at one point that she had to reach up to touch bottom. Lena had written the letter to beg for Sara’s forgiveness, to seek absolution. She’d structured her case the same way she would present an investigation in court. She’d testified to her own good character. She’d laid out the evidence. She’d highlighted the inconsistencies. She’d expertly spun the divergent facts in her favor. Lena hadn’t been writing an apology. She had been begging for the return of her very soul.

The postcard was different. Two words, not three pages. Giving something, not asking for it.

The truth was that Lena had recovered her soul on her own. When she looked at her life now, all she could see was good. She was good at her job. She was good to her friends. She had

married a good man, even if he talked too much. They would eventually have a child together. Maybe more than one child. They would raise their family. They would suffer through Nell's visits. They would have birthday parties, Christmases, and Thanksgivings, and no matter what Sara Linton thought about Lena's choices, she would always know that she had done the right thing.

Virtue was its own absolution.

There was a mail slot by the lockers, a brass plaque with the words U.S. MAIL engraved in bold print across the top. Every day around lunchtime, the woman in the front office collected the outgoing mail and took it to the post office. One of the perks of working at a police station. Especially if you liked long lunches.

Lena stared down at the postcard. For just a moment, she thought about tearing it up. She couldn't bring herself to do it. Lena was fine. Sara was the one who needed forgiveness. She was the one who couldn't let go. It cost nothing to release her.

Lena angled the postcard into the mail slot. She held on for just a second, then let it drop into the basket below.

Outside, a motorcycle revved. Jared was straddling the bike. Estefan was behind him because he couldn't hold it up on his own.

Lena hefted her bag over her shoulder as she headed toward the door.

Toward Jared.

Toward her life.

She smiled at the thought of Sara reading the postcard. The message was simple. Lena could've just as easily written it to herself—

You win.

*For Angela, Diane, and Victoria—
my champions*

Acknowledgments

I feel very lucky to have some really great folks on my team, among them Angela Cheng Caplan, Diane Dickensheid, and Victoria Sanders. Thank y'all so much for being the glue that helps hold this thing together.

As always, much praise goes to my editors, Kate Elton and Jennifer Hershey, for their insight and generosity.

Yet again, Dr. David Harper was very helpful with the medical details. He's kept Sara from killing lots of people over the years, and I appreciate his continued guidance. I owe eternal gratitude to the fine agents at the Georgia Bureau of Investigation for answering what I am sure seem like crazy questions. I promise I am only asking how to commit crimes in service to story. Chip Pendleton, MD, is a great doctor and even more generous adviser on all things Grady. I thank you, sir, for your ribald sense of humor and—more important—your time.

To Beth Tindall at Cincinnati Media, aka Webmaster Beth, aka my good friend: thanks for sticking with me all these years, and for not letting me use too much flash.

To all my publishers around the world and the good people who work on my books: I so appreciate your support. To my readers: I continue to be grateful for your kindness and all the cat photos you post on Facebook.

To my daddy: thanks for always being there even when I was young and stupid.

To D.A.: thanks for promising to be there when I am old and wise. I am sorry that only one of those things is happening.

ALSO BY KARIN SLAUGHTER

Blindsighted
Kisscut
A Faint Cold Fear
Indelible
Like a Charm (Editor)
Faithless
Triptych
Beyond Reach
Fractured
Undone
Broken
Fallen
Criminal

eBook original

Snatched
Thorn in My Side
Busted

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

KARIN SLAUGHTER is the *New York Times* and #1 internationally bestselling author of *Criminal*, “Snatched” and “Thorn in My Side” (e-book original novellas), *Fallen*, *Broken*, *Undone*, *Fractured*, *Beyond Reach*, *Triptych*, *Faithless*, *Indelible*, *A Faint Cold Fear*, *Kisscut*, and *Blindsighted*; she contributed to and edited *Like a Charm*. To date, her books have been translated into more than thirty languages. She is a native of Atlanta, Georgia, where she currently lives and is working on her next novel.

www.karinslaughter.com

If you enjoyed *Unseen*,
you won't want to miss
the next riveting thriller
by *New York Times* bestselling author

KARIN SLAUGHTER

COP TOWN

Coming in hardcover and eBook from
Delacorte Press
in Summer 2014.

Read on for a preview ...

1.

Maggie Lawson was upstairs in her bedroom when she heard the phone ringing in the kitchen. She checked her watch. There was nothing good about a phone ringing this early in the morning. Sounds from the kitchen echoed up the back stairs: The click of the receiver being lifted from the cradle. The low murmur of her mother's voice answering. The slap of the phone cord dragging the floor as she walked back and forth across the kitchen.

The linoleum had been worn away in staggered gray lines from the countless times Delia Lawson had paced the kitchen listening to bad news.

The conversation didn't last long. Delia hung up the phone. The loud click echoed up to the rafters. Maggie knew every sound the house made. She had spent a lifetime studying its moods. Even from her room, she could follow her mother's movements through the kitchen: The refrigerator door opening and closing. A cabinet banging shut. Eggs being cracked into a bowl. Thumb flicking her Bic to light a cigarette.

Maggie knew how this would go. Delia had been playing bad news blackjack for as long as Maggie could remember. She would hold for a while, but then tonight, tomorrow or maybe even a week from now, Delia would pick a fight with Maggie and the minute Maggie opened her mouth to respond, her mother would lay down her cards: the electric bill was past due, her shifts at the diner had been cut, the car needed a new transmission, and here Maggie was making things worse by talking back and for the love of God, couldn't she give her mother a break?

Busted. Dealer wins.

The ironing board screeched as Maggie closed it. She stepped carefully around folded stacks of laundry. She'd been up since

five that morning ironing clothes for the family. She was Sisyphus in a bathrobe. They all had uniforms of one kind or another. Lilly wore green-and-blue-checkered skirts and yellow button-down tops to school. Jimmy and Maggie had their dark blue pants and long-sleeved shirts from the Atlanta Police Department. Delia had her green polyester smocks from the diner. And then they all came home and changed into regular clothes, which meant that every day, Maggie was washing and ironing for eight people instead of four.

There was a scratching sound from Lilly's room as she dropped the needle on a record. Maggie clenched her teeth. *Tapestry*. Lilly played the album incessantly. It was part of her plan to drive them all insane.

Maggie waited for Jimmy to bang on the wall for silence, but then she remembered her brother had picked up a night shift. She looked out the window. His car wasn't in the driveway. He was spared the listening choices of an impossibly moody thirteen-year-old.

Now seemed like as good a time as any to go down for breakfast. Maggie pulled the foam rollers from her hair as she walked down the stairs. The kitchen was humid as the middle of summer. No matter the time of day, it always smelled of fried bacon and cigarette smoke.

The source of both stood at the sink. Delia's back was bent as she filled the percolator. When Maggie thought of her mother, she thought of this kitchen—the faded avocado green appliances, the cracked yellow linoleum on the floor, the burned, black ridges on the laminate countertop where her father rested his cigarettes.

As usual, Delia had been up since before Maggie. No one knew what Delia did in the morning hours. Probably curse God that she'd woken up in the same house with the same problems. It was an unwritten rule that you didn't go downstairs until you heard eggs being whisked in a bowl. Delia always cooked a big breakfast, a holdover from her Depression childhood, when breakfast might be the only meal of the day.

"Lilly up?" Delia hadn't turned around, but she knew Maggie was there.

"Yeah." Maggie made the same offer she did every morning. "Can I do anything?"

She nodded toward the television on the counter. The picture

was rolling. "See if you can get the signal straight."

Maggie turned the antennae, squeezed the aluminum foil around the tips.

"Bang it," Delia ordered, because Maggie had never fixed a TV before in her life. "Not too hard."

Maggie slapped the side of the set, feeling the warm plastic under her palm.

"I said not—"

"There." Something had jiggled the tubes the right way. The gray lines zigzagged. They saw the new black anchor on the morning news, then the weatherman, then the screen went wonky again.

"For God's sake. Is it too much to ask?" Delia slapped bacon into the frying pan. "Watching the news in the morning is the only thing I have to look forward to."

"Thanks, Mom." Maggie changed the channel, then tried the next one. All three were fuzzy. "Maybe if I—"

"Just turn the damn thing off." Delia jabbed the bacon with a fork. "What does it matter?"

Maggie switched off the set. She leaned against the counter with her arms crossed low on her waist. Delia looked exhausted. They'd all been picking up extra shifts to pay Lilly's private school tuition. None of them wanted to see her bused across town to a ghetto school. They had four more years of tuition and textbooks and uniforms before Lilly graduated. Maggie didn't know how much longer her mother could take it. She'd been knocked to the mat so many times that no one could blame her for not getting up.

As a child, Delia had seen her father shoot himself in the head after losing the family business. Her mother had worked herself into an early grave on a sharecropper's farm. She'd lost her two brothers to polio. She must've thought she'd hit pay dirt when she married Hank Lawson. He wore a suit and had a good job and a nice car, and then he'd come home from Okinawa so shell-shocked that he'd been in and out of the state mental hospital ever since.

There wasn't much that Maggie knew about her father, though he'd obviously tried to build a life between hospital stays. When Lilly was born, he put up the swing set in the backyard. One time, he found some gray paint on sale at the hardware store and

worked thirty-six hours straight painting every room in the house the color of an aircraft carrier. On weekends, he mowed the lawn for as long as it took to drink a six-pack of Schlitz, then left the mower wherever he ran out. One time when it snowed and Maggie was sick with strep, he brought her some snow in a Tupperware bowl so she could play with it in the bathroom.

“Maggie, for the love of God.” Delia tapped the fork against the frying pan. “Can’t you find something to do?”

Maggie grabbed a stack of plates and silverware off the counter and took them into the dining room. Lilly was already at the table. Her head was bent over a textbook, which Maggie took as a miracle. The last year hadn’t been so much a burgeoning of Lilly’s womanhood as a running audition for the Exorcist.

Still, Maggie couldn’t give up on her baby sister. “You have a good night?”

“Peachy.” Lilly cupped her fingers across her forehead like she was saluting the page.

Maggie put a plate by Lilly’s elbow. She bumped her with her thigh. “What’re you studying?” She bumped her again. Then again. When Lilly didn’t respond, she sang the opening lines from *I Feel the Earth Move*, punctuating each bump.

“Stop it.” Lilly tilted her head down even more. Her nose was practically touching the book.

Maggie leaned over to set the other side of the table. She glanced back at Lilly, who had been staring at the same spot on the page since Maggie walked in.

Maggie said, “Look at me.”

“I’m studying.”

“Look at me.”

“I have a test.”

“Look at me before I make you.”

Lilly looked up. Her eyes were lined like Cleopatra’s.

Maggie kept her voice low. “I told you to stop stealing stuff from my room.”

Lilly blinked innocently. “What did I steal?”

“My eyeliner, you little brat.” Maggie tugged her hair harder than she meant to.

Lilly screamed like she’d been beaten.

The kitchen door swung open. Delia’s hands and arms were lined with platters of pancakes, eggs, bacon and biscuits. “You’ve

got two seconds to wash that shit off your face before I get your father's belt." Lilly bolted from the room. Delia banged the platters down on the table one by one. "See what you're teaching her?"

"Why am I—"

"Don't talk back." Delia dug a pack of cigarettes out of her apron. "You're twenty-two years old, Margaret. Why do I feel like I have two teenagers under my roof?"

"Twenty-three" was all Maggie could say.

Delia lit the cigarette and hissed out smoke between her teeth. "Twenty-three," she repeated. "I was married with two kids when I was your age."

Maggie resisted the urge to ask her mother how that had turned out.

Delia picked a speck of tobacco off her tongue. "This women's lib stuff works for rich girls, but all you've got going for you is your face and your figure. You need to take advantage of both before you lose them."

Maggie smoothed her lips together. She imagined a lost-and-found box in the back of a storeroom with all the missing faces and figures of thirty-year-old women.

"Are you listening to me?"

"Mama." Maggie kept her tone even. "I like my job."

"Must be nice to do whatever you like." Delia pressed the cigarette to her mouth. She took a deep breath and held the smoke in her lungs. She looked up at the ceiling, shook her head like she was having a conversation with herself.

Maggie guessed it was coming sooner than she'd thought. Her mother was shuffling the deck before laying down the Bad News Card: Why are you throwing away your life? Go to nursing school. Be a Kelly Girl. Get some kind of job where you'll meet a man who doesn't think you're a whore.

Instead, Delia told her, "Don Wesley was killed this morning."

Maggie's hand went to her chest. Her heart was a hummingbird trapped beneath her fingers.

Delia said, "Shot in the head. Died two seconds after he got to the hospital."

"Is Jimmy—"

"If Jimmy was hurt, do you think I'd be standing here talking about Don Wesley?"

Maggie took a mouthful of air, then coughed it back out. The room was filled with smoke and cooking odors. She wanted to open a window but her father had painted them all shut.

"How did it ...?" Maggie had trouble forming the question. "How did it happen?"

"I'm just the mother. You think they tell me anything?" She tapped ash into her cupped hand. "Jimmy's safe. That's all that matters. And you be nice to him when he gets here."

"Of course I—"

A car door slammed in the driveway. The window-panes shook from the sound. Delia's mouth tightened to a thin line. Maggie held her breath because it was easier than breathing. She marked the visitor's progress: Shoes scuffed across the carport, up the back stairs. The kitchen door opened, but didn't close.

She knew it was her uncle Terry before she saw him. He never shut the back door. The kitchen was a non-room to him, one of those things women needed that men didn't want to know about, like sanitary napkins and douches.

Though the sun was barely up, Terry Lawson reeked of alcohol. Maggie could smell it from across the room. He swayed as he stood in the doorway to the dining room. He was wearing his police captain's uniform, but the shirt was unbuttoned, showing his white undershirt. Tufts of hair stuck up from the collar. He looked like he'd slept in his car with a bottle of Southern Comfort trapped between his knees. Which was probably where he was when he heard about Don Wesley on his radio.

Delia said, "Sit down. You look dead on your feet."

Terry rubbed his jaw as he looked at his niece and sister-in-law. "Jimmy's on his way."

"Is he all right?" Maggie asked.

"Of course he's all right. Don't get hysterical."

The fact that he told her not to get hysterical made Maggie feel like she was going to get hysterical. "You should've called me."

"For what?"

Maggie was stunned. She was a cop, too. You went to the hospital when another cop was there. You gave blood. You waited for news. You comforted the family. It was part of the job. "I should've been there."

"For what?" he repeated. "The nurses fetched us coffee. All you'd do is get in the way." He nodded at Delia. "I could use

some, by the way.”

She walked back into the kitchen to get his coffee.

Maggie sat down. She was still reeling from the news. She hated that Terry was the only way she was going to get answers. “How did it happen?”

“Same way it always happens.” Terry dropped into the chair at the head of the table. “Some nigger shot him.”

“Was it the Shooter?”

“Shooter.” He grunted. “Stop talking out of your ass.”

“Uncle Terry!” Lilly ran into the room. She threw her arms around him and kissed his cheek. She always acted a few years younger around Terry. It drove Maggie crazy because Terry was the last person on earth Lilly should be giving her love to.

Maggie told her, “Jimmy’s fine, but Don Wesley got shot last night. He’s dead.”

Terry gave her a sharp look. He patted Lilly’s arms, which were still looped around his neck. “It’s okay, sweetie. We’ll get the bastard.”

Lilly looked at Maggie for confirmation. Her eyes were red from where she’d scrubbed off the make-up. She was still so young and vulnerable. Maggie felt like a heel for being so blunt about Don.

“Come on.” Terry patted Lilly’s arms again so she’d loosen her hold. “We’ll have him strung up by the end of the day. Don’t you worry.”

“Nobody’s worried.” Delia came back with Terry’s coffee. She put the mug on the table and handed him the newspaper.

Maggie saw the headline under the *Atlanta Journal* masthead. It was the first time since the election that the paper had led with something other than the newly elected black mayor.

ANOTHER COP MURDERED

Maggie said, “That makes five this year.”

“Maggie.” Delia headed toward the kitchen again. “Don’t bother your uncle.”

She pretended not to hear the warning. “It’s the Shooter.”

Terry shook his head.

“It was the middle of the morning. They were obviously ambushed. It has to be—”

"Eat your breakfast," he said. "You want a ride to work, you need to be ready to go when I am."

Lilly still had one arm draped around Terry's shoulders. Her voice sounded impossibly small when she asked, "Is everybody gonna be all right, Uncle Terry?"

"This is still a cop town, sweetheart. The monkeys ain't runnin' the zoo." He patted her bottom. "Come on. Eat."

Lilly never argued with Terry. She sat down and started to eat.

He asked her, "You doing good in school?"

"Yes, sir. I got an A in biology and a B in—"

"Good girl," Terry said, because he wasn't really listening. He'd already opened the newspaper. Maggie could only see the top of his head, the square crewcut that showcased his receding hairline. He needed glasses. His forehead wrinkled as he squinted at the football scores.

Maggie's gaze went back to the headline on the front page. She couldn't read the story from here, but she knew what it would say. In the last two months, four patrol officers had been shot in cold blood in the early morning hours. They had all been in pairs. Nobody patrolled downtown alone. The first two were found in an alley—they'd been forced down on their knees and executed from behind. The other two were found behind the service entrance to the Portman Motel. Same *modus operandi*. Same lack of leads. No witnesses. No bullet casings. No fingerprints. No suspects.

Around the station, they'd started calling their mystery bad guy the Atlanta Shooter.

"I put on a fresh pot." Delia sat down at the table, something she rarely did for long. She was turned in her chair, facing Terry—another thing she rarely did. "Tell me what really happened, Terrance."

Terrance. The word hung in the air alongside the smoke and bacon grease.

Terry made a show of his reluctance. He sighed. He took his time folding the newspaper. He put it down on the table and lined it up to the edge. Instead of answering Delia's question, he made a gun with his hand and put it to the side of his face. Nobody said anything until he pulled the trigger.

Lilly whispered, "Jesus."

For once, nobody corrected her language.

Terry said, "Nothing Jimmy could do. He ran twenty blocks with Don slung over his shoulder. Got to the hospital, but it was too late."

Maggie thought about her brother running all that way on his bad knee. "Jimmy wasn't—"

"Jimmy's fine." Terry's voice sounded like he was humoring them. "What he doesn't need is a bunch of hens squawking around."

With that, he opened his newspaper and buried his nose back in the pages.

He hadn't really answered Delia's question. He'd just given the highlights, likely the same details you could read in the paper. They all knew that, even Lilly. And they all knew there was no use pointing it out. Terry couldn't be pushed.

Instead of going back into the kitchen, Delia took a packet of Kools from her apron pocket and shook one out. Her hand trembled as she fumbled with her lighter. She looked calmer once she had it lit. Smoke furred from her nose, her mouth. Every wrinkle on Delia Lawson's face came from sucking on cigarettes—the crepe-like lines around her lips, the sagging jawline, the deep indentation between her eyebrows. Even her dark hair was streaked with the same smoke gray that came out of her Kools. She was forty-five years old, but on a good day, she looked around one hundred. Right now, she looked twice that, like she was already in her grave.

Like Don Wesley would soon be.

Maggie had attended at least two dozen cop funerals in her career. Atlanta's ghettos were filled with people who had quick tempers and access to cheap guns. Most of the funerals were for cops like Don Wesley, murdered in the line of duty. Some had died under less honorable circumstances—trying to take money off the wrong bookie, sleeping with the wrong man's wife. They were still cops and they were still dead, so everybody turned out like they were supposed to.

The first funeral she'd attended was the worst. Maggie had sobbed openly as she watched the procession of motormen and cruisers escorting the hearse down Peachtree. It was a solemn affair. Her heart swelled with emotion, absorbing the weighty responsibility of the badge. By the tenth funeral, which honored a detective who'd been shot by a pimp for refusing to pay for

services, all Maggie could think about was how hot it was in her dress uniform, and what a relief it would be to go home and sit in front of the fan.

Delia always said you could get used to anything. Maggie had gotten used to cop funerals. And then the Atlanta Shooter had come along. Four men, just out doing their jobs. Four men who'd felt the grit of the asphalt under their knees, the cold, hard metal of a gun pressed to the back of their heads.

Those funerals were different. She'd felt it in the crowd—the anger, the confusion, the sting of injustice. Hot tears slid down her cheeks at those funerals, even though she'd never met the dead men. She had cried about the idea of them. They were just doing their jobs. They weren't stealing or gambling or screwing around. The only reason they'd died was because they were cops.

Like Jimmy. Like Terry. Like Don Wesley.

He was a Marine just back from Vietnam, unable to do any job that didn't require him to carry a gun. His people were from lower Alabama. He rented an apartment off Piedmont Avenue. He drove a burgundy colored Chevelle. He had a girlfriend—a doe-eyed hippie who talked about "the man" and didn't complain when Don hit her because he'd seen so much bad shit in the jungle.

And none of that mattered anymore because he was dead.

Terry banged his mug down on the table. Coffee splashed onto the white tablecloth. "Any of this for me?"

Delia stood up. She took his plate and started loading it with food, though Terry was usually too hung over to eat anything in the morning.

She put the plate in front of him. Her tone had a begging quality when she said, "Terry, please. Just tell me what happened, all right? He's my boy. I need to know."

Terry looked at Maggie, then looked down at his half-empty mug.

She allowed herself the luxury of an audible sigh before she went to get the percolator from the stove. As soon as she left the room, Terry started talking.

"They were out on a signal forty-four off the spike at Five Points. That's a possible robbery." He leaned back in his chair and caught Maggie's eye, like she hadn't been behind the wheel of a squad car for five years. "They get there, check the place out.

Doors are locked front and back. They give an all-clear on the radio. And then ...” He shrugged. “Guy comes around the corner, shoots Don in the head, then hightails it. You know the rest. Jimmy did everything he could. It just wasn’t enough.”

“Poor Jimmy,” Lilly mumbled.

“Poor nobody,” Terry countered. “Jimmy Lawson can take care of himself. Got it?”

And for an extra thrill, read on for the short story

SNATCHED

For Gina

Special Agent Will Trent sat in the last stall of the men's bathroom between gates C-38 and C-40 at Atlanta's Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport. He stared at the closed stall door as he tried not to listen to a man availing himself of the urinal. Muzak played from the overhead speakers. Lady Antebellum's "Need You Now." At first, the song had reminded Will of his sort-of-new girlfriend, Sara Linton. And then it had played over and over again, at least sixteen times in the last five hours, and all Will could think about was jamming his fingers into a wall socket and electrocuting himself so he never had to hear it again.

There were many jobs with the Georgia Bureau of Investigation that agents considered less than ideal—running background screenings for convenience store owners who wanted to sell lottery tickets, going undercover in bingo parlors to make sure old ladies weren't being ripped off—but no assignment was considered more odious than having to police the men's toilets at the busiest passenger airport in the world.

Sites all over the Internet listed the best bathrooms for male travelers seeking anonymous hook-ups. Hartsfield was always a prime location. Posters gave the best times for cruising, the type of guy to expect in which concourse, and the various under-stall contortions that were preferred at each location.

Will didn't mind what two consenting adults got up to. He just wished they wouldn't do it in public where kids could walk in. He usually spent the first half hour of every morning checking the cruising sites and anonymously posting that he'd seen a police officer staking out the stalls.

And still these idiots kept showing up.

Eighty-nine million passengers a year. Five runways. Seven concourses. Over a hundred restaurants. Twice as many shops. A people mover. A train station. Close to six million square feet of space that sprawled across two counties, three cities, and five jurisdictions. Seven hundred and twenty-five commodes. Three hundred and thirty-eight urinals.

This last bit of trivia was particularly galling, as Will was probably going to lay eyes on each and every urinal in the airport before he died.

All because he wouldn't get a haircut.

The GBI manual called for agents to keep their hair at least half an inch off their collar. Amanda Wagner, his boss, had slapped a ruler to his neck a few days ago. Will was right on the line, but Amanda had never been one to let fact get in the way of her firm opinion. When Will hadn't rushed to the barber, she'd assigned him to toilet duty until further notice. Amanda was going to have to wait a good long while. Sara liked Will's hair long. She liked to stroke her fingers through it. She liked to drag her nails along his scalp.

Which meant Will was pretty much going to be the Samson of Hartsfield until the day he died.

A man walked into the bathroom. He said, "What I told her was, 'You don't like it, you can move out.' "

Will leaned his head back against the wall and closed his eyes. Over the course of the last few days, he'd learned that a surprising number of people talked on their cell phones while they used the bathroom. One of the janitors had told Will that seven million people a year accidentally dropped their phones in the toilet. Will prayed this jackass would be one of them.

No such luck.

The urinal flushed. The man left without washing his hands. This was no longer shocking, either. In fact, Will had witnessed worse lapses in personal hygiene over the last two weeks than he had during his entire adult life.

Will pulled out his cell phone to check the time. The numbers glimmered, then the screen went blank. A marathon session of Minesweeper had drained the battery into the red zone. He would have to charge it during lunch, which was blissfully close enough to justify abandoning his post. The business travel rush had come and gone. Another morning without an arrest. Will hoped his good luck would flow into the afternoon. He was probably the only cop on the planet right now who was happy to post a zero in the win column.

Will stood up. His knees popped. He stretched his arms up to the ceiling in order to coax his spine into a position more conducive to walking. A spasm nearly doubled him over. He wasn't built for sitting all day. He'd rather chase a chicken back and forth across a courtyard than do this. At the very least, it would give him some exercise.

Around ten every morning, Will usually had his second breakfast of a fried chicken biscuit. By noon, he was at Nathan's ordering a slawdog meal. At two, he visited the pretzel stand, and at four-thirty, he grabbed an ice cream sandwich or a Cinnabon on his way to the parking garage.

If he didn't die of boredom, he always had a heart attack to look forward to.

The stall door next to him opened. Reluctantly, Will sat back down on the toilet and waited. Lady Antebellum revved up over the speakers. Will suppressed a scream. He'd thought he had another thirteen minutes before the track cycled on again. The song pierced his eardrums like an ice pick.

And then a child whispered, "Please, I wanna go home."

Will turned his head, though he could only see the wall next to him. There was something plaintive in the little girl's voice that cut straight through. Will leaned down. He saw a pair of white Hello Kitty ballet shoes with pink trim. Impossibly tiny ankles in white tights. The man behind her wore gray Brooks running shoes. The hem of his tan cargo pants was high, showing white socks.

"Just go," the man ordered. "Quickly."

Slowly, the little feet turned. The bigger feet did not.

Will sat up. He stared at the stall door in front of him. Phone numbers of escorts, tips on the best strip clubs. He knew them all by heart.

The man said, "Hurry up." He said something else, but his voice was too low for Will to make out the words.

Regardless, the little girl sniffed, which made Will wonder if she was crying. He also wondered why every hair on the back of his neck was standing at attention. Will had been with the GBI for fifteen years and learned early on that there was such a thing as a cop's intuition.

Something wasn't right here. He felt it in his gut.

Will stood from the toilet. He'd taped a Band-Aid over the automatic sensor to keep the toilet from flushing. He peeled back the strip and let the sound of a flush announce his presence.

There was a subtle change in the air, as if the man was suddenly on alert.

Will unlocked the stall door. His badge was looped on his belt. He slipped it into his pocket, not wanting to spook the guy. His Glock and holster had been checked with security, but his handcuffs were neatly stacked into the leather pouch at the small of his back.

Which hardly mattered. You couldn't arrest a man for snapping at his daughter. Half the population would be in jail right now.

But still—Will sensed that something was wrong.

He went to the sink and held his hands under the faucet so the water would flow. Will waited, staring at the reflection of the closed stall. He could still see the man's heels under the door. The running shoes looked new. The hem was torn at the back of the trousers. The man had used a stapler to tack them up.

Seconds passed. A full minute. Finally, the little feet went back to the floor.

The toilet flushed. Will waited. And waited. Eventually, the lock slid back. The stall door opened. Will glanced at the man, taking in the short brown hair, the thick black glasses, before returning his gaze to his hands under the faucet. The guy was wearing a green jacket that looked a few sizes too big. He was tall, almost matching Will's height of six-three, but probably weighing in at twenty pounds heavier, mostly in the gut. He looked to be around fifty. There was no telling how young the girl was; maybe six or seven. She was in a flowered dress. The pink collar matched her shoes.

Will tried a casual, "How's it going?"

The man didn't respond. A nervous look twisted his features before he turned toward the exit, dragging the little girl behind him.

Will's peripheral vision tracked the man leaving the bathroom. At the last minute, the man jerked the girl by the arm and practically flung her into the concourse.

Definitely not right.

Will waited a few seconds before following them. He peered around the corner of the exit and saw the man glancing nervously over his shoulder. Was he looking for his wife? Was he just irritated? Was something else going on?

The concourse was filled with the usual travelers dragging suitcases and pillows along the tile floor. Will weaved in and out of them, hunching down because his height made him stick out among most of the crowd. He saw the man heading toward the escalator that led down to the interterminal train. Will pulled out his cell phone as he followed. He tried to scroll to Faith Mitchell's number, but the phone didn't respond.

Minesweeper.

Will cursed as he stuck the phone back into his pocket.

What would he tell his partner, anyway? That a man was being curt with his child in the bathroom? That the man didn't look like the type to make sure the pink trim on his daughter's collar exactly matched the pink on her Hello Kitty shoes?

If she was his daughter.

Will could see the top of the girl's head. Her hair was light, almost yellow. The man's hair was an unnatural brown, possibly dyed. Did that mean he wasn't the father? Will hadn't grown up with brothers and sisters, but he knew that the color of your hair could darken as you grew older. Will knew from the few photos he had of himself as a kid that his sandy-brown hair had started out nearly white.

Besides, the man could be her stepfather.

Whoever he was, he didn't take much care with the girl. At the bottom of the escalator, he wrenched her up by the arm, pulling her off the last two stairs, jerking her toward the train that led to the other concourses.

"Hey!" a woman shouted in protest, but the man was already heading toward the first car on the train. There were two sets of doors. He used the far set, standing close to the exit, which meant he'd be one of the first people off.

Will could hear the familiar announcement warning that the train was about to depart. He pushed past the couple in front of him, hoping he looked like a normal, hurried traveler as he bolted toward the first car. Will used the second set of doors. A quick jump at the last minute got him inside before the final announcement came.

The crowd shifted as the train pulled away from the C concourse. The car was full. Will looked up at the display that showed the train's progress. There were three more stops before baggage claim and the exit.

Will tried to be unobtrusive as he searched for the man and the girl. A group of Delta pilots and flight attendants were clustered in the center of the car. Couples and single business travelers were packed tightly around them. Most of the occupants were looking down at their iPhones and BlackBerries. Will found the man at the front of the car. He was still standing directly in front of the doors.

The brown hair made sense now. It was a wig. The thick black glasses were probably fake, too. The man slid them up his nose as he stared at his watch. And then he looked down at his side. Will guessed he was looking at the girl. There was nothing like compassion on his face. Just anger, tinged with what looked like anxiety.

Will knelt down, pretending to tie his shoe. He peered past a woman's leg and saw the girl. Blonde hair like straw. Pale cheeks. Deep blue eyes with tears streaming down.

She looked straight at Will, and he felt like a knife was stabbing into his chest. She was obviously terrified.

Or was she just scared because she was in a busy airport, surrounded by strangers? Was she going to a funeral? Was she visiting a sick relative?

Will stood. He'd been stuck on toilet duty for three days. Maybe he was creating a circumstance where none existed. Maybe being a cop had made him too suspicious.

Or maybe he was right.

Will turned his back to the man and child. The pilot beside him was checking her email.

"Hey," Will said, keeping his voice low. Her look said she thought he was going to try to hit on her, but Will pulled out his badge, keeping it shielded in his hand so that the whole train wouldn't see. "I need your phone."

She handed it to him without question. Will knelt down again, pretending to tie his shoe. He waited for the crowd to shift, then took a picture of the little girl. He stood to capture the man's image, but the train jerked to a stop. The doors opened. The Delta crew got off. There were only a handful of people between Will and the man now.

"You coming?" one of the flight attendants asked.

The pilot waved him off, saying, "Be right there. I forgot my flight plan."

The flight attendant didn't seem to buy the explanation, but the people crowding in on the train cut him off. The announcement came again, a tinny woman's voice warning them that the train was about to depart. Will glanced up at the display. They were two more stops away from the main terminal. Will dialed a familiar phone number and sent the picture of the little girl to Faith Mitchell, his partner. He handed the phone back to the pilot. "Thank you."

She responded with a nod, taking the phone. He saw her scan the car with thinly disguised curiosity. Most of the Delta pilots had trained in the Air Force. They were as proficient at combat as they were at landing a 747. The woman looked ready to back him up, though Will was hard-pressed to think of a legal justification for detaining the man.

The girl could be the man's daughter. Granddaughter. Stepchild. There didn't have to be a funeral or a sick relative. She could simply be tired and cranky from a long flight. For that matter, so could the man. Lots of people took their anger out on their kids. It was hardly a surprising occurrence.

The train slowed for the A concourse. Again, there was the usual flow in and out of passengers. The pilot gave Will an apologetic shrug before getting off the train. She glanced back at him before rolling her flight case toward the opposite train.

The doors closed. Will could feel someone staring at him. He counted off a few seconds, but he still felt scrutinized. After a few more seconds, he tried to casually look back. His eyes met the man's. There was a steeliness there now—no anxiety. No worry.

The train slowed again. The T concourse. Will stepped toward the doors and stared at his own reflection in the glass. His suit and tie made him look like every other passenger in the airport. Except for his lack of a suitcase. Will didn't even have a briefcase for cover.

He took out his cell phone and pretended to scroll through numbers. Faith was probably calling back the Delta pilot right now, wondering why the woman had sent her a photograph of a child. Will was seized by an overwhelming sense of futility. There was nothing about the man's actions that indicated anything was wrong. Lots of children cried for no reason. Lots of children wanted to go home, especially after a long flight.

The doors slid open. The crowd shifted to leave before the announcement reminded them that baggage claim was the next stop. Will got off the train. He kept his eyes on his phone as he walked. He heard the doors close, the train lurch forward. He could feel the man watching him, and looked up at the last minute. The man stood in the middle of the car, feet apart to counteract the movement. His hand was gripping the girl's arm. The corner of his mouth went up in a knowing smile.

And then he was gone.

Will bolted up the escalator, taking the metal stairs two at a time. As usual, most people either didn't know or didn't care that they were supposed to move to one side for those who weren't content to stand. Will absorbed his share of nasty comments as he pushed his way to the top of the concourse.

The airport didn't advertise the exit through the T concourse, probably because the top of the escalator was already packed with people coming out of security. Most of them had absolutely no idea where they were going. They stood at the display boards with their mouths hanging open, unable to remember their flight numbers, let alone figure out how to locate their gates.

Will had to move people aside as he broke through the milling crowd. He went to the desk just past security and showed his badge to the TSA agent. And then he couldn't think what to say.

The guy asked, "What is it, buddy?"

Will thought about the little girl, the fear in her voice when she said she wanted to go home. The way the man dragged her along like a rag doll. That triumphant smile on his face as the train pulled away.

Will said, "I need you to call Commander Livingston and tell her there's a possible child abduction."

The agent grabbed the receiver and started punching numbers. He told Will, "Takes fifteen minutes to shut this place down."

"Green jacket, tan pants, brown wig. The girl's six or seven, flowered dress, white Hello Kitty shoes—ballet slippers. Can I borrow your cell phone?"

The man handed him his cell as he spoke into the landline. "Code Adam. I need Livingston pronto."

Will didn't wait around. He headed toward the exit, feeling the eyes of hundreds of cameras following him. Commander Vanessa Livingston was in charge of the Atlanta Police Department's airport precinct. Her officers augmented the TSA, addressing the many thefts, assaults, and petty crimes that you could expect in a place that saw nearly a quarter of a million visitors every single day. The cops manning the cameras had probably already tracked Will through the airport, on the train. There would be footage of the man and child. They'd probably show it at Will's formal hearing, where he'd be fired for harassing an innocent father and his daughter.

Will dialed Faith's number into the TSA agent's cell phone. She picked up on the first ring.

"Mitchell."

"Did you get the picture?"

"Yes. What's going on?"

"I think—" Will stopped, but it was too late to equivocate. "I think the girl is being abducted." He mumbled an apology as he bumped into a traveler. "He had her in the bathroom. I don't know, Faith. Something's not right."

"I'm on it." Faith ended the call. Will tucked the cell phone into his pocket and quickened his pace.

A revolving door led to the South Terminal, which led to the parking decks, which led to the exit. Will didn't wait patiently in line, instead swinging through the door before anyone could stop him. The terminal was filled with noontime travelers. Ticketing lines lazily snaked inside velvet ropes. Red Coats stood by to keep the traffic flowing smoothly. Will jogged toward the large escalators that

delivered exiting passengers up from the train. He stopped at the chauffeur waiting area. The folks behind a USO sign started waving and cheering as some soldiers reached the top of the escalator.

"Uh-oh," one of the chauffeurs said. "Trouble brewin'."

A cop on a Segway zoomed by. Two more came on foot, hands to their guns to keep them from hitting their hips as they trotted toward the escalators. Commander Livingston was probably on her way down, too. She'd started on the force with Will's boss a thousand years ago. They were still close friends. Amanda was probably already on her way to the airport from her downtown office. Faith would be putting out a Levi's Call, Georgia's version of an abducted-child alert. The entire airport was grinding to a halt.

Eighty-nine million passengers a year. Five runways. Seven concourses. Over a hundred restaurants. Twice as many shops. A people mover. A train station.

All shut down on a dime because Will had a hunch.

He felt a bead of sweat roll down the side of his face. Will found himself in the peculiar position of actually hoping a crime had been committed.

The USO crowd cheered again as more soldiers arrived. Will glanced into baggage claim, wondering if he'd missed the man and child. The exit through the T concourse was faster, but Will had stopped for God only knew how long at security. He checked the other side of the terminal, the lesser-used North Terminal. A few stragglers stood around gaping at their phones, probably not realizing that the chauffeurs were on the other side.

Will turned back around. He nearly tripped on a suitcase a woman was dragging behind her like a tail. Her head was down. She was reading her email, mindless of the fact that she was making everyone else dart out of her way. Which was a good thing, because Will would not have seen the man and child otherwise.

The green jacket was what finally caught Will's eye. The man was fifty yards away on the other side of the baggage claim area. Will saw the top of his head, the distinct bad wig and thick glasses, as the man rode the escalator down to the lower parking level.

A surge of people pushed against Will as he ran across baggage claim. A well-timed jump over a cart of suitcases was the only thing that kept him from falling flat on his face. That didn't stop people from yelling at him. One guy even grabbed Will by the arm, but he easily shook him off as he headed down the escalator and into the underground tunnel.

Up ahead, Will saw the man again. He was pulling the little girl. She looked as if she'd gone limp. Her feet dragged across the tile floor. She lost one of her shoes, but the man wouldn't let her stop to get it. The double glass doors slid open. The man looked down at his watch. He walked through the door, then looked down at his watch again before he disappeared from Will's view.

Will waved his arms in the air, hoping to catch the eye of whoever was watching the security cameras. He scooped up the girl's shoe as he jogged through the tunnel. Will slowed his pace outside the doors, keeping his distance as he followed the man into the underground breezeway.

As with the T concourse exit, the breezeway wasn't known by many travelers. It was a relatively private space, though it was about the length of a football field. A four-lane road separated the main airport from the bottom level of the

parking garage. This time of day, the area was almost completely deserted.

Instead of crossing the road toward the garage, the man headed up the sidewalk, going in the same direction as traffic. Will put the little girl's shoe in his jacket pocket. The thing was so small that it fit in the palm of his hand.

Cars weren't allowed to stop underneath the airport, but many risked a ticket, idling in the breezeway in order to avoid having to pay steep parking charges. The exit was a straight shot ahead, and you could either merge onto the interstate or loop back around the airport. It was the perfect rendezvous point if you wanted to get out of here fast.

Will saw a gleaming red truck parked several feet ahead. A University of Georgia bumper sticker was on the fender, and an NRA decal was stuck to the back window of the cab. The driver was wearing a cowboy hat. Will saw the man spit into a red plastic cup as he walked by. The Cowboy nodded. Will nodded back.

And then, straight ahead, the little girl made a mewing noise as she stumbled. The man yanked her up violently. She struggled to keep up, walking on the tips of her toes. The man looked at his watch again. He glanced over his shoulder. Will tensed, but he was looking at traffic, not Will. The man studied a black Chevy Malibu that passed. Again, he looked at his watch, then back over his shoulder. Someone was supposed to pick him up; that much was obvious. Was he trading off the girl? Was he going to pick up another one and take her somewhere across the country?

The busiest passenger airport in the world. Over three thousand flights a day. Over two hundred gates. Over 130 destinations. Over a million ways to traffic children in and out of the city, if not the country.

Will looked behind him as a Prius hummed by. An Atlanta Police cruiser crawled up behind the red truck. Will motioned for the officer to stay back, but it was too late. The guy in the truck beeped his horn.

"I'm gettin'," the Cowboy called out. The truck's engine rumbled as he pulled away from the curb.

Will turned back around, searching for the girl and man, but they were gone.

"Shit," Will hissed. He scanned the breezeway, furiously searching for the green jacket, the bad wig.

The Prius. It had parked in front of the far exit. Will ran toward the car. He grabbed the door handle and yanked it open. The woman inside screamed, terrified. Her hands went to her face. Her foot slipped off the pedal. Will scanned the back seat. The cargo cover was rolled up. He could see the empty trunk.

The door nearly slammed on his hand as the woman sped off.

The cop was out of his car. He spotted Will and nodded toward the parking structure, indicating he'd go check it out.

Will jogged a few yards ahead, thinking he should search the second pedestrian tunnel at the opposite end of the breezeway. Maybe the man had gone back into the airport. He was probably spooked. The rendezvous point was compromised. If this man knew what he was doing, he wouldn't panic. At least not for long.

Will stopped running.

There had to be a backup plan. There was always a backup plan.

Will looked into the lower parking lot, his eyes scanning back and forth like a pendulum as he searched in vain for any sign of the man or girl. No bad wig. No green jacket. No cargo pants. No little tights-clad foot missing a pink shoe.

No Atlanta Police officer checking between the cars.

Where was he?

Will took out the TSA agent's cell phone. The screen showed a missed call. Faith. Will hit the green button to call her back. He stared at the parking lot as he listened to the rings, wondering if the guy had already gotten into a car. If he had, there was no way he'd be able to drive out without being caught. Will knew the procedure. Code Adam. Missing child. It took a full fifteen minutes to shut everything down, but they started with the exit points. Each car would be stopped at the parking booths. Trunks would be searched. Seats would be pulled out. Names and licenses would be verified.

Faith answered the phone after two rings. "We've got a Levi's Call out. The picture's already on TV. We've blocked all the exits."

"I lost him in the lower parking deck, south side."

"They saw you on the security feed. A team is heading your way."

"I'm not going to wait for them." Will ended the call, tucking the phone back into his pocket as he crossed the street.

The red truck idled in front of the entrance to the parking deck. The Cowboy reached out to the machine for a ticket. The caution arm swung up. The truck rolled forward. Will followed it into the garage, using the truck as a shield. He saw groups of people heading into the terminal, suitcases and phones in their hands.

The only person walking away from the terminal was an older man in a baseball hat. His hair was white. He was wearing a black jacket and tan shorts. He was about Will's height, maybe a few pounds heavier. He had something gripped in his hand. Tiny, about the size of his palm. Will put his hand in his own pocket. He felt the little girl's shoe, and he knew it was the same man.

Where was the girl?

Will spun around, trying to find her. There was no one. Not even the Atlanta cop. The parking lot was suddenly empty of people, probably because no one was being let in. Will dropped to the ground, checking under the cars, trying to see two small feet, praying in vain that the little girl was playing hide-and-seek and everything would be okay.

But there was nothing. Nothing except the man. Will pushed himself back up. He saw the red truck making the turn onto the ramp leading up to the next level.

Then he saw the man. No more wig. No more baseball hat. No more glasses. He was staring directly at Will. He had the same snarky smile on his face. He was walking backward, hands in the pockets of his reversible jacket. His hairy legs showed where he'd unzipped the bottom part of his cargo pants to turn them into shorts. His white socks looked perfectly normal with his gray sneakers.

For a split second, Will found himself wondering if the man had worn the shoes because he knew he'd have to run. And then the answer became obvious. The man started walking faster. He kept his eyes on Will until the last minute, then spun around and took off running up the ramp.

Will's feet pounded into the concrete as he gave chase. His fists clenched. His

arms pumped. He felt the weight of the tiny shoe in his suit jacket as it tapped against his leg, like a child who wanted his attention. The little girl had his attention now. He should've grabbed her in the bathroom. He should've shut down the airport first thing. Why hadn't he listened to his instincts? Why had he cared about getting into trouble when there was even the slightest chance that a child might be in danger?

Will's ankle twisted as he rounded the corner and bolted up the ramp. The man was at least fifty yards ahead, passing the red truck. His shoes squeaked on the concrete as he made the turn up to the next level.

"Hey!" Will called, banging his fist against the back of the pickup. The Cowboy turned around, but Will was already climbing into the bed of the truck. "Go!" Will shouted. "Follow him!"

If there were questions in the Cowboy's mind, he didn't ask them. He floored the gas, tires sending up smoke as the truck accelerated up the ramp. Will tried to brace himself, kneeling down low, gripping either side of the truck bed for balance. At the last possible moment, the Cowboy wrenched the wheel, taking the turn up to the next level. Will was thrown to the opposite side of the truck. His shoulder slammed into the metal edge. There was no time to assess the damage. The man was already making the turn up the next ramp.

The Cowboy sped up again. Will thought he was going to try to run the man over. Apparently, so did the man. He abruptly changed direction, heading toward the exit stairwell with his head tucked, fists clenched.

Will felt his brain click off. It was a sort of survival mechanism, or maybe it was a death wish. The man was a few yards from the exit door. There wasn't much time. Will pushed himself up. He used the edge of the truck as a jumping board, catapulting his body directly toward the man.

Slow motion.

The man's hand was out, reaching for the doorknob. He turned. His mouth opened in surprise, or maybe horror.

Will slammed into him like a pile driver. The guy flattened out to the ground, arms and legs spreading from the force of 185 pounds of pressure. Will felt the breath leave his lungs. He saw literal stars behind his eyelids. He blinked, trying to clear his vision. That's when he saw it. Hello Kitty. Pink trim. The little girl's shoe was still gripped in the man's fist.

"All right," the Cowboy said. He had a Sig Sauer pointed down at them. Nine millimeter. Will guessed he kept it in the glove box of his truck. Most of these guys did. "You gonna tell me what this asshole did?"

Will couldn't talk yet. He gulped air. His lungs rattled. Finally, he was able to force himself up. It was a challenge not to fall back over. Will's nose was bleeding. His ears were ringing. Every muscle in his body ached. Still, he forced his knee into the man's back, pinning him flat to the ground. "Where is she?"

The man shook his head side to side. His mouth opened as he gasped for air.

"Who did you give her to?" Will pressed his knee harder into the man's back. "Where is she?"

Low moans came from his open mouth. His head was turned toward his wrist. He was looking at his watch again. The glass was shattered. He made a strangled sound. Will thought for a second that the man was crying.

And then he realized he was wrong.

The man was laughing.

“You’re too late,” the bastard said. “You’re too late.”

Both the Clayton and Fulton County sheriffs' departments were called in. The Hapeville Police Department. The College Park Police Department. The Atlanta Police Department. The Georgia Bureau of Investigation. Every available law enforcement office with any jurisdiction over the airport had sent all available resources.

And still there was no sign of the girl.

Every car leaving the airport had been checked. North, South, West, Gold, Park-Ride—every vehicle in every parking structure had been examined and reexamined. The service alleys and cargo areas had been searched. Trash collection. Delivery vehicles. Shuttle parking. Rental car parking. Employee parking. Checked and checked again.

They found nothing.

All they had was the man, who wouldn't speak except to say that he would be acting as his own attorney and that his client had no comment.

His pockets were empty. No ID, no cash, not even a piece of gum. They hadn't found his glasses, wig, or the zippered-off legs of his cargo pants. He'd refused the offer of food and drink. He'd said he didn't smoke. He obviously knew these were common tricks employed by the police to obtain fingerprints and DNA, just as he obviously knew all he had to do was wait out the twenty-four-hour holding period, after which they had to either charge him or let him go.

Amanda Wagner hadn't transferred the man to the downtown jail. She was keeping him at the airport precinct, which was just as good as her home turf.

Will could tell his boss wanted to beat the man senseless. They all did. Every cop who passed the window looking into the cells seemed tensed, ready to break the glass and do as much damage as they could before someone stopped them. Not that anyone would stop them.

Will sure as hell wouldn't. It brought him nothing but pleasure to see the blood dripping from the man's mouth where Will had slammed his face into the concrete floor. If given half a chance, he'd pull the rest of the teeth out with his bare hands.

"Run it through for me again," Amanda told Will. She was normally composed, but today she was pacing, her three-inch heels catching on the cheap carpet inside the airport precinct offices.

"They were in the bathroom," Will began. "I heard them in the stall next to mine." He went through the story a second time, telling her every detail, from the photo he took with the pilot's phone to his leap off the Cowboy's truck.

Amanda wasn't testing him. She was making Will talk it through in case there was something he'd missed, or something that she would look at differently.

Will could see her silently repeating his story back in her head as she watched officers running back and forth across the squad room.

Finally, she said, "We need to find that disguise, figure out how he managed

to sneak her out right under our noses.”

Will thought the “we” was fairly generous, considering the girl had gone missing under his watch. He was about to say as much when the door opened. The room snapped to attention.

Commander Vanessa Livingston usually kept her long hair braided into a bun that stayed hidden beneath her hat. Today was her day off, though, so instead of wearing her uniform, she was dressed in blue jeans and a flowing blue blouse. Obviously, the men who normally worked under her were taken aback by any sign of femininity in their usually severe boss. None of them could look her in the eye, though they all seemed to be in suspended animation as they waited for her to speak.

“Nothing,” she said. “I checked the international terminal myself. The incinerator hasn’t gone off yet.” Will knew that customs was required by law to burn anything illegally brought into the country—usually fruits and vegetables. “I had one of my boys climb around inside, but it was just the usual crap people try to bring in.”

“It was worth a shot.” Amanda sounded as disappointed as they all felt.

Vanessa snapped her fingers at the men assembled in the room. “Report?”

The sergeant stood up. “The rental car companies and shuttles were a dead end. We called all the chauffeur services—legal and illegal. None of them report picking up a single adult with a child, two adults with a child, or a child alone.”

She nodded for him to get back to work, telling Amanda and Will, “It’s Monday. We generally see children traveling on weekends and holidays, so a kid would stick out.”

Amanda walked over to the map of the downtown corridor that was pinned to the wall. She tapped her finger on various points as she caught Vanessa up on their actions so far. “Marriott. Embassy Suites. Renaissance. Hilton. Westin. Holiday Inn. We’ve got at least thirty airport hotels, more if you stretch to College Park. I’ve pulled in all GBI field agents and invoked an Action Alert so that local police forces can help search. This, as you know, is our problem.” She traced a circle around I-75, I-85, I-20, I-285, all the major arteries that led away from the city. “We’re assuming the girl was handed off approximately forty-five minutes ago. That’s enough time to reach the Alabama state line. If he’s heading to Tennessee or the Carolinas, we’ve got approximately two more hours before he’s out of our jurisdiction. I’ve alerted Florida in case he’s going south.”

“Screw that,” Vanessa said. “We’ll take care of these assholes ourselves.”

She used her keycard to buzz them into the command center, which was euphemistically called the Cold Room.

Will let Amanda enter ahead of him. He felt the temperature drop as soon as his foot crossed the threshold. The Cold Room was kept at a cool sixty-five degrees so that the banks of computers could work at their most efficient levels. Every camera at the airport fed into this one room, which looked as if it had taken its design cues from NASA. Rows of desks were tiered like stadium seating. Each station had three monitors, and since that still wasn’t enough, dozens more monitors lined the front wall.

Will guessed the room was the size of a basketball gymnasium, with an upper level that looked down on it all like a suite at a stadium. This is where Vanessa stood, Amanda at her side, Will behind them. They watched the real-time action

of the airport, which was slowly revving back up.

Almost fifty percent of Delta's intercontinental flights laid over at Hartsfield, which meant their schedule had been shot to hell today. None of the passengers on the monitors looked happy. They were all taking it personally that their flights had been canceled or delayed. That a little girl had been snatched seemed a bad justification for missing their flight out. Vanessa's team had already broken up a nasty fistfight in front of one of the ticketing desks.

Vanessa explained, "We've got every inch of the interior facilities covered. The parking garages are spotty—we've got most of the pedestrian walkways covered and of course cameras are on every car that enters and exits. I've already instructed my people to run every image through the face recognition software."

Faith Mitchell stuck up her head from the sea of desks. She told Amanda, "We're ready to go."

Amanda glanced at her friend, on whose turf they were standing, but Vanessa only grunted, "Please."

Faith looked back down at the desk. She'd always been good with electronics. A few taps on the keyboard and she was in complete control of the system.

The largest monitor on the wall flickered, and Will saw himself peering around the bathroom exit. The next monitor in the row showed the man wearing his bad wig and glasses. He was dragging the girl across the concourse, making a beeline toward the escalator. Will heard the tapping of keys as Faith isolated the images. Yet another monitor showed a frozen still of the man's face. His wig was skewed. His glasses were halfway down his nose. Then came the girl's face. She looked absolutely stricken.

Will felt all eyes on him. Looking at it from a distance, the crime was obvious.

Amanda mumbled, "It was a tough call," which was probably the most generous thing she'd ever said.

Faith hit some more keys. The middle monitor sped back up, tracing the path Will had followed through the airport. When Will exited at the T concourse, the train camera tracked the man until he exited at baggage claim. He struggled to get off the train quickly, but was beaten in the rush to the escalators because the girl was holding him back. Instead of climbing the stairs, he took the elevator. The corner-mounted camera inside the car showed him furiously pressing the button to close the doors even as an older woman in a wheelchair approached.

The doors closed in her face. Again, the man looked at his watch.

Amanda asked, "How late was his plane?"

"Fifteen minutes," Vanessa said. "It was one of the first out, so we know he didn't put the girl on a connecting flight."

They had already tracked the man back to his arrival gate in the C concourse. His American Airlines flight had left Seattle's Sea-Tac International Airport this morning. It was a smaller airport, but fortunately was in compliance with Homeland Security's new safety protocols. Every passenger who'd ever flown in a plane knew that their boarding pass was always scanned by the gate agent. What they didn't realize was that there was a camera trained on their face the entire time so that the footage could later be matched to a name.

Sea-Tac had emailed the digital files ten minutes ago. Four techs were already working on finding the man's identity.

Vanessa said, "Neither Seattle nor Tacoma PD have taken a missing child

report matching our girl's age range in the last seventy-two hours. They've sent a notice to all schools within a hundred-mile radius. It's on the airwaves. Her photo's everywhere."

Amanda asked, "Seattle's what—a three-hour drive from Vancouver?"

"We've already coordinated with the Mounties and border patrol. If she passed through one of the four main checkpoints into the U.S., they'll find her."

"There's no telling where she came from," Amanda pointed out. "She could've been driven up from Tijuana, for all we know."

"LAX is running film for us. All the international airports from here to the West Coast. It's a needle in a haystack, but they'll comb every piece to find a kid," Vanessa said. "Let's pull up her picture again."

Faith did the honors. The photo of the stolen girl took center stage. There was a pause, then a flurry of typing as people went back to work. Will stared at the girl, his mind filling with all kinds of what-ifs. What if he'd grabbed her in the bathroom? What if he'd stopped the man, questioned him?

"About what? Why he wanted the little girl to hurry up and use the toilet?"

"Got him!" someone yelled. "Joseph Allen Jenner."

The little girl's photo disappeared and in its place was the man. He stood in line behind a group of travelers in matching yellow shirts, probably part of a cruise trip en route to Florida.

Jenner was wearing the same jacket, green side out. His hair was white. No wig. No glasses. No baseball cap. Will guessed from his bulky jacket that these items were in the pockets. Security couldn't stop you for traveling with a wig.

Faith asked, "Where's the kid?"

She was right. Jenner was alone.

"Scan back through the passengers," Vanessa ordered.

"Already on it," a man answered.

Faith turned back to her keyboard. Her work showed on one of the smaller screens. She was running Jenner through CODIS, the FBI's national DNA database of convicted offenders. "Nothing," she said, though they could see as much for themselves. She ran Jenner through the state system, then the regional, trying to find any record of arrest or registration as a sex offender. Finally, she Googled the man.

Pay dirt.

"He's a tax lawyer," Faith said. She clicked and scrolled through various articles in *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, calling out her findings as she skimmed the information. Jenner wasn't the type to fly below the radar. The guy did pro bono work for a children's charity. He coached little league baseball. He was a certified lifeguard who helped out at the local YMCA.

"Typical," Amanda muttered. "They always hide in plain sight."

"Found the kid." The Sea-Tac footage sped up, and a short, round woman was shown holding the girl in her arms. The child was obviously too big to be held. The woman nearly buckled under her weight.

"The woman is Eleanor Fielding," the guy supplied. "Kid's listed as Abigail Fielding."

Vanessa asked, "Is she still with the kid when they land?"

The footage cut back to the gate in Atlanta. Will saw a line of passengers exiting the boarding door. They looked tired and confused, the way most people

did when they sat in a metal tube for five hours and landed in a completely different city. All of them searched for signs, looking for either the exit or their next gate.

Fielding was in the second wave of passengers coming up the jetway. She didn't look confused at all as she walked into the terminal. She headed off with purpose, almost jogging toward the escalators to the underground train.

Vanessa ordered, "Stay on the door."

The film sped up, but not so much that they couldn't make out the faces. The tech was good. The film was back at normal speed when Joseph Allen Jenner's face came on-screen. He was one of the last passengers off the plane. He was holding the girl's hand, dragging her along. Instead of heading toward the exit, he took her to an adjoining gate. A second and third camera tracked their progress as he led her to the back wall and forced her to sit in a chair. The girl was still groggy. She yawned, looking around with seemingly unfocused eyes.

"She looks drugged," Amanda noted.

"That's fairly common," Vanessa supplied. She'd worked at the airport long enough to know how these people operated. "We had a kid abducted on the West Coast last year. Drugged out of his mind. Flight attendants assumed he was sleeping, which is what you want from a kid on a long flight. He was passed off at the international terminal and on his way to Amsterdam by the time LAX tracked the internal flight."

"Did you recover him?" Will asked.

Vanessa nodded, but Will could tell from her expression that the kid hadn't escaped unscathed. Not many of them did.

Stranger abductions were rare—statistically, a kid was much more likely to be harmed by a family member—but the Internet was making things easier for predators. Will had been involved in a sting several years ago where a man took photos of kids on the playground and posted them to a private chat room. His plan was to snatch a kid that he could trade with another predator. It was a pedophile's version of the old Sears Wish Book. The man had been arrested, but these assholes were like cockroaches. For every one you caught, there were thousands hiding in the walls.

Like Joseph Allen Jenner.

On the security footage, it was obvious that the little girl was coming around. She was more awake now, taking in her surroundings, fidgeting in the chair. Jenner was visibly on edge. He kept looking at his watch, checking the time against the clock on the wall.

"He's waiting for something," Vanessa said. "Fast-forward."

The tape sped up almost ten full minutes. Jenner took another look at his watch and snatched up the girl by the arm. He tried to move her forward, but she stopped, standing rooted in place. Her mouth moved as she spoke, probably asking to be taken to the restroom. Jenner looked furious. She was throwing off his perfect timing.

He dragged her into the bathroom, where security cameras could not reach.

"Where's Fielding while all of this is happening?" Vanessa demanded. "I want to know how she got out of here."

"We lost her," one of the techs said. "Fielding left through the North Terminal. We don't know where she went from there."

Will said, "Jenner disappeared in the South Terminal."

"Put more people on the parking exit videos," Vanessa ordered. Will knew more than two hundred cars had left the airport in the forty-five minutes between the Seattle plane landing and the airport being shut down.

"Fielding's got a record," Faith said. She pulled up the woman's mugshot. "Simple battery, child neglect. Two years ago in Jackson, Mississippi. She's off probation. No registered Atlanta address." The mugshot was replaced by Eleanor Fielding's arrest report.

"My God," Amanda mumbled. "She was a foster parent."

"We got her at the exit," the earlier man said. "She was one of the first cars we stopped. Fielding left through long-term parking, North Terminal. Black Mercedes." He flashed up the car, which had been captured on the security camera at the main exit to the parking area. The Mercedes was thoroughly searched. The trunk was popped. The back seat and floorboard were checked. A mirror was even dragged under the car to inspect the chassis. The woman stood there with her hands on her hips, conveying what a huge inconvenience this all was.

Will checked the time stamp on the footage. Twelve fifty-two. He remembered Jenner checking his watch twenty minutes later.

"There she goes," Amanda said as Fielding got back into her Mercedes and drove off. The camera tracked her to the split at the interstate. She took 75 South.

Faith said, "Fielding paid for the flight for her and the girl with her AmEx card. It goes to a local address on Lake Spivey. The Emerald Drive address matches her driver's license."

"Call Clayton County and tell them to bring her in," Vanessa told one of her men. The guy jogged toward the door.

Faith said, "She flew out yesterday afternoon, so it was up and back."

Amanda asked, "What about Jenner's flight?"

There was a pause as Faith looked up the information. "Up and back, too. He left three hours before Fielding did. His flights were booked with a Visa card," she said. "Belongs to Eleanor Fielding. Tracks back to the same Emerald Drive address." Faith gave an incredulous snort. "She used her SkyMiles to upgrade their tickets."

"Fewer questions in first class," Vanessa noted.

"It was an overnight trip," Amanda said. "Where did they stay?"

Faith did some more quick typing. The screen showed a credit card receipt. "Hilton Seattle Airport and Conference Center," she said. "Two-hundred-six-dollar charge." She pulled up the website for the hotel. After a few clicks, she'd managed to pull up the room options. "A two-double-bed room with the light-rail package that takes you to and from the airport is a hundred thirty-four bucks. With tax, meals, I'd guess that'd put them at around the two-hundred-dollar mark." Faith went back to the credit card receipts. "No rental car on either credit card. Looks like they stayed at the hotel and waited."

Amanda said, "And then someone delivered a little girl to their door."

The room went silent. They all stared at the photo Will had taken of the little girl. Abigail. Maybe that was her real name. They would want to make sure she responded if called. These were the types of people who thought about such

things. They booked the tickets ahead of time. They coordinated the exchanges. The Emerald Drive address was probably nothing more than a drop. Eleanor Fielding wouldn't be there. No one would be there.

Will felt the enormity of the situation start to overwhelm him. The little girl had been so close to him in the bathroom. He could've reached out and grabbed her. He could've knelt down and asked her if the man was her father. He could've punched the guy in the face and taken her away from him.

Vanessa said, "He's invoked legal counsel. We can't talk to him. What's your plan?"

Amanda didn't hesitate. "We talk to his lawyer."

three

Joseph Allen Jenner was a fifty-two-year-old widower. His wife had passed away three years ago. Her obituary listed natural causes, though a call to a sympathetic records supervisor at Emory University hospital revealed she'd had a heart attack at the age of forty-eight. No children were mentioned. Her only survivor was listed as Joe Jenner, lawyer, philanthropist, president of the Jenner Children's Foundation, which helped underprivileged children get access to after-school literacy programs.

Amanda sat across from Jenner in the interrogation room of the airport precinct. The walls were a crisp white, absent the usual scuff marks, cobwebs, and dirt that Will saw in just about every police station he'd stepped foot in.

She said, "I'm Deputy Director Amanda Wagner with the Georgia Bureau of Investigation. This is my associate, Special Agent Will Trent."

Jenner held a bloodied rag to his mouth. His voice was muffled but clear. "I'm not required by law to say anything to you."

Amanda said, "You obviously know your rights, Mr. Jenner. I would expect nothing less from a tax attorney."

Jenner's eyebrow went up, though that was the only indication of surprise that they'd already learned his name. He took away the rag. "In that case, I'd like some ice water, please. And some aspirin."

Amanda nodded toward the two-way mirror. Will guessed Vanessa Livingston was repeating the gesture to one of her minions.

Amanda told Jenner, "You came in on American three-sixty-two this morning. You boarded the plane alone. Your partner, Ms. Fielding, boarded behind you. She was carrying a child whose boarding pass identified her as Abigail Fielding."

Jenner didn't comment.

"Ms. Fielding's credit cards were used to purchase three tickets. One for you, one for her, and one for the little girl. It is Abigail, isn't it? We don't know what to call her."

Again, Jenner kept his own counsel. He looked at the table. Will guessed his teeth were aching, especially the jagged bits where they'd been cracked in two.

Amanda asked, "Who did you hand Abigail off to, Mr. Jenner?"

Jenner gave a chest-rattling sigh. "Deputy Director Wagner," he began. "Surely, you're familiar with the law. You're not allowed to question me once I ask for a lawyer."

"As you are your own counsel, Mr. Jenner, I am speaking to you in the capacity of a law enforcement official to a legal representative. If you'd like for me to use more formal language, I'd be happy to oblige."

He stared at her, his brow furrowed. Will guessed the man was more conversant with Cayman Island tax shelters than the loopholes of criminal law. Finally, he gave a crooked grin. "Very good, Deputy Director. It's refreshing to speak to someone on your side of the law who actually has a brain in his head."

He corrected himself. "Her head."

Amanda gave a tight smile. "What a wonderful compliment."

He laughed. "You people think you're so smart, but what's really going to happen here? You can only hold me for twenty-four hours. You've got nothing concrete with which to charge me. It's really rather pathetic."

Amanda said, "Mr. Jenner, at this moment, your client—Mr. Jenner—is facing charges of child abduction, transporting a minor across state lines for the purpose of sexual activity, child trafficking, impeding a police investigation, evading arrest, resisting arrest, and assaulting a police officer."

"Assault?" Jenner sounded outraged. "*He* attacked *me*. I was just walking toward the stairs, minding my own business." He held up his busted watch. "This is a six-thousand-dollar Rolex."

"We have a witness, a Mr. McGhee, who remembers it differently." The Cowboy in the red pickup truck. Travis McGhee's background check had been squeaky clean, but he'd told Will he'd swear on a stack of Bibles that Jenner had asked for it. That Will hadn't gotten around to asking the man to lie was only mildly surprising.

"Witness, huh?" Jenner was still unimpressed. The smug look on his face made Will want to break the rest of his teeth. "Really, Deputy Director. You're boring me at this point. Can't you come up with something interesting?"

Amanda said, "Mr. Jenner, you realize your client was on camera from the moment he stepped foot inside the airport?" To send the point home, she fanned out the still photographs the techs had taken from the security footage. "This one is particularly interesting. See where your client is wearing a wig and glasses here?" She pointed to the photo. "And yet, here, it seems he took off the wig and glasses. And, of course, once we got him into custody, we learned that he'd reversed his jacket and changed his pants into shorts. What do you think a jury will make of that?"

"I doubt a jury will hear any of it." He glanced down at the table again. "It's always nice to have visual aids, isn't it? Though who that man is in the bad wig is beyond me."

Will followed his gaze. Jenner wasn't looking at the photos. He was trying to see Will's watch. Will resisted the urge to cover his wrist. The cuff of his sleeve obscured the dial.

Jenner said, "As I stated earlier, you can only hold me for twenty-four hours."

"That's correct," Amanda told him. "But a lot can happen in twenty-four hours."

"You're right," Jenner agreed. "Maybe my client will change his mind about that deal. You never know."

Will told Amanda, "Maybe we should check on Ms. Fielding."

Amanda had done this for so long that her face barely registered a change in expression. She said, "Yes. She seemed more talkative than our friend here."

Jenner couldn't hide his curiosity, though he tried. "Who's Ms. Fielding?"

"Your partner in the black Mercedes."

Jenner smirked.

Amanda said, "I'm sure she'll be more forthcoming. Ms. Fielding's been in the system before. She knows a jury won't look kindly on a second charge."

"She's invoked counsel," Jenner said. A good guess, Will supposed, if they'd

actually been able to find the woman. “You can’t talk to her without a lawyer present.”

Amanda stood from the table. “We’ll make sure you get your ice water, though I’m afraid it’s against the law for us to give prisoners any drugs, harmless as aspirin may seem.”

Jenner waved his hand, dismissing her words. “I’ll be here when you want to talk again.” He actually winked at her. “Shaking in my boots, as it were.”

She left the pictures on the table. Will followed her outside the room.

Amanda waited until the door was closed. Still, she kept her voice low. “He’s trying to see your watch.”

Will nodded. “There’s another hand-off. Fielding’s supposed to meet someone else.”

“It would make sense,” Amanda said. “He’s smug for a reason. You know he’s done this before. They trade these kids like used cars, moving them around the country so no one can track them.” Her tone held a low fury. “I’m sure Jenner’s been on the receiving end a few times.”

Vanessa joined them. She had a sheet of paper in her hand. “Nothing on our end. The Lake Spivey house is vacant. It’s been in foreclosure for two years. There was mail in the box addressed to Eleanor Fielding. The neighbor’s a bit nosy, says a black Mercedes comes by once or twice a week and picks up mail. The car is registered to that address, too.”

“Smart,” Amanda said. “She’s using the house as a drop.”

“Fielding’s last known address is a vacant lot. I’ve got a gal at Social Security who’s going to try to give us a hand, but I’m not sure how long that’ll take.”

“Did you get an address on Jenner?”

“He lives and works at the Residences at the Ritz-Carlton. We talked with the head of security there, but he wasn’t willing to play ball, even when we told him a kid was involved. We can’t search Jenner’s apartment or office without a warrant. The attendant at the front desk is retired Atlanta Police. He accidentally left his logbook open for us. No visitors with kids. Not seeing Jenner—not seeing anyone. It’s not a child-friendly kind of place. No other addresses listed for him, so that’s a dead end. What about you?” Vanessa nodded toward the room. “You get anything out of him?”

“Just that he’s an arrogant asshole,” Amanda admitted. “Will thinks there’s another hand-off. I’m prone to agree. Jenner’s waiting for something. His watch is broken. He tried to look at Will’s several times.”

Will guessed, “He’s going to try to make a plea deal when he’s sure the next hand-off has happened. He’ll tell us where to find Abigail. It won’t be his fault when she’s not there.”

Vanessa provided, “All the airport hotels are checking out clean. We’ve sent agents there to look at footage with their own eyes. We’re not taking anybody’s word on this.” She crossed her arms. “Wherever Abigail is being hidden, it’s not in plain sight. What’re you thinking, Will?”

Will looked down at his watch. The hands showed two-fifteen. Will pulled out the stem and moved the hands ahead thirty minutes. “I’m thinking it’s time we let Jenner go to the bathroom.”

four

Will kept Jenner in cuffs as he led the man down the corridor to the men's room. He expected protests or outrage, but maybe part of Jenner knew that he deserved to be duckwalked like a prisoner. Or maybe he was so certain he'd get out of this that he was content to suffer the small travails.

"Here," Will said, holding open the door. His sleeve pulled back. He saw Jenner note the time. Obviously, he liked what he saw. The snarky smile was back.

Will followed him into the small room. One toilet. One sink. An overhead fan that rattled like an old man's lungs. Will took out his handcuff key and removed the bracelets. Jenner rubbed his wrists, trying to get the circulation back into them. He asked Will, "What were you doing in that bathroom?"

"I'll answer if you do."

Jenner smiled, showing his cracked teeth. He winced from the pain. "You should feel lucky I'm not going to sue you for dental costs." He turned back to the sink, his eye on Will's as he turned on the hot water faucet. "I'm sure implants will run into the tens of thousands."

"You've got the money."

"Do I?" he asked. He must've read the answer in Will's eyes. "I guess you tracked my name through my boarding pass. I wonder how? I didn't have it on me. Maybe one of my fellow passengers gave up my seat number?"

Will shrugged.

"The credit card wouldn't go back to me. Google, maybe?"

Will didn't answer.

"It's amazing how privacy has gone out the window since 9/11. I'm surprised you haven't marked me for rendition."

"We're looking into it."

Jenner chuckled good-naturedly. He cupped some warm water into his hands, leaned down, and slurped. Will waited as he swished the water around inside his mouth. Jenner spat a pink stream of blood into the sink. He repeated the process twice before he stood back up. "I know Eleanor isn't talking. Her lawyer makes your boss look like a puppy dog."

Will doubted that, though he took on board that Eleanor Fielding probably had a woman for a lawyer. Will should've known better, but he was always surprised by the awful things some women got up to. He wanted to think it was for the money and not for spite. Or worse.

"She's quite a piece of work," Jenner said, meaning Amanda. "Thinks she's smarter than she is. It's a cop's curse."

Will wasn't feeling so smart at the moment. So far, Jenner had managed to play him like a fiddle. Will tried to feed into the man's ego, saying, "You're smart."

"That I am," Jenner agreed. "It really is a burden sometimes—to be smarter

than everyone else.” He indicated the toilet, which was side-on to the sink. “You mind?”

Will turned his back to the man, though he could still see his reflection in the mirror. Jenner’s gaze stayed down. He obviously wasn’t going to try anything.

Will felt for the stem of his watch. He inched the hands forward a bit more. It was a delicate balance. In the last twenty-four hours, Jenner had traveled across three time zones and back. He would be tired from the flights. Maybe exhausted from adrenaline and caffeine. The stewardess on his flight said he’d drunk at least a whole pot of coffee during the four-and-a-half-hour journey.

Even an innocent person would be feeling disoriented right now.

“Ahh,” Jenner let out a needlessly dramatic sigh as he finished at the toilet. He shook himself a few times. He flushed, then turned toward the door.

Will blocked his way, nodding toward the faucet.

“Of course. Where are my manners?” Jenner went to the sink. He pumped some soap into his palm, then held his hand under the faucet sensor. Nothing happened. “I hate these damn things. They never work.”

Will didn’t bother to agree with him. He waved his hand under the sensor. Still no water. Will tried again. The water came on hard and fast, splashing up on both of them.

“Always happens,” Jenner said, lathering his hands.

Will looked down at his pants. They were wet in the front, the same as Jenner’s.

The faucet cut off. Jenner said, “Towel?”

Will pulled a few paper towels out of the dispenser, making sure his watch showed. He caught Jenner’s reflection in the mirror. If the man was surprised that time was flying by, he didn’t seem to register it.

Again, Jenner turned toward the door.

Again, Will blocked him. He took out his handcuffs.

“Really?” Jenner asked. He sounded disappointed, as if they had somehow bonded in the toilet. Finally, he held out his hands.

Will shook his head. With exaggerated reluctance, Jenner turned around. He held out his hands behind him. It took everything inside Will not to wrench Jenner’s arms up so hard that both his rotator cuffs ripped. Instead, he carefully placed the handcuffs on the man’s wrists and snapped them closed.

Will opened the door. He let Jenner walk out on his own steam, not pushing him or kicking him down the hallway. Will wanted so badly to move his watch forward, to inch away the time, but he made himself keep one hand on Jenner’s elbow and the other at his side. Will put his hand in his jacket pocket. Abigail’s little shoe was still there. He should put it in evidence. He should log it for trial.

Will wrapped his hand around the slipper. It almost disappeared in his grip.

Will sat on a metal bench outside the airport. It was a bright, sunny day, but he’d chosen the underground breezeway as the spot to lick his wounds. This was where he’d lost sight of Joe Jenner. The cop had pulled up. Travis McGhee had beeped the horn in his red truck. Will had turned around and Jenner and the girl were gone.

He held Abigail’s shoe in his hand. The trim was coming off in the back, probably from being dragged. He should get some superglue and fix it. Will

imagined these were the type of shoes a little girl might love. She'd want them back. She'd need them when she got back on a plane and headed home to her parents.

Will closed his eyes. He was hardly some kind of New Age freak, but he tried to imagine Abigail safe in her mother's arms. The little girl was thin and bony. Her mother probably would be, too. They'd have the same yellow-blond hair and blue eyes. Abigail's mother would hold on to her and squeeze her so tight that Abigail would never get away again.

That was what he wanted to imagine, not the truth, which was probably closer to a nightmare.

The Levi's Call was still in effect. Highway patrol had scrambled every cop on their payroll to scour the inter-states and back roads. All the DOT bulletin boards over the highways listed Abigail's height, weight, eye and hair color, approximate age, and the time in which she'd gone missing. Hundreds of calls had already come in, but none of them had panned out.

Will looked at his watch, which was still ahead by fifty minutes. He kept checking on Jenner, inching the hands forward on his watch each time before he went into the room and offered a soda or a toilet break or just sat across from him and watched Jenner stare blankly at the wall.

Will would adjust his watch up another twenty minutes before he went back in with the man. Jenner was clearly exhausted. The last two times Will had checked on him, he'd been asleep, his head on the table. He'd clearly lost track of time. Another five minutes skipped forward. Another ten. There was no telling what the magic hour was, but Will would keep leading Jenner along, moving the time ahead, until Jenner felt like he was safe.

Their only hope was that they'd have enough time left to save the girl.

Abigail had been missing for three hours now—at least that they knew of. There was no telling where she'd come from before that, whether or not a mother and father were looking for her. Eleanor Fielding had worked in social services. Maybe Abigail was a foster child.

So much for the image of Abigail in her mother's arms.

Predators tended to pick easy targets, and the foster system was so bereft of funding that caseworkers could barely keep up anymore. Many of them didn't have cell phones, laptops, or sometimes even offices. Seattle alone had seen dozens of child deaths in the foster system. Florida had a habit of losing their kids. Washington, D.C., had so many neglect cases on the books that they could barely adjudicate them all. There was no telling whether or not Abigail was one of the missing.

At this late hour, she might already be one of the dead.

The doors behind Will slid open. Faith sat down beside him on the bench. She had a radio in her hand. It was tuned to the Atlanta Police frequency, the volume turned down low. Will could hear the soft murmur of cops chattering back and forth.

Faith said, "Nothing," because she knew that was the first thing he'd ask. "Is that her shoe?"

Will handed Faith the ballet slipper with its pink trim and smiling Hello Kitty.

"It's so small." Faith pressed her lips tightly together. She had a daughter in diapers and a son in college. As hard as these cases hit everyone, they seemed to

hit Faith doubly so.

Will asked, "How old do you have to be before you dress yourself?"

Faith sighed as she thought it through. "It varies from kid to kid. You're pointing things out that you want to wear around two, two and a half, but you can't dress yourself. Three or four, you're putting stuff on, but sometimes it's backward or you put the wrong shoe on the wrong foot. By five, you're pretty much able to dress on your own. Unless you're a boy. Then, you can't do it until you're at least twenty-five. Maybe thirty."

Will allowed a smile at the attempted levity, but all he could think about was Abigail picking out her clothes. This morning or yesterday or whenever it was, she'd taken the flowery dress, the matching tights and shoes, and put them on herself. He imagined her smiling at her reflection in the mirror, maybe twirling around.

Faith interrupted his thoughts. "The FBI is chomping to take this over."

"I'm sure Amanda's happy about that."

"They're not being assholes," Faith allowed. "They're giving her everything she's asks for. Nobody wants this thing blowing up in our faces."

Will didn't say that he thought it had exploded a few hours ago. "I keep thinking of her with her mother."

"That's something good to hold on to. I'm going to think about that, too."

"You know it's not likely."

Faith said, "I don't care if it takes the rest of my life, Joe Jenner's going to end up in jail."

Will nodded, hoping that didn't end up being their consolation prize.

"I don't see how you managed to sit across from the smug prick without beating him senseless."

"It's what he wants," Will realized. That was why Jenner kept antagonizing them. Part of it was the lawyer's sense of superiority, but a greater part was the satisfaction he got from seeing the police so out of control.

Faith said, "It's the only crime I don't understand." She handed back the shoe. "Robbery, murder, even rape I can sort of get. But a kid?" She shook her head. "It's disgusting. Something is seriously wrong with a person who would do that."

Will didn't know what to say. It seemed pointless to agree with her.

He sat back on the bench and stared at the underground parking garage. He'd spent the last thirty minutes going through each step he'd taken after he followed Jenner outside. He did it again now: The cop. The Cowboy in the red truck. Running into the garage. Jenner had changed his appearance. How long did that take? Removing the wig and glasses would take two, three seconds, tops. Reversing the jacket and zipping off the bottom part of his pants while still holding on to the girl would be another matter.

Abigail wouldn't have just stood there while he changed. She would've run. Will was certain of that.

Regardless, they hadn't found the wig or any of Jenner's disguise in the many trashcans that were placed around the garage. The stairwells were empty. The spaces between cars absent his stash. Maybe Jenner's hand-off partner had taken everything, but the question remained: how did he or she escape? Every single departing car had been checked. Every exit had been sealed off.

Logic dictated there had to be something they were missing.

Vanessa Livingston had sent a team of men to run the license plate of every vehicle inside the parking structure. According to his driver's license, Jenner had a black Bentley Continental registered in his name. A quick call to the parking attendant at the Ritz-Carlton verified the Bentley was in the residents' area of the garage.

Abigail wasn't secreted away in a vehicle. She wasn't taken out in a service vehicle. She wasn't inside the airport. Was she locked in the trunk of a car? Did Jenner have another automobile hidden in the parking structure? Was his backup plan to simply let the girl suffocate?

Will's throat worked. He felt overwhelmed with the uselessness of it all. The fuzzy picture of mother and child was being replaced with a darker possibility. Will had seen dead children before. The image was hard to get out of your mind. It was the sort of thing you saw when you went to bed at night. It was the sort of thing that popped back into your brain for the rest of your life. Especially times like now.

Abigail.

Why hadn't Will taken her from Jenner? Why hadn't he at least talked to her in the restroom? So what if Jenner had ended up being her father or stepfather or grandfather or uncle. If Will had been on the other side of the situation, if Will had a daughter and some cop stopped him to ask what was going on, he might be mad at first, but then he'd have to appreciate someone looking out for his kid.

Faith, as usual, read his thoughts. "You didn't do anything wrong."

"I should've talked to her."

"If I was in the airport and you leaned down to talk to my kid, I'd kick you in the face so hard your eyes would be spinning before you hit the ground."

"That's different," Will said. Women were more cautious around children. Especially women like Faith Mitchell, who ran a background check on her mailman because she thought he was too friendly.

"It's not different," Faith said. "You did everything you could, Will. We're all doing everything we can."

He hated the defeated sound in her voice, mostly because it mirrored his own feelings.

"I want to run through it again," Will said. Faith nodded, and he started back from the beginning, telling her about sitting in the toilet stall, peeling off the Band-Aid so that the flusher would go off. When he got to the part about waving his arms for the camera in the pedestrian tunnel, he stood up. He told her about finding the shoe, heading out to where they now stood in front of the exit doors.

Will took her down the sidewalk, continuing the story: The red truck. The Cowboy. The cop pulling up in his cruiser. Will's attention was diverted for a few seconds. He lost sight of Jenner and the girl.

Will turned to Faith, remembering, "There was a silver Prius."

"Four door?"

Will nodded. "I heard it pull up behind me."

"If you heard it, then it wasn't going slow," Faith pointed out. The car was virtually silent at speeds under fifteen miles per hour. "Anything else?"

"Black interior. White female driver. I saw through to the trunk. The car was empty." Will tried to remember what the woman looked like. It had all

happened so fast. He'd wrenched open the door and scanned the interior of the car. "I scared the shit out of her," he said. "She drove off like a bat out of hell."

"Drove up there?" Faith indicated the steep turn at the end of the breezeway. The four-lane road narrowed to two as it merged into traffic from upstairs. The road then turned back into a six-lane stretch that allowed drivers to either loop back around to the South or North Terminal or jump onto the interstate.

Will said, "Call it in."

Faith already had the radio to her mouth. "Mitchell to Livingston?"

Vanessa Livingston's voice came back immediately. "Ten-four?"

"I need exit tape on a silver Prius leaving the South Terminal breezeway at approximate time of disappearance."

"Roger."

Faith dropped the radio to her side. "Where was the Prius parked when you opened the door?"

Will walked a few more feet and gauged his position. "Right here." He pointed toward the parking garage. "When I saw Jenner again, he was over there."

"Was that when you called me on the phone?"

"Yes."

"Okay, back up," Faith said. "You saw the Prius. You ran up to it?"

"Yeah," Will said. "I opened the door and checked it. No one was inside. Just a woman. Dark hair, I think. She put her hands to her face. Like I said, she was scared. Surprised." He shook his head. There was a reason cops hated eyewitness testimony. Nine times out of ten, it was wrong. So much had been going on when Will was chasing Jenner that he wasn't even sure the Prius was silver anymore. "Like I said, the car was empty. I could see straight through to ..." His voice trailed off. He looked up the road. He could see cars from the upstairs lanes.

Faith asked, "What is it?"

Will didn't answer. Instead, he jogged up the road, taking the same path toward the exit as the Prius.

There was a bend in the lower road as it rose to meet traffic exiting the main terminal entrance. To discourage pedestrians from walking up the road and possibly getting hit by a car, the garden crew had planted a bunch of black locusts, a pollution-resistant bush that produces a creamy white flower and tiny, razor-sharp thorns at the base of each leaf.

Will pushed his way into the dense bushes, not caring that his hands were getting torn up. His jacket got caught on a long branch. The material stuck to the thorns like Velcro.

"What are you doing?"

Will ripped away his jacket so he could go farther into the bushes. "The TSA agent told me it takes fifteen minutes to completely lock down the airport. We were still inside that window when I caught Jenner. The Prius could've left just under the wire."

"But you said the car was empty."

"It was when I searched it." Will stepped onto a branch, pushing down the barbs with his foot. "They both panicked. The Prius took off. Jenner ran into the garage." He glanced at Faith to see if she was following his logic. "The road curves up right here. I was back inside the breezeway talking to you on the

phone. This is the only place they could've handed Abigail off without me seeing Jenner or the car."

"Or the security cameras seeing them." Faith put her hands on her hips. "The next camera would pick up the Prius at the split that takes you onto the interstate."

Will's finger was bleeding. He wiped his hand on his pants, stepping deeper into the bushes.

And then he found it.

A cheap brown wig, a pair of black plastic glasses, two legs from a pair of zippered cargo pants and—worst of all—a little girl's flowery dress with pink trim.

five

"It's my fault," Will told Amanda. "I took my eye off Jenner. I gave him the opportunity to make the hand-off."

"We'll deal with your mistakes later," she said. "Tell me again about the woman in the car."

He shook his head. Each time he tried to summon up the memory, it was lost. "I think she had dark hair."

"Was she white? Black? Green?"

"White."

"Eye color?"

"She had on sunglasses. Maybe a hat?" Will didn't know if his brain was filling in blanks or not. "I don't know what she was wearing. I didn't see any tattoos or birthmarks. I think the car's interior was black. I don't know anything else. I was looking for the girl, and she wasn't there. That's all that mattered at that point."

Amanda seldom cursed, but she did now, saying, "Dammit, these people have been one step ahead of us all day."

Vanessa Livingston came out of the Cold Room. She said, "The camera loses the Prius once it turns out of the breezeway. It's picked up again on the merge. Whoever the driver was, she beat the shutdown by about two minutes. The Prius went 75 North, but that's all we know."

"Did you get the license plate?"

"Partial. Mud covered all but two numbers—three and nine, nonsequential. We're running it through the system. There are eleven hundred Priuses in the metro area. Half of them are silver. It's a popular color. We're drilling them down to the number registered to women so we have a starting point."

"Great," Amanda said. "Like we don't have enough walls to bang our heads against."

Will asked, "Did any of the cameras catch her face? Maybe we can compare it to passengers on the Seattle plane."

"No," Vanessa answered. "If she'd gone into one of the parking decks, or used the upper floor, that would be a different matter."

Will said, "What if it's Eleanor Fielding?"

Instead of shooting him down, Amanda said, "Go on."

"Her Mercedes left the airport. Maybe she looped back around, parked the Mercedes in a different lot, picked up the Prius, and came back to pick up the girl." Will remembered Jenner looking over his shoulder as he walked up the breezeway. The man was looking at oncoming traffic.

Amanda said, "Jenner could hand off the girl downstairs, change into his outfit, then—"

Will finished for her, "Walk back upstairs, go into the main terminal, then take a taxi home."

"Covers them both," Vanessa said. "Except for Will spotting them, we

wouldn't even know it had happened."

Amanda looked at her watch. "Will, it's time for you to go back in with Jenner. Add another half hour to your watch."

Will didn't immediately follow orders. "That's a big leap."

"Do as I say," she told him. "It might be the difference between finding the girl and finding her body."

Will sat across the table from Jenner with his hands clasped in front of him. His watch was on full display, the hands set ahead by an hour and twenty minutes. It was a big jump, but Jenner had been in the room for almost four hours. He'd spent most of the time either staring blankly at the two-way mirror or napping. There were no magazines. No TV. No distractions. His sense of time would be infinite.

At least they hoped it would be.

Will looked at his watch. He knew that Jenner hadn't had lunch. "It's way past dinnertime."

Jenner shrugged.

"I can get you a hot dog, chicken sandwich."

Jenner didn't answer. He was turned sideways in his chair. One leg was crossed over the other. Jenner's mouth had stopped bleeding, but he looked bad. Bruises were starting to form around his eyes and nose where his face had met concrete. Dried blood speckled his chin. A crease was down the side of his face where he'd fallen asleep with his cheek on his arm.

He didn't seem scared or anxious. If anything, he seemed bored.

Will forced out a heavy sigh. He sat back in his chair. "You wanna know why I was in the bathroom?"

Jenner's chin lifted. He gazed at Will out of the corner of his eye.

"It's part of a sting operation to catch men cruising for sex."

Jenner snorted a laugh, then seemed to think better of it when the pain shot through his busted nose. "I suppose the police don't have anything better to do."

Will ignored the observation. "I arrested a minister last week."

"Hm," Jenner said.

Will didn't add how awful he'd felt parading the man out in handcuffs. There was a reason Amanda had assigned the job as a punishment. Every day, Will felt like he needed to go home and scrape the filth off of him.

Then again, it was nothing compared to how disgusting he felt sitting across from the likes of Joe Jenner.

Will said, "You really should make a deal."

Jenner cleared his throat. "I've advised my client that it's best not to take legal counsel from the man who's trying to send him to prison."

"You were so easy to track." Will amended, "Your client was, I mean."

Jenner rolled his eyes at the game.

"And the hand-off in the parking lot. Pretty smooth. You know we found your disguise."

Jenner didn't move, which was evidence enough that Will had hit on something.

Will tried another lie. "Eleanor told us where it was. We've got her in the other room."

Jenner pursed his lips.

Will said, "My boss is talking to her right now."

"Is that so." Not a question, but Will could tell that Jenner wasn't so sure of himself now.

"You're a lawyer, Joe. You know that the first person who makes the deal always serves the least amount of time." He pressed a little harder. "Eleanor's already served time. She knows the system. She's going to flip on you. You know that. It's just a matter of time."

"Time?" Jenner looked down at Will's watch, then back at the two-way mirror. "I have plenty of time."

"Is that right?"

"I'm not talking to you anymore."

"Ever? Or just for now?"

Jenner's eyes met his, then went back to the mirror. Will had no idea who was behind the glass. They'd been playing this cat-and-mouse game for a while now. It was tantamount to watching paint dry.

Jenner cleared his throat. He crossed his other leg over his knee. His fingers tapped the table.

Will stared at the man. On the surface, he seemed as normal as any other fifty-year-old. Gray hair. A bit of a paunch in the stomach. Some wattle around the chin. That was the thing about these monsters—they looked just like everybody else. They took jobs that brought them into contact with kids. They developed covers that helped them elude capture. They spent every day of their lives working to bury their tracks, which was why it took so long to unravel the truth when you finally caught them.

Joe Jenner was a pro. He'd worked all of this out ahead of time, exploring the angles, running through the various scenarios. He wasn't alone in this. He had a team. Maybe it was just Eleanor Fielding. Maybe it was more. Whatever their numbers, these people were sophisticated. Coordinated. They hadn't just started doing this on a whim. They had a well-timed plan. They had a backup plan. They had accounted for every variable except for Will being in that bathroom.

And that still might not stop them.

Was that why Jenner seemed so smug? You didn't get to live in the Ritz-Carlton and drive a Bentley by being unsure of yourself, but the man seemed to have a preternatural sense of superiority.

And why wouldn't he? Eleanor Fielding's name was on everything—the flights, the hotel room. She was the one who boarded the flight with Abigail in her arms. There was grainy footage of Jenner with the girl, but he could argue against that. Then there was the fact that Will had jumped him in the parking lot. Jenner's lawyer could easily claim that the police were conspiring to protect their own.

All they had was Will's testimony and some grainy footage. Jenner hadn't harmed the girl—at least not that anyone could say. He'd taken her hand when she got off the plane, led her to the bathroom, then led her to the parking lot. With a sympathetic jury, he might get two or three years. If they never found Abigail—never found the body—he might get less than that.

But then there was the question of time.

Jenner was obviously waiting something out. Was Jenner waiting until he was

certain his accomplice had driven Abigail across state lines? Or was the man letting another abuser have his fun while Jenner ran out the clock?

There was a knock on the door that startled both of them.

Faith motioned Will out of the room.

"They found the mother," she said, walking down the hall. "Rebecca Brannon. Lives just outside of Post Falls, Idaho. Father was KIA in Iraq five years ago. Girl's name is Abigail Brannon. Seven years old."

A uniformed patrolman buzzed them into the Cold Room. The main monitor showed a television feed from CNN. A woman with blonde hair and pale white skin stood in front of a bank of microphones with various news logos on them. Both of her eyes were black. Her lip was busted open.

Will blurred his eyes, saw past the damage to the woman's face. He'd been right about one thing, at least. Abigail looked like her mother.

Faith explained, "The mom was beaten and tied up in her basement for two days. Said the attacker was wearing a mask, didn't talk, didn't do anything but knock her out and take the kid. Her boyfriend found her when he got home from a business trip this afternoon."

"Business trip?" Will asked.

"His name's Paul Riggins. He services medical equipment for operating rooms," Faith said. "Most of his business is in Seattle."

"Seattle," Will repeated.

"Riggins drove over to Seattle yesterday morning, came back today. We tracked him through his credit cards. You wanna guess the name of the hotel where he stayed last night?"

Will slowly turned to Faith. "The Hilton Seattle Airport and Conference Center?"

"It gets better: They searched his car. Found thirty thousand dollars in cash underneath the spare tire. All of it in crisp, new hundred-dollar bills."

"New?" Will saw where this was going. The Bureau of Engraving and Printing distributed paper money in blocks that could be tracked through their serial numbers. "Tell me."

Faith could barely contain her excitement. "All of the bills were distributed to the Sixth District."

Will felt a matching grin on his face. The Sixth District of the Federal Reserve Bank provided paper money to Georgia, Alabama, Florida, and parts of Louisiana and Tennessee. He asked, "When were the bills released into circulation?"

"Last week."

"Not enough time to make their way to Seattle."

"Not even close." She added, "And even if there was enough time, there's no way all the bills would be from the same block from the same district by the time they made it to the opposite corner of the country."

Will felt some of the pressure lifting off his chest. Given a little more time, Faith would be able to trace the bills back to a particular bank. If that bank had Joe Jenner as a client, the right kind of judge could be persuaded to sign off on a warrant to search Jenner's accounts. Even the best defense lawyer in the world would have a hard time rebutting testimony from the chairman of the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta. This was exactly the kind of evidence that juries loved

to hear.

Will asked, "Is Riggins talking?"

"No. He lawyered up."

"Please tell me the Idaho cops got a warrant before they searched his car."

"Didn't have to," Faith said. "Paul Riggins is a registered sex offender."

Will mumbled a curse. "Did the mom know that?"

"No." Faith looked back at the monitor. Rebecca Brannon was sobbing into the microphones, begging for her daughter back. "But she does now."

Yet again, Will sat across from Joe Jenner. He kept his arms crossed, hiding his watch. They were two hours over the correct time now. It was a huge jump, but Jenner had been in the bare interrogation room for so long they were praying that it didn't matter. For Will's part, today already felt like one of the longest of his life.

Jenner finally let out a long, bored sigh. "Well?"

Will told him, "The district attorney for the City of Atlanta is waiting outside."

Jenner seemed unimpressed.

"She's ready to make a deal with you, Joe. Just tell us where the girl is."

Jenner did not respond.

Will laid out the evidence they had. "We know Paul Riggins took Abigail Brannon from his girlfriend's home yesterday morning. Last night, he delivered Abigail to you and Eleanor Fielding at the Hilton Seattle Airport and Conference Center. You gave Riggins thirty thousand dollars cash for the girl."

"You have no proof of any of this."

"We traced the serial numbers, Joe. You should never use new money for this kind of thing."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

Will laid out what Faith had told him a few moments ago. "The Federal Reserve in Atlanta sent a batch of new hundred-dollar bills to Bank of America's central distribution center. From there, the bank sent it out to their branches. It's money, so they're careful with it. They track the serial numbers. They know where every bill is from the second it enters the system to the second it leaves. Which is why we know that the cash you gave Paul Riggins was withdrawn from three different Bank of America branches: Buckhead, Ansley, and Peachtree Battle." Will crossed his arms over his chest. "We got a judge to let us peek at your accounts. Last week, you withdrew ten thousand dollars from three different accounts at three different branches: Buckhead, Ansley, and Peachtree Battle."

For just a second, Jenner looked surprised. "You can't prove it's all the same."

"Can't we?" Will had to resist the smile that wanted to come. He liked hearing the panic in Jenner's voice, no matter how quickly it dissipated.

"I was robbed."

Will asked, "Did you file a report?"

"I didn't have time."

"You just let thirty thousand dollars walk off?" Will shook his head. "Why'd you have it in the first place?"

"I don't believe that's anyone's business."

"Be sure to tell that to the jury," Will advised. "I guess you thought you were being smart by limiting each withdrawal to ten grand. Being a tax lawyer, you know that the bank is required to report any transactions over ten thousand

dollars. And, of course, on internal flights, the TSA can't legally limit how much cash you travel with."

Jenner brushed some invisible lint off the sleeve of his jacket.

"Eleanor Fielding carried Abigail onto the plane. The girl was drugged. I imagine Paul Riggins has access to sedatives, seeing as he's in and out of hospitals all day. Abigail slept the whole flight. You were two seats back, but you kept an eye on her the entire time, drinking coffee so you'd stay awake." Will paused, making sure Jenner had time to absorb every word. "You took Abigail off the plane. You had it timed just right until Abigail had to go to the bathroom."

Jenner's mouth opened. Will was certain he was going to make a snide comment about small bladders, but he changed his mind.

Will continued, "Eleanor picked up her Mercedes at the North Terminal deck, then looped back around to the South Terminal, where she traded it for the Prius." This had been the final piece of the puzzle. A quick search through records had located the Mercedes just where Will assumed it would be. "Meanwhile, you took Abigail out of the airport through the underground breezeway. You were supposed to hand her off there, but you saw me and panicked."

Jenner's eyebrow went up. He obviously didn't care for the description.

"You had to improvise. You ran into the garage, hid behind some cars until I was looking the other way, then handed off Abigail at the top of the ramp. I couldn't hear the engine because the Prius was going too slow."

Jenner waited.

"That's where we found your wig and glasses. You changed your appearance in the hopes that you'd be able to walk back into the airport, grab a cab, and go to the next meeting point." Will leaned forward, crowding the space between them. "You can help yourself out of this."

Jenner remained silent.

"Tell us where she is, Joe. That's the only way you avoid serious jail time."

Still, Jenner kept quiet.

"It'll be easier for you if we find her alive," Will said, hoping to appeal to the man's self-interests. "If she's dead, and the coroner shows pictures of her body, tells the jury what she's been through..." Will braced himself for the awful things he had to say. "They'll show the bruises on her wrist where you grabbed her. It'll match the film of you dragging her through the concourse. They'll show the bruise on her knee where she stumbled in the tunnel. The film will back that up. They'll show her shoe. Her missing shoe." Will took the little slipper out of his pocket. He threw it on the table between them. "The jury will see the film of you jerking her up when she reached back for her shoe. Maybe the coroner will have slides that show the damage to her arm muscles where you wrenched it."

Jenner was looking down again, but his eyes were not on the shoe. They were on Will's watch. Will followed his gaze as the big hand moved to the seven.

Jenner flashed a self-satisfied smile. He said, "I want it in writing."

Will was so shocked that it was finally the appointed hour that he almost didn't know how to respond.

Jenner said, "I'll tell you where the girl is being held, but I'm not going to jail." He added, "And I'm not going on the registered sex offenders list."

"You know you can't avoid jail time."

"I can avoid anything I like if you want to find the girl alive. Get the DA in here." His eyes flashed toward the door. "I'd hurry if I were you. Tick-tock."

Will stood from the table. Instead of leaving, he waited for the door to open. It was quite a crowd for the small room: Anna Ward, the Atlanta district attorney; Vanessa Livingston; and Amanda Wagner.

Jenner held up his handcuffed wrists, telling Will, "Get these things off me."

Will fished into his pocket for the key. He took off the cuffs as Amanda shut the door.

"Mr. Jenner." Anna smoothed her skirt as she sat down at the table. She placed a digital recorder beside a closed file folder. A click of a button turned on the red recording light. "I'm Anna Ward, the city's attorney. I want to advise you that I'm recording this conversation. Can you please confirm for the tape that you've been read and understand your rights?"

Jenner rolled his eyes. "Yes, I've been advised of my rights. Yes, I am aware that this is being recorded. Yes, I'm aware that this is being watched through that ridiculous mirror on the wall."

"Thank you." She opened the folder, ignoring his sarcastic tone. "I hope you don't mind if I skip the rest of the introductions. As you know, we don't have much time."

Jenner smiled, showing his broken teeth. "On the contrary. I have all the time in the world."

Anna passed him the first document from the folder. The red, gold, and black seal of the Atlanta Police Department was in the top corner. "This authorizes your immediate release from the Atlanta Police's Airport Precinct and guarantees that the department will not pursue any charges against you in this matter. It is signed by Commander Vanessa Livingston here at the bottom." She turned to the next page. "This states that the City of Atlanta will not require you to register on the sex offenders list and that we will not pursue any further charges against you for the abduction, transportation, trafficking, or any other crime related to the minor known as Abigail Brannon." She turned to the last page. "This specifies that the deal is strictly contingent upon you directing us to the exact location of the girl."

"I can only tell you where she was taken."

"We understand that, Mr. Jenner. If you refer to this line"—she touched her finger to the appropriate words—"you'll see that your only requirement in honoring this agreement is to tell the truth about everything you know. If at any time you lie or evade questioning, or any information you give is found to be untrue, this agreement is void and you are subject to full prosecution." She took a pen out of her jacket pocket and handed it to Jenner.

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," Jenner said. He took his time reading the documents. His eyes scanned back and forth along each line of each page. Will looked down at his watch. Five minutes passed before Jenner was certain he'd seen every possible loophole or trick in the one-page agreement.

"Okay," he said, taking the pen. He signed each page, then handed the sheets back to Anna. She signed and initialed everything.

Amanda said, "Mr. Jenner, where is the girl?"

He pursed his lips, clearly enjoying the tension. "She's being held at the

Lakewood Arms Hotel. Room 215.” Less than ten miles away.

“Go!” Vanessa yelled, tapping the two-way mirror, though Will was certain her team was already heading to the hotel.

“So.” Jenner took the documents and folded them in two. “I suppose I should get out of your hair.”

“Did you touch her?” Will asked.

Jenner’s eyes went to Anna Ward. She told him, “You’re required to tell the truth, Mr. Jenner. That’s the agreement.”

“No,” he admitted. “Unfortunately.”

Will’s body tensed. Except for Amanda’s calming hand on his shoulder, he would’ve pounded the guy into the floor again.

“I think we’re done here.” Jenner tucked the documents into his jacket pocket and stood from the table. “When are you people going to realize you’re not smart enough to play these games?”

“Thirty thousand dollars,” Will said. “That’s all a child’s life is worth?”

Jenner looked at Anna Ward again. “The truth, right?”

She had to clear her throat before she could speak. “Yes.”

“I think that’s a fair sum when you factor in transportation and accommodations.” He gave a pleased sigh. “I know the Lakewood Arms doesn’t sound like much, but I had such a lovely night planned for our first date.”

Will’s fists clenched. “You bastard.”

Jenner had that familiar snarky grin on his face. “I’d hurry out to Lakewood, Officers. Eleanor was expecting me an hour ago. I’m sure she’s halfway to Florida by now.” He headed toward the door. There was something like a spring in his step. “Florida. That sounds like a nice place for a first date, doesn’t it?” He put his hand on the doorknob.

Amanda asked, “Where do you think you’re going?”

“Home,” he said. “It’s been a long day.”

“Be that as it may—” Amanda reached past Jenner and opened the door. An imposing man in a sheriff’s uniform blocked the exit—literally; he was as big as a refrigerator.

Amanda made the introductions. “Mr. Jenner, this is Phil Peterson, the sheriff for Clayton County. You can’t see behind him, but the Fulton sheriff and the FBI would like a word, too.”

“The—” Jenner pulled the documents out of his pocket. “I have your word that—”

“Mr. Jenner.” Vanessa Livingston did the honors. “Perhaps as a tax lawyer you’re familiar with the competing interests of various jurisdictions?” She paused, as if she expected an answer. “The airport compound reaches into the unincorporated regions of two counties and three cities.” She paused for effect, pointing at the floor. “You’re currently in the city of Atlanta. As the commander of this zone, I’ve ordered your release. You have my signature on that paperwork. I’ll do nothing to stop you from leaving.”

Anna Ward added, “Nor will I. The City of Atlanta will honor its agreement. We will not pursue charges against you.”

Jenner’s tone had a decidedly higher pitch. “I don’t understand.”

Vanessa explained, “The C concourse is in Hapeville, which is inside Fulton County. Your time in the underground train took you through the

unincorporated parts of Clayton County. Your jaunt through the South Terminal breezeway was in College Park, which, again, is within the Fulton County limits. Sheriff Peterson won the coin toss, so he gets first crack at charging you.”

Amanda picked up from there. “The Georgia Bureau of Investigation would also like to talk to you regarding your transportation of a child across county lines.” She added, “And, of course, since you traveled across state lines—many state lines—that puts you directly in the crosshairs of the FBI.” She mimicked Jenner’s snarky smile to perfection. “I trust you understand what I’m saying, Mr. Jenner. It’s always refreshing to talk to someone with a brain in her head.” She corrected, “His head.”

Sheriff Phil Peterson took out his handcuffs. He was almost a foot taller than Jenner and twice as wide. His deep baritone rumbled in Will’s eardrums as he told Joe Jenner, “Turn around, little man. I’m gonna let you see what it feels like to be dragged through the airport.”

seven

Will paced underneath the gates at the E concourse. There was a small waiting area inside, but he was too anxious to be confined. Even the wide-open space of the great outdoors wasn't enough.

He just wanted it over. He wanted Abigail with her mom. He wanted the bad guys in jail. He wanted to go home to his girlfriend and spend the rest of the night listening to the soothing cadence of her heartbeat.

Will stopped his pacing as a plane touched down. He watched it taxi down the runway, then turn toward one of the other terminals. He resumed pacing, thinking about all the people above him who were oblivious to what had happened today. It amazed him that the world was still spinning on its axis. Wide-body jets were parked nose-in to the gates, lining up like soldiers for international flights. Jetways were locked in. Catering trucks were extended on scissor lifts. Suitcases loaded. Flight attendants got on board. Occasionally, a pilot would walk out, examining every inch of the plane as part of the preflight safety inspection.

It was as if nothing had happened.

Will looked at his watch, feeling a moment of panic before he realized he hadn't bothered to set it back.

Abigail Brannon was safe. That was all that mattered right now. Faith had called from the hospital to let Will know that the little girl had checked out fine. A few scrapes and bruises were the only physical injuries she'd suffered.

The same could not be said of Eleanor Fielding, who'd had the bad sense to try to evade arrest. A battalion of cops had chased her through the Lakewood Arms. She'd finally climbed on the balcony and threatened to jump. When no one seemed interested in stopping her, she'd followed through on her promise. Unfortunately, the woman had survived the three-story fall. Her busted pelvis and legs would mend, but she'd spend the rest of her life in prison.

Just like Joe Jenner.

Will had to smile every time he thought about the shocked look on the man's face. It was always the smart ones who ended up tying their own nooses.

The doors slid open. A ground-crew worker came out. His orange vest hung loose around his waist. He gave Will a nod and headed toward the men waiting for the next landing so they could collect baggage off the plane.

Will couldn't pace anymore. He leaned against the wall. His back ached. His head was pounding. He was pretty sure he was getting lung cancer from the constant odor of jet fuel.

He was punch-drunk from exhaustion. And anxiety. And relief.

He took Abigail Brannon's slipper out of his pocket. He'd found some glue to fix the trim. He'd taken the other shoe out of evidence. He'd give them to Faith. He doubted Abigail Brannon would want to see him. She'd seen Will twice—in the bathroom and on the train. Both times she'd looked at him with longing in

her eyes, begging to be rescued. Both times, Will had failed her.

At least she'd be in her mother's arms soon. Will would have to stop calling New Age believers freaks after this. He had visualized Abigail Brannon in her mother's arms, and that was exactly what was about to happen.

A wealthy Idaho farmer had donated the use of his private jet so that Rebecca Brannon could fly straight to Atlanta to meet her daughter. The charter pilot had been given special permission to divert to the E concourse so that the press couldn't bother them.

Will could only imagine what was going through the woman's mind right now. The flight was over four hours long. That was a lot of time to think about the fact that Paul Riggins, the man she'd been dating, had sold her daughter to a ring of pedophiles. He would probably spend the next ten years in prison.

Ten years.

That seemed light to Will. None of these bastards ever got what they really deserved. It was the one instance where Will was one hundred percent in favor of the death penalty. He'd advocate bringing back a firing squad if it meant he'd be the one to take out Joe Jenner.

The man was already working the angles. He'd hired one of the top lawyers in the state. He'd probably end up with five years. The rumors about what happened to pedophiles in prison were true, but still that was not enough to satisfy Will's desire for the man to be punished.

The doors slid open again. Amanda and Vanessa Livingston were shoulder to shoulder, talking in low voices. They'd worked together longer than Will had been alive. The women shared a bond in the way of soldiers who've been bloodied in the same battles.

Vanessa held a police radio in her hand. It squawked as soon as the doors closed. She put her ear to the speaker, nodding as if the person on the other side could see her. Finally, she told Will, "The plane just landed. Faith's on her way down with the girl. We've had some more enterprising reporters who booked flights so they can get into the terminal."

Amanda added, "Rumor has it they'll be at the T concourse."

Vanessa grinned. "I wonder who told them that?" She winked at Will as she walked over to the ground crew.

Amanda stayed with Will. They watched a small jet plane make the turn toward the gates. There was a large green logo on the side. Will couldn't make out the words, but he guessed from the yellow stalk of corn in the middle that this was the wealthy Idaho farmer's plane.

Amanda said, "And people say the one percent don't do their share."

Will wasn't in the mood to joke. He wasn't going to be able to breathe again until Abigail and Rebecca Brannon were together.

The engine roared as the jet turned toward them, nose pointing at Will's chest. The plane idled for a second, then inched forward, stopping a few yards away. The engine wound down. One of the ground crew rolled out a blue carpet. The door was twisted open. A set of stairs came out like a tongue.

The pilot got off first, then an older man, probably a grandparent. He was leaning on a cane. The pilot held out a hand to help him down. Once the old man was on the tarmac, he turned around and held out his hand for the next passenger.

Will recognized Rebecca Brannon from her news conference. She looked even more frail in person. Her eyes were almost black. Her nose had been broken, as had her ankle. She handed down her crutch. Both men had to help her hop down the stairs.

Amanda told Will, "It's a good outcome."

"It should've never happened in the first place."

"Take the win, Will. Cases like this, that doesn't usually happen."

Vanessa had her radio to her ear again. She jogged ahead of the Brannons, handing Will her keycard. She told him, "Run to the top of the stairs to let Faith in. I don't think the mother can make it up."

Will didn't feel like the right person for the job, but he was too tired to argue. He went back into the building, taking a moment to get his bearings. The labyrinthine underbelly of the airport was more confusing than anything the public ever saw. Will found the metal stairs outside a propped-open fire door. He took them two at a time, his shoes thumping on the steel. At the top, he saw a closed door with a narrow window. Faith was looking down at him. There was a worried expression on her face.

She stepped back so that Will could open the door.

He stood on the top stair, unable to move. He'd been hoping that the girl was too exhausted to remember him. He'd been praying she was too focused on seeing her mom to stare at him with those same sad eyes he'd seen so many hours ago.

But Abigail Brannon was none of those things. Her eyes were trained down at the floor. She was quiet. Too quiet.

Will looked at Faith.

She explained, "They gave her something to help calm her down."

Will knelt down on the top stair so that he could look at the girl. He told her, "Your mom's downstairs waiting for you."

She didn't move—didn't appear to want to see her mother, or anyone else.

Faith asked, "Sweetheart, don't you want to see your mom?"

Abigail's small shoulder went up in a shrug. Her eyes were glazed over. Her face remained emotionless. She was dressed in a long T-shirt that fell past her knees. Faith had obviously bought it at the hospital gift shop. The creases were still in the material where it had been folded up in the package. A pair of blue hospital sandals were on her feet. The label was still attached. Her toes didn't even show. They were meant for a small adult, not a little girl.

Will took Abigail's shoes out of his pocket. There was a tiny flash of recognition in the girl's eyes. Wordlessly, she put her hand on Will's shoulder, kicking off a sandal, lifting her bare foot. He slid on the Hello Kitty shoe. She changed hands, lifted the other foot. He had to use his finger to help her heel slide in. Too much glue had made the back stiff.

He asked, "Ready?"

She didn't answer. Will finally made himself look her in the eye. He braced himself for that same sad expression, the one that cut straight through to his heart. Instead, he saw wonder.

"I saw you," she whispered. "I saw you from before."

Will felt a lump sticking in his throat. This time, he was the one who couldn't speak. He could only manage a nod.

"I saw you in the bathroom and I saw you on the train."

Will had to force himself to answer. "Yes," he agreed. "You did."

Her eyes started to water. He thought that she was going to cry, but a smile slowly spread across her face. "I knew you would save me," she told Will. "I saw you seeing me, and I knew that you would save me."

Will breathed out. He didn't realize until that moment that he'd been holding his breath.

"I knew it," Abigail repeated. "I just knew."

She threw her arms around Will's shoulders. He gently returned the hug. He could feel her bony elbows and wrists as he lifted Abigail up and carried her down the steps to her mother.

And for an extra thrill,
read on for the short story

BUSTED

BUSTED

1.

Will Trent let out a long, mournful sigh as he stared at the blinking red light on the frozen Coke machine. There was no telling how long the Coke and ice had to cycle before a delicious frozen beverage came out. Will had an app on his phone that showed the location of every Icee machine in Georgia. This was the twenty-first century. It was bad enough they weren't flying around in jetpacks. Was it too much to expect a real-time update on a frozen Coke?

He glanced around the Lil' Dixie Gas-n-Go, taking in the neon signs that advertised live bait, ammo, and lottery tickets. Will was in Forest Park, less than half an hour's drive from downtown Atlanta, but the gas station had all the makings of a country store. Day-old biscuits baked under a heat lamp. A gallon jar of pickled pigs' feet sat next to the cash register. A plexiglass display for smokeless tobacco filled an entire wall. Except for the frozen Coke, Will was hard-pressed to come up with a reason anybody would want to be here.

He wasn't just thinking about the store. Forest Park was a dog of a city, sitting on the edge of Clayton County, which was arguably one of the worst counties in the state. The usual suspects had led to its demise—bad real estate deals, corrupt county officials, the shuttering of a major military base—but the final nail in the coffin had been the 1996 Olympics. In the name of progress, Atlanta had razed all of its government housing projects and sent the occupants south so that international guests and athletes wouldn't have to gaze upon the poor and disenfranchised.

After the Games were gone, no one was asked to return. For Atlanta, out of sight meant out of mind or, in the case of the thousands who were forcibly relocated, out of luck. Very little

monies or resources were spent on helping them settle. Gang members set up shop. Crime rates soared. Neighborhoods were decimated as anyone who could afford to fled to other counties. The pillaging didn't stop with the usual bad guys. In the intervening years, rampant corruption and mismanagement had touched just about every governing body. The Clayton County school system had lost its national accreditation. The county chief of police was being investigated by the state for theft of grant money. A commissioner had been billed by one local paper as "often investigated, never indicted." The county's finance office and archives had been served with enough search warrants to wallpaper the governor's mansion.

And none of that accounted for the glaring injustice of the slow-moving wheels in the Lil' Dixie frozen Coke machine.

Will took his cell phone out of his pocket and checked the time. He'd wasted six minutes waiting for the machine to cycle. He already knew he was an idiot for waiting so long. The question was, would he be a bigger idiot if he cut his losses and left?

Five more minutes.

He tucked the phone back into his pocket and walked up the aisle. The girl behind the register eyed him suspiciously. She had good reason to. Will usually wore a three-piece suit to work, an outfit he'd been told made him look more like an undertaker than an agent with the Georgia Bureau of Investigation, which he'd been for over a decade. Today was his first day undercover for a new assignment. He was wearing shitkicker boots, torn jeans, and a flannel shirt that was too tight across his shoulders. The only thing missing from his con attire was a tattoo, but there were some sacrifices Will was not willing to make.

He had always liked working undercover, liked the idea of being a different person, walking around in a different skin. Of course, that was before he'd met Sara Linton. The prospect of being someone else had lost some of its appeal now that he had a steady girlfriend. Will liked exactly who he was right now. He liked the man he saw reflected in Sara's eyes. He especially liked the way she'd woken him up with her mouth this morning, which was exactly how Will wanted to wake up every day for the rest of his life.

The bell over the door clanged. A fireplug of a cop sauntered into the store, his eyes scanning back and forth like a gun turret.

The man's leather belt creaked as he walked, his gun, mace, baton, and handcuffs beating their own symphony against his body. His black shoes snicked on the floor. His dark blue uniform with its yellow stripe appeared to be from the bumblebee line of law enforcement attire. The pants were ironed into a sharp crease. The Forest Park Police Department badge on his chest was shined to a mirror polish.

Will knew the guy's type without even thinking about it—the way he swiveled his sunglasses around to the back of his head, the bulging arms that were more fat than muscle, the air of Axe body wash that chewed into the oxygen around him. He was the type of hard-ass who would play fair so long as you understood that he was in charge. The minute he thought otherwise, you'd hear the hounds of hell barking in your ears.

Today must've been a good day. The cop winked at the girl behind the counter as he grabbed the key to the bathroom. He'd clocked Will the minute he'd walked through the door, but he pretended like he hadn't right up until it was time to pass by. Will narrowed his eyes, mindful that he was undercover. His fake identity had him as a con named Bill Black, and there wasn't a con on earth who didn't hate the sight of a cop. If not for a sense of decorum, Will would've spit on the floor.

The cop looked up at Will, his neck cracking because Will had a good ten inches on him. "That your bike out there?"

Will didn't answer. The Indian Chief Dark Horse came courtesy of the Fulton County impound lot. The motorcycle's warbonnet headaddress tank design and black matte spoke wheels had cost a high-rolling drug dealer a chunk of change. It gave Will some pleasure knowing the high roller was currently serving ten to fifteen in Valdosta State Prison while his shit-hot bike was parked in front of the Lil' Dixie. The license plate was registered to Bill Black. The cop would've pulled up Black's sheet on his computer before he entered the store. Assault. Battery. Attempted robbery. Suspected in a string of crimes from here to Kentucky. And perhaps most heinous of all—speeding in a school zone.

The cop asked, "I need to worry about you, hoss?"

Will guessed Bill Black wouldn't have much to say to a cop. He would also know it was perfectly legal to remain silent. Instead of answering, Will looked at the magazines on the rack. Porn, mostly, and *People* magazine, which was basically porn for

women.

“All right,” the cop said. “If that’s how you wanna play it.” He glared another second or two before heading off toward the bathroom.

Will checked the girl at the counter again. She had seen the exchange and was looking at him differently now. Very early on in his life, Will had learned that there was a certain kind of woman who was attracted to trouble. He guessed the girl behind the counter was this kind of woman. At least it seemed like it when she took out her lip gloss and seductively traced the wand around her wet lips.

Which made Will think of Sara this morning.

Which made him think he needed something to distract himself.

He made sure the Icee machine’s light was still flashing, then randomly picked up one of the magazines. The paper was thin, and he realized he’d chosen *Busted*, a weekly newspaper that compiled all the mugshots taken by the local police. It was like a celebration of incarceration, with centerfolds, ads for bail bondsmen, and explanations for the alphabet of charges: DUI, PUI, PMDD, DGCSA.

Obviously, some arrestees had cottoned to the fact that their mugshots might be viewed by a wider audience. The centerfold for this particular issue was a female meth freak with her head thrown back so the camera could better capture her toothless grin. Underneath her face was a smattering of capital letters that Will didn’t bother to decipher.

He returned the paper to the rack and headed toward the back of the store. The flashing red light was flashing at a slower pace. Will wondered if that meant the mixture was close to ready, or if he was trapped in some sort of Icee-fugue state where time had ceased to matter.

He thought to ask the girl, but she had stopped making googly eyes at him and was staring blankly at the wall. Her body was draped across the counter in a visual display of boredom. Will guessed she hadn’t noticed that a truck had pulled up outside. It was an older model Chevy with nothing but Bondo and a spotty primer coat holding it together—the kind you saw in the movies that indicated the guy who drove it was either an old-timer who smoked a pipe or a young man who had resisted the call of the

city and was choosing to work the land.

The truck idled. Smoke curled from its tailpipe. There was a man behind the wheel, but he didn't get out.

The bathroom door slammed open. Will had to breathe through his mouth. Axe body wash was no longer the predominant odor. The cop tossed the bathroom key up and down in his hand, calling to the girl, "You might not wanna go in there for a few." He was smiling when he looked at Will, but there was a warning in his eyes. Will held contact for a few seconds longer than necessary before turning back to the Icee machine.

The red light was off.

Will tried to pretend that his heart hadn't just skipped a beat. The idling truck was a distant memory; let the cop deal with it. Will was a con named Bill Black who liked to partake of the occasional frozen drink.

He grabbed a cup and snapped on a plastic dome. He lined up the hole in the dome with the spout for the machine. He wrapped his fingers around the handle, pausing a split second before pulling back and allowing the rush of frozen Coke to fill the cup.

And then something odd happened.

The cup was on the floor. The plastic dome topped a pile of frozen Coke like something out of a Stephen King novel. Will's hand was empty, but his fingers were still curved like he was gripping the cup. His other hand held open the nozzle. A slush pile slopped over the tip of his boot. There was a high-pitched whine, then a sharp pain like a needle piercing his eardrum.

His brain quickly went into rewind. Somewhere in his visual cortex, Will saw the cup lift off the floor, the frozen drink slush back in, the dome snap back onto the top. At the end, Will was holding the cup again, about to pull back on the handle.

That was when he'd first heard the gunshot. It was an explosion that shook the air like a rocket taking off.

Two seconds had passed, tops, but it felt like minutes.

Will's knee went to the floor—automatic, just like he'd been trained. *Get yourself low and little*. His hand went to his side, but of course his gun wasn't there. He was undercover. Cons weren't allowed to carry weapons, and Bill Black was a law-abiding con.

"Give me the fucking money!" a man screamed. His voice trilled up, like he was more scared than anybody else. "Hurry!"

Cautiously, Will peered around the row of magazines. The girl

was shoving money into a plastic bag as quickly as she could. The offending weapon was pointed at her head. Shotgun. Winchester Model 24, double-barrel, side-by-side boxlock action. The man holding it was African American, maybe forty, forty-five years old, roughly five-eight and 180 pounds. He had a bushy porn mustache and a spotty goatee. He looked straggly, more homeless guy than holdup man. He was wearing dirty jeans and a matching denim jacket with dark stains on the sleeves. Dreadlocks stuck out from underneath a John Deere baseball cap.

Will took out his cell phone. He dialed 911.

"All of it!" the gunman screamed. The tip of the shotgun wavered from his shaking hands. "Hurry!"

Will pressed the cell phone to his ear, willing the operator to pick up. He looked for the cop. The man was on the floor. His Glock was inches from his fingers. He'd obviously tried to draw down on the robber and gotten a bullet for his effort. Blood pooled around him. His sunglasses had skidded across the floor. One of the lenses was broken in two. The gunman's heel crunched on the plastic as he stepped back. Sixth sense. He was wondering who else was in the store.

Will heard a loud click in his ear. The emergency operator sounded as bored as they usually did. "Nine-one-one. What's your —"

"Who's there?" the gunman yelled. He turned toward the back of the store, took one step, then another. "Who is it?"

Will put the cell phone on the floor as he duck-walked toward the next aisle.

"Who are you?" There was something different about the gunman's tone. Will looked up, his eyes finding the fish-eye mirror in the corner. He could see the gunman, which meant the gunman could see him.

Slowly, Will raised his hands. He tried to sound like a con. "I got no beef with you, man."

"I need to worry about you?"

The words were eerily similar to the cop's.

"No." Will glanced down at his phone, hoping like hell the 911 operator was listening. "Lookit, bro, we're cool. You ain't the first guy to rob a gas station."

The shotgun was raised, but the man didn't come closer.

Will pressed his luck. "Don't worry about me. Just take the

money, jump back on 75 and get the hell outta here.” Will had to swallow so he could keep talking. “Police ask me, I’ll tell them you took the back roads.”

There was a moment that felt a lot like contemplation. Will didn’t realize he’d been holding his breath until he saw the gunman shake his head once, then turn back to the girl at the cash register.

Apparently, the gunman wasn’t pleased with her lack of progress. “I said hurry, you stupid bitch!”

“I’m doin’ it!” she yelled back. Will chanced another look. She stuffed one last handful of cash into the bag before shoving it toward the robber. “That’s it! That’s all I got!”

The gunman snatched the bag out of the girl’s hand. Relief seemed to flood his body. His teeth showed under the mustache. He gave a rebel yell as he raised the shotgun and pulled back on the trigger, which was a very dramatic way to make an exit, but a stupid thing to do if you wanted to get away.

Double-barrel shotgun. Two triggers. Two shots. Unless he broke the action and reloaded, the gunman might as well be holding a hollow metal stick.

Will stood up.

“Jesus Christ!” the gunman screamed, obviously startled.

Will started walking toward him.

“What are you doing?”

Will told the girl, “Go out the back.”

“I thought we were cool!” the man yelled, his voice cracking. “Stop right there!”

Will didn’t stop.

The man leveled the shotgun from his waist. “I’ll shoot you.”

Will kept walking. The girl was frozen in place, so he made his voice harder. “Move.”

She finally did as she was told, bolting for the back door.

“Stop!” The man shook the gun at Will. “I mean it! Stop!”

Will still didn’t stop.

The gunman pulled on the first trigger, then the second one. The empty clicks reverberated through the store. “Shit!”

Will grabbed the shotgun. The hot barrels singed his skin. He jammed the butt of the gun into the man’s chest so hard that he could feel the sternum give. The man stumbled back against the plate glass window. His arms flew out. His eyes went wide. There

was a clinking sound. The glass started to crack, white lines shooting out like bolts of lightning.

The man's forehead broke out in blood—at least that's what it seemed like. Will felt the air stir as a bullet whistled past him. Bone and gray matter spattered his face, the front of his shirt. The gunman had been shot from behind. The bullet went through the glass, through his head, and almost straight into Will.

Instinct.

Will's knee hit the floor. His hands went over his head like they could magically stop a bullet.

The idling Chevy.

The getaway vehicle.

The driver stood outside the open door to the truck. He started shooting wildly into the store. Bullets zinged off the floor, ricocheted into the snack displays.

Will reached for the Glock. The cop's hand snaked out and grabbed it before Will could. Even flat on his back, he wouldn't give up his weapon. Another bullet whizzed past Will's shoulder. There was no time for reasoning. Since Will couldn't grab the Glock, he grabbed the bag of cash. He ran down the aisle, hiding behind the end-cap as linoleum tiles splintered behind him.

Silence descended. Like time, sound was defying the laws of science.

Slowly, Will was able to pick out some familiar noises. The idling engine of the Chevy was like a broom sweeping up asphalt. The heavy, snare drum pounding was his heart trying to break out of his chest. The rat-tat-tat was the breath panting out of his mouth. Will looked down at the bag of cash in his hands like it could explain to Will why he'd grabbed it. And then for no reason at all, he looked back up at the Icee machine.

The red light was flashing again.

Motherfucker.

Glass crunched. The driver was inside the store. Will's eyes automatically locked onto the fish-eye mirror. He could see the second shooter, so the second shooter could also see him.

Everybody wanted to think they were Rambo in a situation like this, but the fact was the only thing going through your mind was that you were probably going to die. Will debated how to go out. Should he throw the bag of cash at the man, hoping that's all he wanted? Should he just stand up and take the bullet to his chest

on the off chance that all the major arteries would be missed? Should he just stay curled into a ball and piss himself like every bone in his body was telling him to do?

One single gunshot rang out. Will stood up. This wasn't instinct or training, but just blind hope. The shot was either the cop shooting the driver or the driver shooting the cop. It didn't really matter. This was Will's only chance. He lunged into a full run. He kept his body low like a linebacker going for a tackle. The driver was either distracted or shocked or just plain stupid, because instead of shooting Will in the face, he stood there with his mouth open in surprise until Will's shoulder slammed into his gut.

The force pounded them both into the floor. Will tried to grab onto the man, but he was wiry, and he bucked like a horse. Will got in a few punches before the driver's elbow swung around like a rotary blade. Will's nose exploded. That was the only way to describe it. The pain was debilitating. He saw literal stars. He was too stunned to do anything but bleed, which gave the driver the opportunity to push himself up from the floor. Will struggled to do the same. It was no use. He shook his head like a dog. Horked up a wad of blood from the back of his throat.

The driver ran toward the door. There was a wail of sirens in the distance. Will could see the guy heading for his truck. After a few false starts, Will ran after him. His boots cracked against broken glass. He jumped over the cop's body. The asshole was still holding tight to his Glock. Will didn't bother with the gun. The Chevy was barreling toward the road, which was less than fifty yards from the interstate.

Will jumped on his bike. He kicked the starter and revved the engine. The bike bucked from the sudden surge of power, but Will held on tight, opening the throttle wide as he shot out into the road.

He nearly rammed straight into a Mercedes. Morning rush hour was out in force, cars streaming into the various fast-food restaurants lining the exit. Will darted in and out between cars, narrowing his eyes to keep out the bugs and dirt spitting up from the road. He heard sirens behind him, but knew that his bike was their best chance to keep up with the Chevy. Ahead, the man drove with one foot on the brake, one on the gas. He swung the truck like a slingshot in and out of traffic, blindly trusting that

everyone else would get out of his way.

The Chevy ran the first light it came to, causing an eighteen-wheeler to jackknife across the median. Will cringed as the rig swept up two SUVs. Just by chance, he looked down to find the handlebar of his bike inches away from a car's side view mirror. Will jerked his hand away seconds before the grip hit the mirror. The mirror flipped back. He fought to correct the turn, praying he hadn't saved his fingers only to lay down eight miles of skin on blacktop.

The Indian righted, staying true to the yellow line in the center of the road. Will gunned the engine. He clenched his ass cheeks as he slid between two cars going in the opposite direction. The Chevy was up ahead. A Forest Park Police cruiser was on its tail now. Lights and sirens were blaring. Cars were starting to pull over, but not all of them. Will saw a man holding up his iPhone with one hand as he attempted to drive with the other.

The Chevy approached the bridge over the interstate. The driver was going straight as an arrow, but he made a split-second decision and swerved toward the on-ramp to I-75. The police cruiser missed the turn by about a foot, popping against the bridge railing so hard that the trunk and hood flew open. Will almost did the same. He turned at such a steep angle that he felt the asphalt rub the seam on the side of his jeans.

He righted himself, then swerved sharply to avoid rear-ending a parked BMW. Then swerved again to avoid another car. Will gripped the brake as hard as he could. The bike went into a spin, almost getting away from him before shuddering to a stop.

The on-ramp was packed with vehicles. Again, the Chevy weaved back and forth through traffic. The driver's luck ran out smack in the middle of the ramp. The Chevy clipped the front end of a Prius. The impact was like two rubber balls colliding. The Prius sucked into an SUV. The Chevy bounced sideways, sliding at a right angle across the asphalt.

Will stood from the bike.

The on-ramp started at the top of a steep hill. Instead of a guardrail lining the left side, there were a bunch of orange barrels indicating where a guardrail would eventually be placed. The on-ramp needed it. The median was a sharp drop down, maybe thirty feet of nothing but sky between the top of the ramp and the highway. The Chevy driver's hands worked furiously to avoid the

obvious, but there was no stopping gravity. The truck knocked out a row of orange barrels as it plunged toward the interstate.

Will felt his jaw drop.

Instead of fighting the fall, the driver steered into it. The truck accelerated. The wheels caught air. The landing wasn't pretty. The truck bounced and skipped across four lanes of interstate, hit the median divider, then skidded back across the same four lanes. Cars careened around like pinballs. The driver's arms flew wide as his head slammed into the roof, then snapped down, then slammed into the roof again.

For just a moment, it looked like the Chevy might tip over, but through some act of physics Will would never understand, the truck stayed upright. The driver didn't argue with luck. The truck's engine screeched as it lurched down the interstate. The tires had popped from the impact. The rubber flew loose like Silly String. The Chevy was on nothing but rims now. Sparks flew up from the road.

Still, he was getting away.

Will sat down on the bike. He pulled back on the throttle again, gunning the engine. The on-ramp was bottlenecked. Some of the drivers had gotten out of their cars to watch the melee. Most of them had phones in their hands, like nothing was real for them unless they captured it on video.

Will had no choice but to follow the truck's path down the median. He tried to control the descent, but a large rock sent the bike airborne. He ended up making roughly the same jump to the interstate as the Chevy. It was easier on the bike, and certainly more graceful, but only a last-minute straightening of his knees kept Will's testicles from sneezing out of his nose.

Up ahead, the Chevy was slowing. The rims had melted down to the axles. Finally, the driver was forced to stop in the middle of the interstate. No one had been speeding, but there were still some collisions as the cars around him came to a stop. In the end, the Chevy looked like the center of a Matchbox display.

Will was around a hundred yards away, the length of a football field, but he clearly saw the driver get out of the truck. A blue bandanna was wrapped around the lower half of the man's face. A gun was in his hand. He stumbled as his leg started to give out from under him. Blood soaked his shirt and pants. He limped across the interstate, the gun pointed straight out in front of him

as he approached a yellow Mini Cooper. Will saw the door open. A woman's leg appeared, her high-heeled shoe touching the pavement.

The man waved his gun, indicating she should slide over to the passenger's seat.

Hostage.

Will revved the bike. He didn't let himself think about what he was doing, because what he was doing was probably the most idiotic thing he'd ever done in his life.

He steered straight toward the driver, the muscles in his arm and shoulders screaming from pulling back on the throttle. The driver turned, but it was too late. By the time he swung around to point the gun at Will, Will was off the bike and the bike was heading straight toward the driver.

Will didn't slide across the asphalt—there was a limit to his stupidity. What he did was try to hop off. The shift in weight lifted the motorcycle's front wheel up into the air. Instead of flipping back on itself, it roared across the tarmac on its back tire.

Oddly, Will recalled a show he'd seen on Animal Planet the week before. Bear attacks. Tense stuff. During one of the reenactments, a giant black bear had reared up, mouth open, claws up, as the victim just stood there waiting to get mauled.

And so it was with the driver. He stood there motionless with his gun out in front of him. The screaming Indian seemed to leap at him. Metal met metal, then skin, then bone. Blood sprayed. Hair was wrenched from the scalp.

It really was a lot like the bear attack.

Will fared only slightly better. His body didn't just stop because he was no longer on the bike. The momentum wasn't entirely unexpected. As he jumped off, Will tried to pitch to the side. Tuck and roll, just like they'd taught him. Of course, drills couldn't prepare you for the massive shock of hitting the interstate with nothing but your own body fat to cushion your fall. Will hit the pavement like a clapper striking a bell. His entire skeleton jangled inside his skin.

Will was no stranger to getting the shit knocked out of him. He'd blacked out before. Somewhere in his mind, he knew how to fight it, but it was too late for thinking. He saw more stars, then darkness, then nothing at all.

2.

Will was sitting in the back of an ambulance when a black Suburban with smoked glass pulled into the parking lot of the Lil' Dixie Gas-n-Go.

"You all right?" the paramedic asked. "You just groaned."

"Yeah," Will said. He *had* groaned. And with good reason. "Just having a bad day."

"No shit, dude." The paramedic looked back at the Suburban. An older woman with a helmet of salt-and-pepper hair jumped down from the driver's seat. She called something to the passenger, a blonde wearing the Georgia Bureau of Investigation's regulation dark blue shirt and tan khakis.

The paramedic noted, "Somebody called in the big guns."

"Yeah," Will repeated. He angled himself out of the ambulance, wincing from the pain in his shoulder. "Thanks for patching me up."

"You might wanna get that looked at."

"It's all right." Will winced as he tried to shrug his shoulder, which felt like it had slammed into the pavement going thirty miles an hour. He asked, "That cop gonna be all right?"

"Still in surgery." The man tilted his head to the side like he had to consider the prognosis. "He's young. In good shape. That goes a long way." He glanced back at the Suburban. The driver had her hands on her hips. She wore sunglasses, but even a blind man could see the flames of fury burning in her eyes. "I bet they got some questions for you." He looked at Will. "You ask me, you're some kind of hero taking out that guy with your bike. Probably saved that lady's life."

"It was a good bike," Will said. "Closed loop, sequential, port injection with heated oxygen sensor."

"Damn." The man slowly shook his head, and they both shared

a moment of silence for the fallen Dark Horse.

“Thanks again.” Reluctantly, Will headed toward the Suburban. There was an escort for him, a Clayton County cop who was shaped like a shepherd’s crook. In keeping with the theme, he herded Will toward the black SUV. Will pulled the cotton out of his nose as he walked. It hurt like a bitch, but this was not the kind of crowd you wanted to show weakness to.

Law enforcement officers were everywhere—Clayton County cops, Forest Park cops, Clayton County sheriff’s deputies, some officers from the Georgia Highway Patrol, and a smattering of GBI agents, who were trickling in from the Panthersville Road headquarters. The entrance to the parking lot was blocked by several cruisers. Crime scene tape crisscrossed the broken plate glass. A white sheet covered the dead body inside the store. Yellow cards marked spent shells, fibers, trace evidence.

And yet, no one was doing much of anything. They all knew that jurisdiction wasn’t something that had to be hashed out. Pro forma, the GBI was always asked to investigate officer-involved shootings. Even Will’s escort peeled off when they reached the Suburban’s gravitational field. The SUV was a G-ride, short for “government ride.” The vehicles the GBI used were easy to spot if you knew what you were looking for. The rear was lower to the ground than the front because of the heavy metal gun cabinets bolted in back.

The GBI was to the state of Georgia what the FBI was to the country. Despite what Hollywood portrayed, neither agency could just waltz in and take over an investigation. Except in instances of child abduction or drug trafficking, the GBI had to be invited onto a case before they could work it.

Clayton County, by virtue of its squalor, offered another exception. After the county’s coroner was caught running a drug ring out of the back of his funeral parlor, it was decided by all involved that it would just be easier to pay the state to perform all of the county’s medical examiner duties. This included but was not limited to cases of murder. And in this particular case, a man had definitely been murdered. Sure, he’d been in the process of robbing a convenience store, but murder was murder.

Then there was the guy Will had plastered with his bike. Like the cop who’d been shot, the driver of the Chevy had been rushed to the hospital. Unlike the cop, he probably wouldn’t make it.

Will didn't know if that counted as an officer-involved death or vehicular homicide. The only thing he was certain of was that his boss was about to stick her foot as far up his ass as it would go.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Deputy Director Amanda Wagner snapped off her sunglasses. Will had been right about flames of fury in her eyes, though up close, they certainly burned a lot hotter. "You were supposed to be in Macon this morning. You should be checking in with your parole officer right now."

Will looked to his partner for help. Faith Mitchell's gaze settled on the giant sign in the window that advertised cold frozen drinks inside. She looked back at Will, offering an almost imperceptible shake of her head.

Amanda said, "Arrest him."

Faith looked as surprised as Will felt.

"Bill Black is a material witness to a crime who is also on parole and who also has a history of armed robbery." Amanda's voice turned into a low hiss. "Seventy-five thousand dollars, Will. That's how much it cost to put you undercover. And that doesn't include the thirty grand we're going to owe Fulton County for the motorcycle. You are officially costing me more than you're worth."

"I'm sorry," Will said, trying hard not to make it sound like a question.

"You'd better just be damn glad no one was close enough to get your face in those videos." She nodded to Faith. "Cuff him."

Faith mumbled something that was just loud enough for Will to hear. Still, she took out her handcuffs. "Turn around."

"My shoulder kind of hurts."

Faith gave a heavy sigh. "Hands out front."

Will held out his hands, mindful that cops from at least five agencies were watching his arrest. Amanda probably had a point about his cover. He still had an undercover case to work in Macon, which was about an hour from where they stood. Cops talked to each other all the time. They would share the story of the con who ran his bike into a guy standing in the middle of the interstate.

Will wondered if it looked as cool as he remembered.

Amanda said, "Read him his rights before you bring him into the store." She slid her sunglasses back on. Her high heels made a snapping sound as she walked across the parking lot. Probably

from her cloven hooves rubbing together.

Faith ratchetted down the handcuffs. "You stopped for an Icee, didn't you?"

Will exercised his right to remain silent.

"Did you lose consciousness?"

"No," he lied.

"Are you going to tell Sara about this?"

"Of course," he lied again. In order to tell Sara what had happened, he would have to tell her why he was on his way to Macon.

"So," Will said. "There's video?"

"Amanda's right. From what we've seen, nobody got a good shot of your face."

He tried, "How about that motorcycle trick? Cool, right?"

"It reminds me of Evel Knievel." She made sure the handcuffs were tight. "You know, when he tried to jump over the Snake River Canyon on his bike."

He gently corrected, "The X-2 Skycycle was a steam-powered rocket, not a motorbike."

"Whatever, Will. How'd it go for him?"

Will didn't answer her. There was a reason Knievel still held the world record for the most broken bones in a lifetime. "You look nice today."

Faith jerked him toward the store. Will wasn't certain whether it was kindness or forgetfulness that made her drag him by his uninjured arm.

They found Amanda standing in front of an old tube television set behind the counter. She was surrounded by beefy, tall cops, but her presence was such that the men seemed reduced around her. Amanda had spent her life in law enforcement. Her father had been a cop. She'd come up when the only thing the Atlanta Police Department could agree on was that women didn't belong in uniform. To say there was a chip on her shoulder was to say that Chuck Norris was kind of a badass.

She didn't look up when Faith dragged Will inside, but obviously she knew he was there. "Mr. Black, would that be you hiding behind the Yodels?"

Will leaned in, squinting at the paused image. The camera was mounted over the front counter, but instead of capturing the front doors, the lens was pointed toward the back of the convenience

store. There Will was—curled into a ball, hands over his head.

He said, “I believe those are Little Debbies.”

The laughter died down as quickly as it started. A pointed look from Amanda cleared the front of the building. She waited until just Will and Faith were left in the store with her.

“Run it down for me,” she told Will, though history told him that she likely had more information than he did.

Still, he gave her the highlights, substituting the Icee quest for a gas run. “I guess he got scared when he heard the sirens,” Will said, meaning the driver of the Chevy. “He ran out of the store, jumped into his truck. I pursued. You know what happened next.”

“Everyone does. It’s all over Hooter.”

Will hoped she meant Twitter.

Amanda supplied, “The driver of the truck has been identified as Wayne Michael Walker. He’s at the hospital now. It doesn’t look good. The cop got off a shot before your little chase. Nicked the femoral artery. Of course, that pales in comparison to taking a full-body slam from a ten-thousand-pound motorcycle.”

Will said, “It’s probably closer to seven hundred.”

She pressed together her lips before continuing, “Walker’s fifty-three years old. He’s a high school counselor, recently fired from the Clayton County school system.”

Faith gave a low whistle. It took a lot to get fired from Clayton County. “What’d he do, slap a kid?”

“Yes.”

Faith seemed a little shocked.

“At any rate,” Amanda continued, doling out the information she’d obviously gleaned on the drive down, “Walker’s accomplice worked at the same school—Spivey Senior High. Math teacher.”

“He didn’t look like a teacher,” Will said. “He looked like a homeless man.”

Amanda picked her way across the debris littering the floor. Will stepped in to help her when she knelt in front of the dead body, then he remembered he was in handcuffs and that people in handcuffs didn’t tend to help the police.

She pulled back the sheet. “Douglas Raymond Pierce. Doug-Ray to his friends. Coached girls’ softball. School-wide teacher of the year last year.”

Will accepted that he really was some kind of idiot. The John Deere baseball cap was tilted back on Doug-Ray Pierce’s head,

giving Will a clear view of where dreadlocks had been sewn into the rim. Likewise, the bushy porn mustache was a fake. The spotty goatee was all Doug-Ray. Take off the disguise, and he looked like every math teacher/coach Will had ever had.

“What about their next of kin?” Faith asked. She was scrolling through the closed-circuit footage. Will looked at the set. He saw himself dive behind the Little Debbies. And then the film reversed and he ran backward. And then the film played out and he went down again.

Amanda supplied, “The driver, Wayne Walker, was born and raised in Forest Park. He got his degree from Clayton State College. He’s twice divorced, currently single. Both exes live outside the state—one in Idaho, the other in Massachusetts. He has a twenty-year-old daughter who’s stationed in Afghanistan. We’re trying to track them all down, but it’s rough going.” She paused, and Will could tell she was exasperated for other reasons now. “Walker has no history of violence except for slapping that student. He’s as financially stable as you’d think a high school counselor would be, usually pays his bills late, but he always pays them. He hasn’t been issued a speeding ticket in the last seven years. He has a master’s in social work, for what that’s worth. And I should add that universally, one word came up in all the interviews we’ve conducted so far: ‘asshole.’ ”

“And Pierce?” Faith asked, not looking up from the TV. Will saw himself diving again.

“On paper, Doug-Ray Pierce is more of the same. We found nothing on his record but a speeding ticket in Florida three years ago,” Amanda told them. “Personal details are still being filled out. He’s new to the area—been here less than two years. Before that, he taught in west Georgia. We’ve got people heading over to Spivey High to conduct interviews. Preliminarily, no one seems to know much about Pierce. His emergency contact is his father, who died three months ago. Pierce was a loner by all accounts, never talked about his private life. Except for Wayne Walker, he didn’t seem to have any friends.”

“Gay?” Faith asked.

“Not if you take off the mustache,” Amanda quipped. “What exactly are you doing?”

Faith paused the footage again. She pointed to the screen. “Look here.”

Amanda normally kept her reading glasses on a chain around her neck. Will guessed she'd left them in the car. She leaned forward, her nose almost touching the screen. "What am I looking at?"

"Here." Faith pointed to the fish-eye mirror. "This is the only camera in the store, but you can see some of the front entrance in the fish-eye mirror. Watch the truck."

Will leaned in, too. The footage was the kind you normally found in convenience stores. The equipment was old. The VCR tapes were reused. The average cell phone camera had a hundred times better resolution. Still, he could clearly make out a man crawling out of the back of the truck. He kept low, knees bent, back curved, as he shuffled away. Instead of going into the store, he headed toward the back.

Three robbers, not two. One in the truck. One in the store. One securing the exit.

Faith asked, "No known associates on either man?"

Amanda had her phone out. She dialed a number as she told Faith, "We've got data processing running their backgrounds. It could be an hour or more before the computers spit anything out." She held up her finger for silence as she put the phone to her ear. It was answered on the first ring. She said, "Nick, we've got a third suspect, possibly on foot. He was hiding in the back of the truck. Close down the perimeter for five miles. Pull all recently reported stolen vehicles. I want door knocks on every house within a two-mile radius. Send me a tracking team and start a fingertip search of the woods behind the store."

She nodded as Nick obviously relayed some new information to her.

Will looked down at his cuffed wrists. His back had been to the window when the guy jumped out of the truck, but he still felt bad for missing what was obviously an important clue. And that wasn't all he'd missed.

Will asked, "Where's the bag of money?"

Faith said, "Is that what you had?"

"What are you two talking about?" Amanda had finished her call. "What money?"

Faith fast-forwarded the tape, and Will saw his mad scramble down the aisle, the plastic bag full of cash gripped tightly in his hand. Faith paused the image. The bag was on the floor. They all

turned in unison and looked at the same spot on the floor.

The money was gone.

“Well.” Amanda paused dramatically before continuing, “If only we had a way to know what happened to that bag.”

Faith took the hint. She fast-forwarded the tape. Will saw himself stand up again. This time, instead of walking backward, he was running forward to tackle Wayne Walker.

“There you go,” Faith said. The girl from the front counter had apparently not run out the back door to find help. She’d stuck around, waited for the right moment, then sneaked back in and grabbed the bag of cash.

Faith paused the tape. “This doesn’t make sense. The person who got out of the back of the truck looked like a man.”

“That’s because he was. Is.” Will explained, “That’s the girl behind the counter. She took the money on her way out.”

“No.” Faith shook her head. “We’ve got her outside. She’s a hundred years old if she’s a day.”

Will shook his head, too. “She’s twenty, tops.”

“How hard did you hit your head?” Faith indicated an old woman sitting in the back of a police cruiser. The door was open. Her long gray hair was disheveled. Her blue dress was faded from too many washings. Even from twenty feet away, it was obvious to Will that the woman’s face more closely resembled a dried apple core.

Amanda supplied, “She’s the mother-in-law of the store owner. He’s currently out of town on business. She can’t recall where he is, and the Lil’ Dixie Gas-n-Go corporate phone number rings at the store.” Amanda indicated the old woman with a wave of her hand. “Samantha Lewis, or Maw-Maw, as she likes to be called, said she was working here all morning. She’s sketchy on the details, but I’ve had worse eye witnesses.”

Faith pointed out, “She couldn’t bend down to pick up that bag of money, let alone run like that.”

Will wondered if Faith was right about his head. Then again, Will could clearly recall the girl behind the cash register, the way she’d eyed him appreciatively after the cop had tried to rattle his cage.

He walked around the counter and started searching the shelves, which was made infinitely more difficult because of his cuffed wrists.

“What are you doing?” Amanda asked. “That area hasn’t been cleared yet.”

Admittedly, Will didn’t know much about women, but he knew that they didn’t go anywhere without their purses. That is, unless there was an opportunity to exchange their purse for a bag of cash.

He pulled out a pink handbag with green and blue spots all over it. Certainly not the kind of thing an elderly woman would choose. Will tried the zipper, but his hands were too close together to do anything useful.

Faith already had on a pair of gloves. She grabbed the bag and dumped the contents onto the counter. Will felt an inordinate amount of relief when he saw the pink lip gloss he recalled the girl applying to her lips. Faith was more interested in the wallet. She read from the license, “Billie Eugenia Lam, born October 9, 1994.”

The name sounded old-fashioned, but the photo showed the young girl Will remembered.

He said, “That’s her. She was behind the counter the whole time.”

Faith asked, “What the hell? Maw-Maw said in her statement that she was ducked behind the counter the entire time.”

“What the hell, indeed.” Amanda crossed her arms over her chest. “According to the interrogating officer, Maw-Maw says she works here three days a week. When she’s not volunteering at the church, that is.”

“What a sweet old lady.” Faith flipped through the photographs in the young girl’s wallet. Will looked over her shoulder. He saw the usual stuff—Billie and friends posing with pouty lips and too much makeup, snapshots from a fun day at Six Flags, a photo of the dance floor at some club they weren’t old enough to get into.

There were no family photos, but the last picture showed Billie from a few years earlier. She must’ve been in high school. She also must’ve been into sports. She was wearing a red and white uniform. Her ball cap was low. She had a softball bat resting on her shoulder.

Faith asked, “What do you wanna bet Doug-Ray Pierce was her coach? Only this uniform isn’t from Spivey High.” She explained, “Jeremy used to play Spivey during regionals.” Her son had been a basketball player. “Their uniforms are green and white. The

mascot is a mustang. This looks like a ladybug on her chest.”

Amanda reminded them, “Doug-Ray Pierce taught in west Georgia before he moved to Forest Park two years ago.”

“Maybe he was diddling his players, Billie being one of them. She followed Mr. Pierce from west Georgia. She gets a job here, they do this heist.”

Amanda finished, “And Maw-Maw lies to keep her granddaughter from going to prison.”

Will didn’t completely buy the theory. “That would make sense if Pierce did it on his own. There’s Walker and the third guy from the back of the truck. Plus, Pierce is a pretty crappy bad guy. He wasn’t easy with the shotgun.”

“Winchester Model 24.” Faith looked at the weapon on the floor. Someone had secured it with a zip tie, looping the plastic through the breach. “Pistol grip, beavertail forend, full choke.”

Amanda cut to the point. “That’s not the kind of weapon you rob a convenience store with.” She started typing into her phone. “I’ll put a fire under ballistics and see if we can trace ownership.”

Faith bent down by the weapon. “Serial number’s been sanded off.”

Amanda gripped her phone.

Will ran it through his head again, Doug-Ray Pierce’s shaking voice as he told Billie to give him the money, the man’s strange rebel yell before he pulled the second trigger.

Will said, “Pierce didn’t seem to know that he only had two shots.”

“So, our math teacher isn’t an evil genius.”

“My money’s on the school counselor.” Faith had watched the tape through and was ready to render her opinion. “He shot Pierce in the head, bull’s-eye, straight on. He nearly killed you, too, by the way.” She gave Will a look that he really didn’t need to see. “Wayne Walker is thoughtful, methodical, a planner. He knew when to cut rope. He could’ve grabbed the cash, but he ran when he heard the sirens.”

“Scared of getting caught?” Will suggested.

“Too smart to get caught,” Faith countered. “Remember what Amanda just said: everybody anybody’s talked to so far says Walker’s an asshole. He’s probably the kind of guy who tries to control things. Look at the tape when he gets back into the truck. He doesn’t have to think about it. He jumps in, heads straight for

the road, takes his turn onto the interstate. If this stupid store kept their surveillance tapes, we'd probably see him doing dry runs for the past two weeks."

Will looked at Amanda. She could be a horrible person, but she'd never gone after them for tossing around theories.

"Spit it out," she told him, rolling her hand to urge him on.

He said, "Walker got fired for slapping a student. That doesn't sound like somebody who has everything under control."

"Have you been in a high school since you graduated?" Faith asked. "I'd probably slap those kids until my hands fell off."

She wasn't exactly the poster child for patience, but Will said, "Walker hesitated when he hit the main road. The turn onto the interstate was at the last minute."

"On purpose?" Faith asked, and Will couldn't really answer the question. Walker's last-minute turn had sent the cruiser straight into the bridge railing. Except for Will, he probably would've gotten away.

"All right." Amanda ended the speculation. She was staring at Samantha Lewis sitting in the back of the cruiser. Maw-Maw knew how to work the old-lady thing. Someone had brought her a blanket and a bottle of water. "What now?"

Faith indicated Billie Lam's license. "We go to Billie's address. This license was issued less than a year ago. She probably still lives there."

"You think she's stupid enough to go home with the money?"

"I think criminals being stupid is what keeps us in business."

"Fair enough," Amanda allowed. "Report back. And run down every detail you can find on this Billie Eugenia Lam. I want to know what she had for lunch yesterday afternoon."

"Yes, ma'am."

Out of habit, Will started to follow Faith.

"Not so fast, Mr. Black." Amanda smiled like she meant it. "I've got other plans for you."

3.

Will sat in the manager's office of the Gas-n-Go, counting backward in his head by sevens. He'd started at a thousand and was in the low two hundreds when he heard Amanda's voice from somewhere inside the store.

Or at least he thought it was Amanda's voice. He'd never heard her sound so kind in his life.

"I know, dear," she said. "I'm sorry we have to keep you. We're just going to leave you back here for a few minutes while I find someone to drive you home."

There was a low hum—a woman's voice, frail and incoherent. By process of elimination, Will guessed Amanda was speaking to Samantha Lewis, a.k.a. Maw-Maw.

Sure enough, a moment later, the old woman appeared in the office doorway. Amanda's hand was cupped underneath her elbow, her arm wrapped around the woman's waist as she helped her shuffle into the room.

Amanda said, "Oh," when she saw Will, as if she'd forgotten he was there.

Will stood up, muscle memory compelling him to go to his feet when a woman entered.

Amanda's tone was more what he was used to when she directed, "Stay out in the hall, Mr. Black. Keep your mouth shut and your eyes where they belong. And be mindful that there are at least a hundred police officers surrounding this building."

Will muttered some soft obscenities as he walked into the hallway. He watched Amanda help Maw-Maw settle into the chair. She needed the assistance. Up close, Will would've put her age somewhere in the mid-eighties. Her balance was off. She didn't sit in the chair so much as fall back and trust there was something to catch her.

Amanda asked, "Ms. Lewis, are you sure I can't get you anything? Is there someone I can call?"

"Oh, no, dear. I wish I could remember where my son-in-law is, but so much has happened today that it's set my brain all abuzz."

Amanda pressed, "We haven't been able to locate a phone number for him other than at the store."

"I'm sure it'll come to me. I don't set much by these new-fangled telephones you can carry around in your pocket." Maw-Maw patted Amanda's hand. "I'll let you know the minute I remember."

"I'll be right outside the store if you need me."

Amanda gave Will a nasty look as she left the office. He was fairly certain he would've gotten the same response even without the old woman. He watched her walk up the hall. Instead of heading toward the exit, she stopped about fifteen feet away. Amanda leaned her shoulder against the wall. She crossed her arms and waited.

Will looked back at the old woman in the office. She was probably under a hundred pounds, even with her heavy orthopedic shoes on. Her dress was too big for her frame. He imagined it was the smallest size she could find. She was built like a bird, from her narrow shoulders to her tiny wrists, which reminded him of Pixy Stix because of the various rubber bracelets she wore. Livestrong. Breast cancer research. Support our troops. Will had seen a display of the bands by the cash register. He wondered if she'd paid for them, and then he felt guilty for thinking that the old woman would steal.

Of course, she had already lied to the police, so there was that.

"Well." Maw-Maw glanced up at him, curious, but too polite to stare.

Will turned his attention to the scenery out the back door. Amanda wasn't lying about the cops. He counted at least ten men walking around the field behind the building, and that was just the cops who were in his line of sight.

The old woman asked, "Is the lesbian gone?" There was a waver to her voice, like a weak signal from a radio station. She tried to make it stronger, yelling, "I asked, is the—"

"Yes."

"Good." Maw-Maw was smiling at him like she hadn't just said what she'd said. "She thinks she's hiding it with that skirt, but

you can always tell. We can't forget that Satan was the most beautiful angel before the Fall."

Will didn't know what to say, so he concentrated on not looking up the hallway, where Amanda was probably pulling her gun out of her purse.

Maw-Maw whispered, "Why'd you cover for me?"

Will cleared his throat. He took his time answering. "Cover for what?"

She seemed exasperated. "About this morning. You know I wasn't here."

Will shrugged. He assumed Bill Black would lie to the cops as a matter of pride.

"Is it money you're after?" Tears came into her eyes. She clutched the neck of her dress in her frail hand. "I'm an old woman on a fixed income. There's nothing I can offer."

Will couldn't look at her, mostly because he felt like the worst sort of bad person, the kind who preyed on old people.

Down the hall, he heard a thumping sound: Amanda's high heel hitting the floor, sort of like the way a horse thief digs its heels into the flesh of an innocent pony.

Will swallowed, then made himself look back up. "Why'd you lie?"

"Please, mister ..." Her voice took on a pleading quality. She was still afraid he would tell. "I know it's wrong, but I had my reasons."

"She your granddaughter?" Will guessed from her reaction that he was on the right track. There weren't a lot of reasons to volunteer yourself up to the police. "They're gonna find her. They know her name. Billie Lam."

Maw-Maw looked terrified by the news. "How do they know?"

"I heard the cops talking to the lesbian." He let a smile come, figuring it might make him look devious. "They found Billie's purse under the counter. They know she was here."

She slumped back into the chair, nearly disappearing in the dress. Her head started shaking. He wasn't sure if this was on purpose or from some kind of palsy. "This is down to my worthless son-in-law."

"He robbed his own store?"

"Of course not. Why would he rob himself?" She kept shaking her head. "After Billie's mama died, all he cared about was taking

them expensive fishing trips and taking money outta the store.” She shrugged. “Of course, he’s a kike. What did I expect?”

Will wasn’t up on his racial slurs. “Kike,” he echoed. “Is that for Polacks?”

“Jews,” she corrected. “Where’re you from?”

“Atlanta.”

“Huh,” she said, like that explained it. “What else did you hear the po-lice say?”

Will took a gamble. “You first.”

“Pierce,” she told him. “That’s the colored man got shot.”

“I heard he got caught having sex with a student.”

Maw-Maw raised an eyebrow, but she didn’t reveal whether or not that student had been her granddaughter. “You know what we used to call his type back in my day? Farm equipment.”

Will found himself blinking too rapidly. Maw-Maw just sat there innocently with her hands curled in her lap, legs crossed at her tiny ankles. She had to be the most adorable racist Will had ever met in his life.

He said, “If you really wanna help your granddaughter, you’ll tell the police where she is. They just wanna know what happened. She won’t be in any trouble.”

She started shaking her head again. “Ain’t no situation ever got better with the po-lice involved.”

“She wasn’t part of the robbery. She just saw a good opportunity and took it.”

She kept shaking her head. This time, he could tell it was on purpose.

Will said, “You can get into a lot of trouble for lying to the police. It pisses them off, and you don’t want them pissed off when they find her.”

Maw-Maw seemed to think it over. For just a moment, Will thought she was going to give up her granddaughter.

And then something changed.

She sat up in her chair. She looked down at the handcuffs around his wrists. “Why are you asking me all these questions? You sound more like the po-lice than a criminal.”

Will caught movement out of the corner of his eye. Faith had taken Amanda’s place down the hallway. She was leaning forward, practically hanging on every word.

Will tried, “I’m just trying to help you out.”

"I don't need your help," she snapped, though he was pretty sure she couldn't get out of the chair without assistance, let alone ensure her granddaughter's safety. "I can do fine by myself."

"Lookit, I don't care one way or the other." Will tried to put some authority in his voice. As sexist as it sounded, women of Maw-Maw's generation generally responded well to men in authority. "I'm just offering some friendly advice. The police can protect her. You can't do this on your own."

Some of her resolve seemed to slip. "I don't know."

"Anything you can tell them would be helpful."

"I guess I could tell them some. Since they know she's my granddaughter anyway." She seemed to think of an idea. "I can tell 'em about Billie helping with the nursery at the church. She's good like that, good with children."

"You need to tell them where she is."

Maw-Maw opened her mouth. Will could practically see the words moving to the tip of her tongue. And then she clammed up. "I just don't know, sonny. Hand to the Bible, I would tell them where she is, but I just don't know."

4.

Will leaned into a curve as Faith sped toward the hospital. He felt like he was on his bike again, but they were in Amanda's SUV, which wasn't built for zigzagging across the road.

"She was so smug," Faith said, meaning Maw-Maw. "It's like she thinks we can't touch her."

Will stared at her. "What did you hear in the hallway? That wasn't my read at all."

"Please. She played you like a fiddle. All that old-woman bullshit, meanwhile she's lying to the police. She's obstructing a case. A cop was shot. Another man was killed. You were nearly shot in the process. You could've died. Wayne Walker caused millions of dollars in damage trying to get away. That old biddy knows something, and she should pay for holding it back."

"Well, when you put it that way."

"How else would I put it?"

Will didn't have an answer for her.

"You never knew your grandmother. Trust me, they're not all they're cracked up to be."

Will tried to move her along. "What did you find out about Billie Lam?"

Faith had to breathe through it before she could answer. "Not much more than what Maw-Maw told us, which—believe me—has me more worried than not." She beeped her horn at a car that wasn't moving fast enough. "Billie Lam is a college dropout. Her mother died when she was twelve. No siblings. No cousins. Maw-Maw said the father isn't around much. He uses the income from the store to go on fishing trips down in the Gulf. They don't see him for weeks at a time."

Will might have fallen for the old woman, but Faith had a point about not taking all of this information at face value. "Did you lift

any prints from Lam's purse?"

"She's not in the system."

"You ran a records check?"

"Through the DMV, through the county systems, through every single database we have access to." She listed it out. "We don't know her social security number. We don't have her credit score. We don't have a cell phone number for her. We don't know who her friends are. We don't know jack."

"Have you talked to the father?"

"More don'ts. No phone number. No address. His credit record is a mess, but everything is registered to the store or a PO box. Maybe he lives with his mother-in-law, but who knows? The agent who drove Maw-Maw home went into her house. You know this. There was no one inside. He checked the place top to bottom."

She was right. Will did know all of this. He knew that the same agent was sitting outside Maw-Maw's house, that both Doug-Ray Pierce's house and Wayne Walker's apartment had been turned upside down. They'd been working this case for nearly three hours and still nothing viable had turned up.

Faith said, "While you were enjoying your chat with Maw-Maw, I rattled some cages at the school board. Didn't you think it was weird that Doug-Ray Pierce got fired for messing with a student, but he walked onto a job in another county?"

"I just assumed Clayton was desperate for teachers."

"Me, too," Faith said, "but apparently even they have standards. Somebody pulled in some big favors to get Doug-Ray Pierce hired in Clayton County."

"Wayne Walker," Will guessed, because it was the only thing that made sense. "He's older. He had what passes for tenure around here. He'd know people at the county office."

"Exactly." Faith took another sharp turn. Will grabbed the dashboard.

She told him, "A secretary at the county office gave me the story. Walker vouched for Pierce, said that he was fired off rumors, that nothing was proven—which is technically true—that they went after him because he's a black man and he was accused by a white student. *Birth of a Nation*, yada yada."

Will was missing a connection. "How did Billie Lam know Wayne Walker?"

“Walker went to their church. So says the secretary.” Faith shook her head. “This is still a small town. Everybody’s up in everybody else’s business.”

“Not that it’s been much help.” Will rubbed his face, trying to concentrate. “Maw-Maw said the son-in-law is Jewish.”

Faith glanced his way. “They go to an Episcopal church. His name is Gilbert Caldwell. I just assumed he was Billie’s stepfather.” She wrinkled her forehead. “Why would Maw-Maw lie about him being Jewish?”

Will shook his head, too. It seemed Maw-Maw lied just for the sake of lying. “What about friends? Billie had pictures in her wallet. She must’ve known people from church or school.”

“We’re talking to people from both, but Billie’s a ghost. She’s nineteen years old. We don’t know what school she went to because Maw-Maw can’t remember. Billie doesn’t have a record. She doesn’t own a car. She’s never filed a tax return. We don’t know her social security number, so we can’t pull her bank accounts. I’m sure she has a cell phone but who the hell knows what the number is.” Faith slowed the Suburban, turning in to the hospital parking lot. “I tried to look her up on Twitter and Facebook, but the only Lam in the area is a sixty-year-old parole officer who lives in Atlanta. I sent her a message. She’s never heard of her.”

Will racked his brain for other ways to find the girl. “The family doesn’t have other properties? She’s hiding out somewhere.”

“No properties. We’re knocking on every door at every fleabag motel around.”

“That’s a lot of motels,” Will said. Forest Park was near the airport. You couldn’t throw a rock without hitting a motel. “Billie got to work somehow. She has to have a car.”

“Maw-Maw’s powder blue Honda was parked behind the store. We turned it inside out.” Faith bumped the gear into park. “Nothing. That’s the story of this case: nothing.”

Will pushed open the car door. “Either she’s a criminal mastermind or she’s very lucky.”

“Or both.”

He followed Faith to the loading dock, asking, “Any reason Amanda wants me here?”

“I don’t question orders.”

She was a better liar than Maw-Maw. "I'm still maintaining my cover, right?"

"I guess so. She told me to bring you through the back. McClendon's out of surgery, but there are still cops all over the place." She stepped on a chock and boosted herself onto the loading dock. "Pete McClendon, that's the name of the cop who was shot."

"He clean?"

"Who the hell knows? The doctors are keeping him in a coma because of the pain. We won't get to talk to him for another day at least."

The large metal door was rolled only partway up. Faith walked underneath, but Will had to bend down to make the clearance. He pulled his phone out of his pocket to check the time. The glass was scratched. He felt lucky Amanda hadn't logged it into evidence just to prove a point. It was only a few minutes after noon. Will guessed all the dockworkers were at lunch.

Faith took a moment to get her bearings, consulting the emergency exit map to find the freight elevator. Will helped her lift the heavy door, which opened like a guillotine. Carts of soiled laundry lined the back wall of the car. They both stared ahead as the elevator creaked into action, taking them to the top floor.

Will said, "All this because of the blinking light on an Icee machine."

Her jaw set. "Sure. That's why."

"Five minutes later, I would've been out of there."

She wouldn't look at him.

He said, "There was a Triumph at the impound lot. I guess I can use that when I go down to Macon."

"Make sure it has a cup holder."

The elevator groaned to a stop. She finally looked at him.

"Oh." Will was slow on the uptake. He would've been trapped at the store even longer while he drank the Icee. "Have I ever told you that you're a really good detective?"

"Whatever." Faith lifted the elevator door. She didn't look back to make sure Will followed. They had about twenty feet of hallway before a turn. He tried to think of a witty rejoinder, but then he turned the corner and saw Amanda.

She was waiting for them by the nurses' station. As usual, she was reading something on her phone. She didn't look up as she

asked, "Anything?"

Will figured it was his turn to take one for the team. "No, ma'am. We're trying to verify Maw-Maw's story, but we're hitting a lot of dead ends."

She still didn't look up. "Talk to that patrolman over there."

Faith walked over to the cop. He was so young Will doubted he had to shave more than twice a week. "You have something for us"—Faith read his name off his uniform—"Mixon?"

"Yes, ma'am." The cop took off his hat. "Pete was in that store every day at the same time. I was his boot for three months. We went there every single day."

Will knew a boot was what they called a patrolman in training. He asked, "Why did he go in there?"

Mixon didn't seem to want to answer Will's question, probably because Will looked like a thug.

Faith said, "Why did he go there?"

Mixon was still reluctant, but he finally said, "He was sweet on the girl worked behind the counter."

"Seems like a lot of men were," Faith noted. "Why wasn't McClendon wearing his vest when he went into the store?"

Mixon shrugged. "He always had it on when I worked with him."

"His logs didn't report anything suspicious at the store. Did he say something to you? Indicate there might be a problem?"

"No, ma'am. I'd tell you straight out." He rolled his hat in his hands like pizza dough. "I was thinking, though, if they cased the place, then they'd know Pete was there at the same time every day. Maybe this was a hit? Something professional set up by one of the gangs?"

"Did McClendon deal with any gangs?"

"Well, no, ma'am. His beat cuts through an industrial area. He was mostly called out to break-ins and such. There's been a ton of robberies around there, usually in the early hours, sometimes late at night. Smash and grab. Real organized. We got our detectives on it, but they ain't caught nobody yet."

Faith had spent the first decade of her career in a squad car. She knew what the pay was like. "Did McClendon have any other jobs? Something he did for extra cash?"

"I know he taught CPR classes over at Spivey. Some of the teachers wanted to get certified 'cause of all these school

shootings.”

“Spivey,” Faith echoed. “Thank you, Officer. We’ll be in touch if we have any questions.”

He put his hat back on and headed toward the stairs.

Faith said, “Pete McClendon worked at Spivey Senior High.”

As usual, Amanda was a step ahead of them. “According to the principal, Wayne Walker recommended McClendon to teach the CPR course.”

Will tried to get a handle on where they were. They’d all worked robberies before. Usually it was through familial or community connections that they were able to break open a case. “We’ve got Pete McClendon tied to Wayne Walker through the school, Wayne Walker to Billie Lam through the church, Doug-Ray Pierce to Billie Lam possibly through softball camp, maybe even a teacher-student affair.”

Faith added, “What about the third man in the back of the truck? Where are we on finding him?”

“The same place we were three hours ago—clueless.” Amanda sounded exasperated. “Wayne Walker just woke up from surgery. They stopped the bleeding, set his pelvis and both arms, wrapped his ribs, which have been rendered into oatmeal, but he’s refused further treatment.”

“Can he do that?”

“This is America. We have a constitutional right to make unhealthy choices.” Amanda started down the hall. They followed. “His fever’s spiked. The gunshot wound was a ricochet, low velocity. It’s just a matter of time.”

Will knew this was bad news. A high-velocity bullet generated enough heat to cauterize and disinfect the wound. A low-velocity shot opened up the body to all kinds of infection.

Amanda said, “He wasn’t in the best of health to begin with. Brittle diabetic, pack-a-day smoker, high blood pressure, overweight, and then there’s the melanoma he’s been fighting for the last four years.” She stopped outside a closed door where a GBI agent stood guard. “He knows he’s going to die without treatment. Let’s pray he wants to unburden his soul.”

Faith started to go in, but Amanda stopped her.

“Mr. Walker has made it clear he’s not going to waste the last few hours of his life explaining himself to a woman.”

At least Will finally understood why Amanda had let him come

to the hospital. He pushed open the door. Sunlight flooded the room, probably some doctor's or nurse's attempt to bring in some UV rays and kill the infection.

And there was no mistaking that an infection was raging inside Wayne Walker's body. The blankets covering him were soaked through. He shivered like a parody of someone who was freezing to death. His teeth chattered. What was left of his hair was stuck to his head like pieces of moldy straw. His eyes were wide with panic. Sweat dripped down his face, pooled under his chin. He looked exactly like what he was: a man who was in the process of dying.

Still, Will took his time. Under Walker's watchful gaze, he dragged over a chair, letting the legs scrape the floor. Will stopped a few feet from the bed. He tried to keep his expression passive. In Will's experience, deathbed confessions weren't all they were cracked up to be. On the one hand, there were the people who held out a tiny sliver of hope that a miracle would occur. On the other were the people like Wayne Walker, who seemed ready to not only embrace death but give it a big, wet kiss.

Will sat down in the chair.

"You." Walker's teeth clicked around the word. He blinked rapidly, like he was afraid to close his eyes too long. "You're a cop."

Will guessed Wayne Walker had seen a lot sitting in that truck outside the convenience store. "That was a good shot," he told Walker. "Taking out Pierce like that. Right through the center of the head." Will didn't have to work to sound impressed. Walker was some kind of marksman. "I don't know a lot of cops who could make that shot."

Walker didn't respond. He just lay there shaking like a paint mixer. The pain must've been excruciating. Will could make out the cast covering his entire lower half. Both arms had been broken. Pins and bolts stuck out of the casts, which were frozen in a permanent Hammertime. His neck and face had been belted by a motorcycle tire. The shattered ribs alone must've been torturous. Will had broken his share of ribs. Just breathing could cause a knifelike stab to your lungs. Every movement put you in deeper agony.

Will said, "You know you're going to die if you don't let the

doctors give you treatment.”

Walker’s shoulder jerked up, which Will guessed was voluntary. “Rather die than go to jail.”

Will had heard these words before, but he’d rarely met someone who was ready to go through with it. “You got Doug-Ray Pierce the job at Spivey.”

Walker’s mouth worked, but it took a few seconds for him to make words. “Worthless cocksucker.”

Will could see why people called this man an asshole. “He must’ve been your friend at some point.”

“Fuck him. He was—” Walker was racked by a violent shudder. He called out from the pain. “Oh, God!”

Will knew he should feel some kind of compassion. The man was a killer, but he was a human being in pain. Still, there was something so pervasively off-putting about the guy that all Will could do was sit back in the chair and wait for the episode to pass.

Walker clenched his jaw to stop his teeth from chattering. Will thought he was going to keep up the silence, but he hissed out, “It was Billie.”

So, the teenager was at the heart of this after all.

“Pete was supposed to get shot in the arm.”

“With a shotgun? By a man who didn’t know how to use a shotgun?” No wonder Pete McClendon had stunk up the bathroom. Will’s stomach would’ve been upset, too. “Tell me what’s really going on here, Wayne. I know there’s more.”

“She was two-timing me.”

“Billie?”

Walker watched him carefully. There was real fear in his eyes. Will was beginning to think death wasn’t the man’s biggest concern right now. He was either covering for the third man or he was covering for somebody else.

Will asked, “Where is she?”

Walker turned away. Guttural sounds came from his throat. Will wasn’t sure, but it sounded like he was crying.

“Tell me where she is, Wayne. That’s the only way she stays safe.”

Walker didn’t answer. Will guessed Billie had managed to tie him into knots. There was no other reason for him to protect her.

“You were a teacher,” Will tried. “I know there’s good left in

you.”

Walker’s mouth opened in a sob. “Tell Terri ...” He stopped to swallow. “Terri ...”

“Your daughter?” Will remembered. Walker had a twenty-year-old serving in Afghanistan.

“Tell her ...” Walker began. “Tell her my last thoughts were about her.” He had to stop to breathe through the pain. “Promise me you’ll tell her that.”

“I promise,” Will said. “But you can tell her yourself, Wayne. Let the doctors treat you. You’re not a bad guy. You just did a bad thing. You can make that right now.”

“She’s a soldier,” Walker said. “I’ve always been proud of her.”

“You can tell her that yourself.”

Walker took a deep breath. His teeth started chattering again. Will thought he was having a seizure until the man mumbled, “Don’t hurt her.”

Will thought he meant Terri, but then he realized Walker was still worried about Billie. “I have no intention of hurting her.” Will didn’t think prison would hurt Billie that much. “Let’s end this, Wayne. Tell me where she is. Maybe I’ll let you see her before you go.”

“Please.” Tears streamed down Walker’s face. “I did everything you told me to.” His throat worked as he tried to swallow. “I’m begging you. Don’t hurt her.”

“I won’t,” Will repeated, wondering where this was coming from. Maybe the fever had reached Walker’s brain. “I promise you, Wayne. I’ll do everything I can to keep Billie safe.”

“No!” His lips smacked together. They were darker now, almost black. “They got her at the house. You gotta save her.”

“What house?” Will leaned over the man. He wanted to shake him, but he was already shaking too much on his own. “Who has her, Wayne? Who has Billie?”

“Not Billie,” he whispered. “Gloria.”

5.

Will sat in the mobile command center watching the GBI's SWAT set up outside Gloria Pringle's house. They couldn't use Clayton County SWAT. According to Wayne Walker, Officer Pete McClendon was part of a ring of dirty cops who'd been robbing local businesses for the past year. There was no telling who else on the force was involved.

The speakers inside the converted box van buzzed with a low static. A man's voice said, "Team three, check." Another answered, "Team one, check."

Will thought about the story he'd finally gotten off Wayne Walker.

Four hostages were inside the two-story house: Gloria Pringle, her nineteen-year-old daughter, her twenty-year-old son, and the son's nineteen-year-old girlfriend.

They were being held by two masked men, all heavily armed, all ex-military. Wayne Walker had been very specific about the weapons inside the house. AKs. Fully automatic. Enough ammo to last through a long siege. Flash grenades. Explosives. Pipe bombs.

And Billie had orchestrated it all.

Will studied the bank of monitors inside the van. They showed real-time footage from the head cams the SWAT team wore. Two women checked inside Gloria Pringle's station wagon. Their weapons were out in front of them. He heard a woman's voice from the speakers. "Team six, check."

"Something's not adding up here," Will said, though Faith and Amanda were only half listening. Their eyes were glued to the monitors. Six men were stationed under each window in the front of the house. Another team was preparing to breach the front door while several other teams secured the back.

Will said, "There was maybe a thousand dollars in that cash

register.” He started pacing back and forth in the tight quarters. The van shifted with his weight. “There’s three men outside that store: Walker, Pierce, and the third guy, the one who went around the back. There’s Billie inside. There’s Pete McClendon, who’s running some kind of French Connection. They’ve kidnapped Wayne Walker’s girlfriend, her family, her son’s girlfriend, so that’s two more guys.”

Faith was finally paying attention. “All for a thousand dollars.”

“I don’t care what kind of magical spell Billie casts on men, that’s just south of a hundred fifty bucks each for a whole lot of risk.” Will stopped pacing. He braced his hands above him on the ceiling. “Let’s say I believe there’s a ring of cops breaking into businesses.”

“It’s happened before,” Amanda said.

“More than once before,” Faith corrected. “We are talking about Clayton County.”

“All right.” Will relented. “We’ve got a ton of break-ins on Pete McClendon’s beat. It’s one of the most crime-ridden areas of the county, which—yes—that’s saying a lot.” Will paused for a breath. “Let’s say McClendon was involved in all of those robberies. We’re talking around ten thousand dollars each job—tools, light machinery, a couple of safes. McClendon hits them at night or early in the morning, when he knows nobody is going to be there. I buy him being in on that. But what happened at the Lil’ Dixie doesn’t fit his pattern.”

Faith said, “Broad daylight, witnesses, right out in the open during rush-hour traffic.”

“Right,” Will said, glad she finally understood. “This doesn’t sound like a stickup. This sounds like a hit where maybe they get to keep a little cash.”

“Pete McClendon was the target,” Amanda said. “That’s an interesting theory.”

“Maybe not just Pete McClendon. Doug-Ray Pierce was shot, too.”

“You think Wayne Walker wanted them both dead so he could have Billie to himself?”

Faith said, “And his girlfriend. Don’t forget Wayne said he’s been dating Gloria for a year.”

“About that,” Will started.

Amanda’s cell phone rang. She held up her finger for silence.

Will watched her face as she listened to the call. And then he couldn't see her face anymore because she put her head in her hand.

Finally, she said, "Very well. We'll discuss this later."

Amanda made a show of putting her phone on the desk in front of her, setting it parallel to the edge. "That was Nick Shelton. Maw-Maw gave his men the slip."

Faith narrowed her eyes. "An eighty-four-year-old woman sneaked out of her house under the noses of two trained GBI agents?"

Amanda quipped, "Thank you for the summation, Faith. It wasn't clear to me until now."

The speaker crackled again. The SWAT team commander said, "Deputy Director, all teams in position. Good to go?"

Amanda tapped the button on the microphone. "Hold. Repeat—hold." She looked at Will. "You've got twenty seconds. Finish your thought."

Will ran through all the information they'd found while the SWAT team was staking a perimeter around Pringle's house. "We couldn't find one person at the school or the church who said Wayne Walker was dating Gloria Pringle. The pastor said he was under the impression that Gloria couldn't even stand him, that there was some bad blood between them. That Wayne had bad blood with just about everybody." Will repeated the pastor's words. "Wayne Walker is an asshole. Even his ex-wives won't return our calls because they don't care whether he lives or dies."

Faith got back to brass tacks. "We've got no phone calls between Wayne Walker and Gloria Pringle going back six months. No overlapping credit cards. They never even bought gas at the same station or shopped at the same Walmart. They don't work together. Gloria's kids didn't go to his school."

"So why would Walker send us here?" Amanda indicated the monitors. "He had to know we'd bring an army. He's practically put al-Qaeda inside that house. I've got a helicopter set up two miles from here. Tell me what Walker is playing at."

"I don't know," Will said. "I wish I could tell you. This just feels wrong."

"Your feelings have always mattered so much to me." Still, Amanda tapped the mic again. "Major, do you have eyes inside the house?"

“That’s a negative, ma’am. Shades are all pulled. We hear a television. There’s some interference from a microwave.” He paused a moment as he switched to another channel, then back. “We think the daughter’s upstairs. The son and mother appear to be downstairs. No idea where the girlfriend is. Maybe in the basement.”

“What’s on TV?”

If the major thought this was a strange question, he didn’t say. “Sounds like *The View*.”

Amanda sat back in her chair. She steepled her fingers together. It didn’t take her long to form a new plan. She told Will, “Go knock on the door.”

“What?” Will and Faith said in unison.

Amanda spoke into the mic. “Major, I’m sending my agent to the front door. Tell your team to drop back.” She looked up at Will. “Don’t worry. They’ll still be there for cover.”

Will felt a bead of sweat roll down his back. He was pretty sure he was right about this, but he wasn’t sure enough to risk his life.

“Oh, for God’s sake.” Amanda pushed herself up from the chair. She threw open the back door and was down the steps by the time Will managed to jump down from the van. She walked across the yard with her head high, ignoring the twenty men surrounding the house. Two steps up to the porch. Another two steps to the front door.

Amanda raised her hand and knocked.

Will waited. He heard laughter inside the house, obviously from the television. A woman’s voice called a jovial, “No, no! Let me get it!”

The bolt slid back. Then the thumb latch turned. The door opened. An attractive woman in her fifties with long dark hair stood in her bathrobe. She smiled at Amanda. Then she saw Will and Faith and her smile faltered.

Then she saw the SWAT team surrounding her house and started screaming.

6.

“Wayne Walker is a lying asshole.” Gloria Pringle stabbed her cigarette out in the ashtray, only to grab up her pack for another. “Hell no, I never dated him. He should be so lucky.” Her hands shook as she lit a new cigarette. “What were you going to do, bust in here and kill us all?”

Amanda used her diplomatic voice. “We were told the men who were holding you hostage were trained mercenaries.”

Gloria laughed out loud. “And you believed that?”

Will let Amanda handle the question. He glanced around the woman’s kitchen, which was decorated in a strawberry theme. Strawberry wallpaper. Strawberry curtains. Strawberry tablecloth. Even the canisters on the countertop were shaped like strawberries.

“I don’t even know why he bothers to go to church,” Gloria said. “Not like he’ll get into heaven.”

Faith came into the kitchen with three surly-looking young adults in tow. “There’s no one else in the house. They all tell the same story. They’ve been here all morning. They have no idea why Wayne Walker would say they were being held hostage.”

“We could sue you,” the girl said.

“For?” Amanda asked.

The girl didn’t have an answer.

Amanda turned to Gloria. “Why would Wayne target you like this?”

No one spoke, but there was a definite air of guilt among the strawberries.

Finally, the litigious girl spoke up. “Terri used to date Connor.”

Will guessed Connor was the young man slumping against the refrigerator. He had the floppy blond hair and boyish good looks of a player.

"I broke up with her," Connor said. "She wanted to get serious, but I was, like, not with you being gone for a whole year. Oh, hell no."

Will provided, "Walker said he wanted Terri to know he was thinking about her."

"Thinking about her?" Gloria trilled. "Sending a SWAT team to my house because my son broke up with his daughter?" She waved her cigarette in the air. "Fucking crazy, that's what this is! Just crazy!"

"Whatever." Connor started to leave.

Amanda asked, "Where did you say you were this morning, young man?"

"Here." He indicated the house. "Me and Sheila was sleeping one off."

"He's telling the truth," Gloria said, as if she would offer up her son otherwise. "I checked on them when I got in from work."

"When was this?"

"Around eight-thirty this morning. I work the night shift at O'Kelley's." She sucked on her cigarette. "They're a parts supplier off Kennedy Road."

Will asked, "That's near Exit 40?" The Lil' Dixie was off 40.

"Yeah, I just missed all that traffic this morning from the holdup." Her hand stopped a few inches from her face. The cigarette smoldered. "That was Wayne, wasn't it? That whole thing this morning."

Amanda asked, "Why do you say that?"

"Because that's just the kind of asshole stunt he'd pull."

"You seem to know a lot about him."

"I got a pair of ears and we go to the same church. He's probably just as much up in my business as I'm up in his." She took a hit off the cigarette. "Plus, I dated Wayne's half brother back in high school. Caused a bit of a stir." She told her children, "Believe it or not, there was a time when a white woman could get killed for sleeping with a black man."

"And I'm outta here," Connor said. He slinked back out of the kitchen with the two girls following close behind.

Will saw the vein in Amanda's forehead had started to throb. It seemed like she was having trouble speaking. "Wayne Walker has an African American half brother?"

Gloria nodded vigorously. "He lived with his daddy over on the

other side of town, but everybody knew.” She played with her lighter, flipping it end over end. “Me and Doug-Ray dated in high school, then he moved to west Georgia to go to college, then he moved back here a couple’a-three years ago. His daddy died recently. I read about it in the paper. I guess I could’ve taken off to go to the funeral, but we’re on time and a half, you know?”

Will couldn’t keep the reluctance out of his voice. “What about Pete McClendon? Do you know him?”

“Pete.” Gloria huffed out some smoke. “There’s a blast from the past. I don’t know how that fool managed to get in uniform. He stole my purse one time when I was over at his aunt’s house. We found it under his bed, bless his heart.”

No one asked the obvious question, but Gloria was on a roll now.

She explained, “Pete is Wayne’s cousin on his mama’s side. Now, as I recall, Miss Mina passed away when Pete was a baby, so Wayne’s Maw-Maw raised him.”

Will got a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. “Maw-Maw?”

“That’s Mrs. Lewis. I’m sure she has a first name, but I can’t remember it.” She jabbed her cigarette toward Amanda. “You run across her, you wanna be careful. That woman’s nothin’ but a spoon. She’s always stirring up shit.”

Amanda pressed her fingers to her temples. “Samantha Lewis is Wayne Walker’s mother?”

“And Doug-Ray’s.” Gloria laughed out some more smoke. “Which was hilarious, because if you’ve ever talked to her for even a second, you know she’s racist as hell.”

“Yes,” Will said. “We’ve talked to her.”

“It’s not just blacks.” Gloria wasn’t finished. “She found out one’a the teachers at Wayne’s school was a lesbian and had her run out on a rail. And it takes a lot to get fired from the Clayton County school system.”

Faith shook her head, like she needed to clear it. “Where does Billie Lam fit into all of this?”

“That piece of trash?” Gloria stubbed her cigarette out by the others. “Like I said, I haven’t talked to any of them in years, but I hear she followed Doug-Ray up here when Wayne got him a job at the school.”

Amanda made it clear. “Billie followed Doug-Ray back to

Forest Park, not the other way around?"

"What she wanted to do up here is beyond me. Same trailer, different park." Gloria lit another cigarette. "Why are y'all looking at me funny?"

"Billie isn't Maw-Maw's granddaughter?"

She sputtered out smoke as she laughed. "Oh, hell no. Maw-Maw woulda drowned a girl before she raised her. You think she hates men? You should see what she does to women. I'm not sure why she talked Gilbert into hiring Billie to work at the store, but mark my words, Maw-Maw was working an angle. Don't let her fool you. She's a crafty old bitch."

Will noted an absence of saliva in his mouth.

Faith said, "Gilbert Caldwell is Maw-Maw's son, not her son-in-law?"

"By a different daddy from Wayne and Doug-Ray. Never married none of them, of course." She pursed her lips. "My mama used to say Samantha Lewis had a rocking chair for an ass."

Faith asked, "Did she have any more children?"

"Just the three boys, God bless their souls. And Pete, though like I said, he was her sister's kid."

Amanda pushed herself up from the table. She rarely showed her years, but today was an exception. "Thank you for your time, Ms. Pringle. We'll follow up if we have any more questions. In the meantime, if you hear where Billie might be, we would appreciate a phone call."

"No problem. You'll be the first to know." Gloria walked them toward the door. There was a look of concentration on her face. In Will's experience, the best details always came out when an interview was over. Gloria Pringle was no exception.

"What about the house?" she asked, holding open the front door. "Did y'all check Doug-Ray's house?"

"Yes," Faith answered. "Doug-Ray's house, Wayne's apartment, Maw-Maw's house."

She didn't mention that Maw-Maw had given them the slip, but Will could tell from the way Amanda's jaw set as she walked onto the porch that the thought was prominent in her mind.

"What about Arthur's?" Gloria smiled when they all stopped and turned around. "Arthur Pierce. He was a mailman. Died about three months ago." Her smile started to falter. "Y'all know Doug-Ray's daddy left him a house?"

7.

Arthur Pierce had left his son a two-bedroom clapboard house located in a section of Forest Park that bordered Atlanta's Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport. The house wasn't exactly on the runway, but Will felt the need to hunch his shoulders as a Delta jet came in for a landing.

He walked up the driveway. There was a silver Pontiac Firebird parked in front of the closed garage. Will glanced in as he passed, making sure no one was hiding in the back. He headed toward the front porch. Weeds had grown through the cracked concrete, but Will could tell the house had been well maintained until three months ago when Arthur Pierce passed away. And he had really died, because they'd all seen his death certificate, tax returns, property deeds, and records on his closed pension account.

The day's events so far had served as an unwelcome reminder of why they taught you at the academy to verify all witness testimony down to the last detail.

Arthur Pierce was without question deceased. They'd talked to the funeral home that buried him and his friends at the VA who'd been there when he clutched his chest and keeled over onto the poker table. By all accounts, the senior Mr. Pierce was a stand-up guy. He'd been a mailman, which explained why his mailbox was painted dark blue with an American flag on each side. The front door was a matching blue. There was another American flag hanging from a column that held up the small shed roof over the door. The material was tattered from the elements, which Will was glad Mr. Pierce did not have to see.

Will had planned to knock, but the front door was cracked open. He used the toe of his boot to push it the rest of the way. He had Faith's Glock tucked into the back of his pants, but he didn't pull the weapon. Maybe this wasn't exactly wise. Every

minute of Will's day had been spent underestimating people.

The house smelled musty and closed up. Doug-Ray hadn't bothered to clear out his father's furniture or mementos, but he'd availed himself of all the copper in the house. Plaster had been hammered away in chunks. The ceiling looked like the world's largest rat had bounced its way across the beams. Pipes, electrical wire—anything that could be sold for scrap had been removed long ago.

Which didn't explain the coppery smell in the air.

Will felt the hairs on the back of his neck go up. He put his hand on the Glock, but didn't pull it. There was only one thing he could think of that smelled like copper but wasn't copper, and that was congealed blood. Something about the iron hitting oxygen brought about the scent. Every cop had a different description for it, but what it boiled down to was the smell of metal that hooked into the back of your throat like a fishing lure.

He walked through the front room as quietly as he could. Broken plaster littered the floor. The carpet was wet and moldy. There was a hole in the roof somewhere. Doug-Ray had probably talked to a real estate agent and realized very quickly that no one would be interested in buying his father's house. According to the tax records, Arthur Pierce's home was one of only three in the neighborhood that wasn't in the process of foreclosure.

Will peered into the two bedrooms and a tiny hall bath before making his way to the kitchen. Something told him this was where he would find Billie, and he was right. Only, he hadn't anticipated the state in which she would be found.

She was lying on her back in the kitchen doorway. Her bleached blonde hair flowered around her head. Her arms were out, hands open. Her eyes were deep blue. They were also glassy, most likely because of the large kitchen knife sticking out of her chest.

Will stood over the body. He didn't bother to bend down and check her pulse. He didn't want to give Maw-Maw the opportunity to jump him.

The old woman was sitting at the table smoking a joint. She blew on the tip, one eye on Will as he stepped over Billie's body and entered the kitchen.

"She came at me," Maw-Maw said, her voice raspy from the smoke. "I thought she was gonna kill me."

Will looked at the scene. There was some evidence to support a struggle. Kitchen utensils were scattered on the floor. Drawers were open where someone had furiously searched them.

Only, it wasn't just one or two drawers that were open, but every single drawer in the room. In Will's lengthy experience with stabbings that occurred in the kitchen, he was hard-pressed to think of a case where someone searching for a knife started with the bottom drawers and worked their way up.

Maw-Maw waved at the chair across from her. "Sit down, sonny. Let's talk."

Will reached into his pocket. He took out his iPhone. "I'm going to record this."

"Suit yourself."

"As a police officer, I have to inform you that you're entitled to a lawyer. You have a right—"

"To remain silent, et cetera, et cetera," she interrupted. "I'm eighty-four years old. You think I haven't seen my fair share of *Murder, She Wrote*?"

Will didn't recall Jessica Fletcher ever making an arrest, but for the sake of the recording, he asked, "You're waiving your rights, Ms. Lewis?"

"Yes." She impatiently pointed at the chair. "Now sit."

Will sat. He put the phone on the table between them. The little needle on the readout bounced back and forth as a jet roared overhead.

Will waited for the noise to fade, then asked, "Do you want to tell me what happened?"

Maw-Maw held a lungful of smoke before letting it out. "Poor Billie. She knocked on my kitchen door a while ago. I knew those cops were outside. I tried to get them, but she grabbed me." She showed Will a mark on her wrist where he had no doubt Billie Lam grabbed the old woman, probably to keep the knife from going deeper into her chest. "She took me out the back and brought me here."

"That's her car in the driveway?"

"Gilbert's," Maw-Maw provided. "He let her drive it to work. That's just the sort she was. Give her an inch and she takes a mile."

"Was Gilbert the third man at the gas station today?"

She gave him a disappointed look. "You're getting ahead of

yourself.”

Will held out his open hand, indicating she should continue spinning her defense.

“I tried to help that sweet girl. Got her a job at the store. Took her into my home. And then she drags me here. Holds that very knife to my neck and tells me she wants all my money.” She inhaled deeply. “I don’t know how it happened. I managed to get the knife somehow. I wasn’t going to hurt her. I just held it out in front of me, and she ran toward me, and ...” Her voice trailed off. She gave Will a cat’s smile. “Poor little thing. She was so young.”

“You said she was your granddaughter.”

“Well.” The smile still played at her lips. “She was just as good as. That girl felt like family. All I ever wanted to do was protect her.”

“Like you were trying to protect your sons?” Will leaned forward. “Wayne Walker and Doug-Ray Pierce.”

“Both dead,” she told Will. “I heard it on the news. Wayne died half an hour ago. Bless both their hearts.”

Will hadn’t heard about Walker, but he wasn’t surprised. “You don’t seem too broken up that two of your children are dead.”

“Wayne was sick for a long time with the cancer.” She blinked, and he wondered whether her moist eyes were for show. “He was an asshole, but he was my asshole.”

“And Pete McClendon?”

“Sweet, but stupid.” She chuckled as she took another hit from the joint. “So stupid.”

“He was robbing businesses on his own beat. We talked to the detectives on the case. They were about to arrest him.”

“I told him he’d get caught eventually—don’t shit where you eat—but that boy was a shit-eater from the day he was born.”

“What about the store today?”

She set the joint down on the edge of the table. Will watched it smolder against the linoleum. Her hand shook as she reached out to the phone. She was better at working the device than Will. A series of swipes turned off the recorder, then she pressed the button and powered it down.

She put the phone back on the table and picked up the joint.

She said, “It was Wayne’s idea. He knew he was dying, wanted to go out with a bang. Fly to Vegas, get some hookers.” She lowered her voice. “Let’s be honest, nobody was gonna sleep with

that asshole unless they was gettin' paid for it."

Will had to take a moment to digest her words. It was very convenient that Wayne couldn't dispute the charge. "What about Doug-Ray?"

"He was following Wayne's lead. That's just how they are, isn't it? Always looking for the fast score, too lazy to make it happen on their own. I told him it would get him killed one day." She puffed out a cloud of smoke. "Men never listen to reason."

"Did you know Wayne was going to kill Doug-Ray?"

"They were brothers, but they never got along." She added, "And Arthur's pension from the post office died with him, so what's the point?"

Will had always thought being able to live your life was a good point. "There was only a thousand bucks in that cash register."

"A thousand twelve," she corrected. "Never lie about money, son."

Will shook his head. He still didn't understand, and he wasn't too proud to admit it. "All of this for a little over a thousand dollars?"

"Anybody ever tell you you're just about as ignorant as a goat?"

Will didn't respond. Amanda often compared him to farm animals. "What's in it for you, Maw-Maw? I don't get it."

"Well, let me walk you through it, boy." She counted off on her fingers. "Wayne got fired, but he's still got his pension and life insurance policy through the school. Doug-Ray has about the same, but Pete's the jackpot. A hundred thousand dollars for being killed in the line of duty. And happened just in time, I guess, if those detectives were as close as you say to locking him up." She seemed pleased with herself. "I'm next of kin with his mama and daddy gone."

"Pete's not dead."

"Yet." She shrugged. "If he makes it, he'll get disability. The investigation will go away—let's be real, the county doesn't need another scandal on top of the pile. I guess I'll have to take care of little Petey again." The wink she gave Will suggested what kind of caregiver she planned on being. "Poor boy."

"What about Billie?"

Maw-Maw's face twisted in disgust. "She pulled a baby-daddy scam on Doug-Ray. I saw it coming a mile away, but he was blind

to anything had more than one hole between the legs. That girl was about as pregnant as I was. I let her live with me so I could keep an eye on her. She spun some story about losing the baby. Of course, I couldn't kick her out after that. I'm a Christian."

"You needed her as a witness," Will realized. "The store really had to be robbed. She had to back up Pete's line-of-duty death."

"Which she would've done if everything hadn't gone to hell."

Will floated his theory. "Doug-Ray and Pete weren't meant to survive the robbery. Shooting Pete in the chest wasn't an accident. Neither was shooting Doug-Ray in the head."

"Wayne had one foot in the grave. The melanoma was gonna take him in a few months. I told you, he never much liked Doug-Ray, and Pete always got more poon than he did, which can grate on a man. I'm sure you get where I'm coming from. Every single one'a y'all walk whichever way your compass needle points you."

Will had to say, "For the mother of three sons, you really seem to hate men."

"What can I tell ya? I've known too many of them to think otherwise. Present company excluded, of course."

Will doubted he was an exception. Hate radiated off her like the heat lamp over the nachos at the Lil' Dixie.

He thought of something that hadn't stuck out before. "The surveillance camera was angled to the back of the store. Billie's testimony about the robbery would've been the only thing the police had to go on."

"Which would've worked great if the little bitch hadn't run out the back screaming her head off. Took everything I had in me to keep her from going to the police." She soured her face. "You don't think I wanted to be up there this morning pretending like I saw the whole thing."

Will was fairly certain Maw-Maw had seen a great deal. He asked, "What kept her from turning all of you in?"

"Money," she said. "I threw the bag of cash on the roof of the store. Near about shocked me to death that y'all didn't look up there."

Will could only imagine the words Amanda would have for the agents who missed this. "Billie was supposed to get the proceeds from the holdup."

"Now you've got it."

"And Gilbert?"

“He’s the only one’a them ever added up to anything.” Her words were kind, but her expression said otherwise. “Not that that’s much, considering.”

“Where is he?”

“Dead eight days. Slipped and fell at the store. Cracked his head open like a walnut.” She shook her head. “I swear to God, if I’d known the police was this stupid, I woulda planned this whole thing a lot different.”

The woman had a point. Gilbert’s accident had happened in Clayton County. His death would’ve been investigated by the GBI medical examiner’s office. The autopsy report was probably making its way through the system.

“Poor Gil,” Maw-Maw said. “Little shit couldn’t run a business to save his life. Or my life, which is the part that matters. The whole damn place was falling down. Mortgaged out the wah-hoo. And then I find out he put my house up as collateral. I was gonna lose everything.” She pointed her finger in Will’s direction. “I’ll tell you what I told Billie: ain’t nothing you can get from a man that you can’t get better from a dog and a jar of peanut butter.”

Will felt light-headed.

She threw back her head and laughed. “Shut your mouth before you catch some flies, boy. I may be old as dirt, but I still got some life left in me.”

Will tasted blood in his mouth. His teeth had cut open the inside of his cheek.

“That it?” She pressed her hand to the table, making to stand.

“Sit down.” Will stopped thinking about what she’d said and concentrated on what she’d done. Her sons were dead—two of them by violent means; God only knew what had happened to the other. The boy she had raised was clinging to his life at the hospital. Billie Lam lay dead on the floor with a knife in her heart.

And Maw-Maw was certain she was going to get away with it.

Will reached for the phone. She clamped her hand over his. She was fast when she wanted to be. He could feel the sandpapery rub of her skin as he pulled his hand away.

He said, “The robbery was your idea, not Wayne’s.”

One shoulder went up in a shrug. The motion was almost lost under her loose-fitting dress. Will wondered what else she had under there. Faith’s earlier warning still echoed in his brain. He’d

been played like a fiddle by this woman from the moment they'd met. Will took out his gun and put it on the table in front of him. His hand stayed on the grip.

"Well." She glanced down at the Glock. "That changes the tone."

"You're the reason they're dead. Wayne, Doug-Ray, maybe Pete. Certainly Billie."

She stubbed the end of the joint out on the table. "I only got a few years left. I'm not gonna end up spending them in some damn state-run nursing home stewing in my own piss."

"You sacrificed all those lives so you could enjoy your retirement?"

"I've earned it." She shrugged again, this time with both shoulders. "Two, maybe three less men walking the planet. As far as I'm concerned, I've done the world a favor."

"Not all men are bad."

She snorted, as if he'd told her a really bad joke. "You'd put me in jail if you could."

"Prison," he told her. "Jail is where you await trial. Prison is where you go after you're sentenced."

"You gonna put my picture in *Busted*?" She laughed at his surprise. "I work at a convenience store, numbnuts. We look at that thing every week to see how many customers are in it."

"I'm going to make sure you're the centerfold."

"You'd have to be a hell of a lot smarter than you come across."

Will leaned in closer. Maw-Maw did the same, like they were about to throw it down and arm-wrestle.

He said, "You've been lying to the police all day."

"I did what I had to do."

"You lied to the police about working at the store this morning."

"Yep."

"You lied to the police about being Billie's grandmother."

"Uh-huh."

"You lied to the police about your sons being involved in the robbery."

"I did."

"You lied to the police about being in the back of the Chevy this morning."

She smiled.

"I know that was you." Will recalled the shambling departure the third robber had made from the back of the truck. It wasn't the case of a man being covert. It was the case of an old woman trying not to break a bone.

He said, "You went to the back of the store to wait for Billie. You were there to make sure she didn't run."

She shrugged. "Girl never had much of a spine."

"You've been obstructing this investigation from the beginning."

"Yes, I suppose you're right." She employed her patented one-shoulder shrug. "Am I supposed to be sorry?"

"You killed Billie."

She moved back in the chair. She was cocky, but she knew she was talking to a police officer. "That was clearly self-defense."

Will narrowed his eyes. "Is it clear?"

"I'll get a good lawyer," she told him. "I've recently come into some family money."

"You even lied about things that didn't matter. Gilbert wasn't Jewish."

"He was never circumcised." She snorted with disgust. "I suppose Obamacare will take care of that."

Will refused to let her sidetrack him. "Why lie? Why lie to the police for no reason?"

"Because I can," she answered, like it was simple. "Because it's fun. Because watching y'all spin around chasing your tails all day has been the most entertainment I've had in ages." She gave a rascally chuckle. "If that's a crime, then arrest me."

"Okay." Will stood up. He pulled a set of handcuffs out of his back pocket. "Please stand."

"What are you doing?"

"Samantha Lewis, I'm placing you under arrest."

"What the hell for?" She was talking tough, but there was genuine concern in her eyes. "You can't prove I had anything to do with that robbery. You can't prove what happened with Billie was anything but self-defense."

"You're probably right," Will allowed. "But I'm absolutely certain I can prove you lied to the police. That's a felony, Mrs. Lewis. Each instance carries a five-year prison sentence. By my count, you just admitted to it four times, plus copped to willfully obstructing an investigation." He matched her hillbilly cadence.

“Did you not know all that’s illegal?”

“What the—” She tried to stand, nearly knocking over the chair in the process. “I didn’t—”

“You did.” Will reached into his shirt and pulled out the microphone that was clipped to the inside of his collar. “And you admitted to doing all of it on tape.” He hoped there was a twinkle in his eye when he smiled. “Thanks for waiving your rights, by the way.”

“I turned that off!” she screamed. The effort nearly knocked the wind out of her. She gripped the counter for support. “You bastard! I’ll cut off your balls and feed them to the pigs!”

Will opened the kitchen door. Faith was standing there. He had done a lot of outlandish things today—wasted twelve minutes waiting on an Icee, chased after a murderer without a gun or backup, jumped from a speeding motorcycle—but he didn’t have it in him to handcuff an eighty-four-year-old woman, no matter how detestable her crimes. Besides, her wrists were too thin for the cuffs.

Faith said, “Samantha Lewis, you have the right to remain silent.”

“Go to hell.”

“Please exercise your right to remain silent.” Faith tried to grab the old woman’s hands. “You have a right to an attorney.”

Maw-Maw slapped her away like she was swatting flies. Faith was not deterred. She held both of the woman’s wrists in one hand. With her free hand, she pulled out a plastic zip tie. Will saw Faith wince as the plastic cut against the woman’s thin skin.

“Idiots!” Maw-Maw said. “They won’t convict me! I’m just an old woman! I won’t spend a day behind bars!”

“Our boss is with the state prosecutor right now,” Faith told her. “You know we’re with the state, right? The jury for your trial won’t be from Forest Park.”

Maw-Maw’s mouth opened as she sucked air.

Faith continued, “Believe it or not, Georgia is cracking down on people who lie to the police. The attorney general plans on making an example of you.”

“That’s not true!” Maw-Maw’s voice had a pleading tone to it. “You watch. There’s not a jury alive who’ll convict me. I was protecting my family! Anybody would do that!”

“We’ll see in a year or so,” Faith said. “That’s about how long

this will take to come to trial. Unless you have somebody who'll bail you out? Maybe a family member?"

Maw-Maw's mouth gaped open and closed. Will could almost see the wheels turning in her head. She mistook his attention for an opening, telling him, "What I said before—I told you, sonny, I got dementia. I can't remember things. I was under the influence of drugs. I got Alzheimer's."

"Keep practicing for the trial." Faith pressed her hand to Maw-Maw's shoulder to get her moving. "Maybe some of the girls at the jail can help you."

Will smiled as warmly as he could. "I hear they love meeting new people."

"No!" Maw-Maw lunged for Will. She grabbed his shirt in her fists. "You fucking bastard! You can't send me to jail! I can't live out my life with a bunch of dykes!"

Will carefully pried her bony fingers from his shirt. "Don't worry," he told the old woman. "I hear they taste just like peanut butter."